Dangerous Challenge

As schools push to improve student writing, a novice instructor examines his task

The alarms first sounded about a decade ago: writing skills, even among the best and brightest of college students, were deteriorating rapidly. As many critics saw it, the main problem was that elementary and secondary schools were no longer demanding the rigorous development of literary skills. Whatever the cause, the results were disturbing. Verbal scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test dropped sharply, year after year, beginning in 1965. Even highly selective colleges had to enroll large numbers of freshmen in courses nicknamed "bonehead English." Graduate schools of law, business and journalism were forced to establish remedial writing courses of their own. And still, the cries of dismay echoed in the halls of commerce and the professions, where writing is the basis for almost all formal communication.

In response, colleges and universities across the country began paying new attention to writing. Today, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 73 percent of all institutions of higher education offer courses in remedial writing, and more than one out of every five freshmen take them. But even so, professors report that they confront a basic—and almost intractable—problem: attitude. "Students are motivated economically," says Robert Hann, chairman of the philosophy department at Florida International in Miami. "I don't think many of them see writing as a marketable commodity."

It is, of course. And in the years ahead, as the information explosion reaches proportions unthinkable just a decade ago, the ability to sort, distill, organize and analyze what is truly important—and communicate it to the society at large—will be increasingly important. Those skills happen to be the very essence of good writing. To find out how writing instructors approach the task of imparting them to students, Newsweek On Campus asked Dennis A. Williams, former

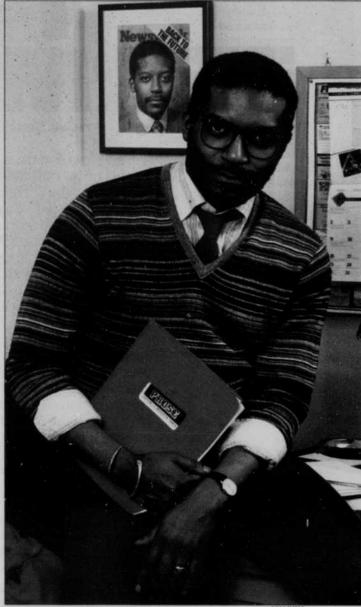
Newsweek Education Editor and now a teacher of writing at Cornell, to reflect on his experiences.

knew the job was dangerous when I took it. During five years as Newsweek's Education Editor, I wrote extensively about the declining academic performance of American students. That decline included a serious erosion in writing skills. It was general wisdom that nobody taught grammar, or style, or clear thinking. There were fewer essay questions on exams and more multiple-choice items. Job applications, memos and reports were all sinking into illiteracy, and employers complained that they were being sent people who couldn't rub two sentences together and make a spark. Educators were rallying to correct these defi-

ciencies, but I had no illusions when I became a writing instructor at Cornell.

Brutal comment: Admittedly, I did not have all the training more experienced writing teachers have. I didn't know all the jargon or the diagnostic techniques, and I had to develop my own system of margin comments. (The ones that magazine editors use are far too brutal for college students.) But I knew bad writing when I saw it and had a pretty good idea how to fix it.

I got to see a lot of it right away. Each year, Cornell invites as many as one-quarter of its entering freshmen—nearly 800 students—to take a writing-assessment test during their first weekend on campus. As one of the test evaluators, I read more than 60 of the papers—short essays written in about 45 minutes under conditions hard-



JON REIS

Trust me: Williams on the job at Cornell

ly conducive to thoughtfulness. Most of the essays I saw were not horrible, but few could be considered good.

I knew that student writing, in general, had deteriorated, yet I was amazed at some of what I saw: painfully short essays with little thought; two-page papers written in one kitchen-sink paragraph; scrambled syntax; bad-guess spelling; time-warp tenses and subjects and verbs that couldn't agree if their lives depended on it. Occasionally, against my better judgment, I looked up a student's admissions-test scores—even though I have little faith in those tests. Still, I was surprised and disheartened to see, here and there, a badly troubled writing sample coming from a student with a well-above-average score.

Eventually, about 120 students-most