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On Writing With Light

MY experiences, and those of all of the college English professors and high school teachers of English with whom I am acquainted, are not similar to those described by T. J. Ray in a recent journal. A self-avowed stick-in-the-mud fellow, he believes that the use of computers by students in writing required papers and essays has had a negative effect on their ability to express themselves adequately. The ease of writing on word processors has made his students sloppy writers, he contends, and the use of spell checkers has made them sloppy spellers. If this is so, then they are not being taught to edit their compositions. It is in the editing and rewriting that the manuscript improves and the author's thoughts become distilled.

I have written a number of books and articles B.C. (before computers) and can report that at least 80% of my time was spent inefficiently, re-plowing the same ground – typing, manually editing double- or triple-spaced manuscript, then retyping, then using scissors and scotch tape, physically cutting, rearranging text and pasting, then retyping. I was never in a position where I could hand a mangled manuscript to a secretary and let her perform the onerous task of deciphering changes and retyping. It was faster than calligraphing an entire manuscript, though I know that millions of books were written by this most basic method. The word *manuscript* literally means “hand-written”. Enormous amounts of time were spent on

the mechanics of producing readable, logical copy. When I began to write on even the simplest computer, it was a revelation! I have written thousands of pages on the lowly, extremely primitive (by today's standards) Commodore-64 in the early 1980's, and my writing efficiency increased to an astonishing degree -- nothing came between my mind and the finished page. Gone was the 80% of my unproductive time spent cutting and pasting and retyping. Being able to insert a word or words, or move a line or paragraph to a different position in the manuscript was a revolutionary experience. I was freed to spend my time thinking and composing rather than worrying about the tedious mechanics I had been taught as “the *correct* way to write.” The PC I use today is so advanced over the ancient C-64 it could be considered science fantasy!

Learning to compose at the keyboard was a major step in making my writing time more efficient. Still I enjoy maintaining notebooks in pen and ink, making notes and sketches and recording ideas that come to me when I am away from the computer. I feel that one should be a touch typist in order to better exploit the greater potentials of keyboard composition, though I have met many older experienced two-fingers writers who were rapid and accurate typists. Young people today have the great advantage of growing up with computers. They are not intimidated by modern technology, and are taught typing skills early. I still find it fascinating to sit before my computer monitor and without looking at my hands, massage the keyboard and watch my thoughts appear magically in words on the screen before me – in effect, writing with light. I feel free of the shackles that older methods of writing imposed on me. Editing on a computer is very easy, and

without having to start nearly from scratch with each revision, one can concentrate on the most important element in writing – thinking critically. The writer can edit endlessly, and the manuscript doesn't become finished until it pleases him/her. Further, I feel that in the first drafts the rapid recording of ones thoughts is more important initially than perfect spelling and grammar. Spelling corrections can be made during the editing process. I recommend that writers have at their fingertips a decent unabridged dictionary for quick reference. Spell checkers sometimes help but shouldn't be relied on blindly.

So what do my English teacher friends and English professor colleagues feel about teaching student writing? – *that critical thinking usually leads to critical writing*. Most compositions in elementary school, high school and college are now required to be typed, and computers make that so easy. Many colleges and universities maintain writing labs and require students to submit their compositions electronically. Professors read their digital drafts and make suggestions about organization of ideas, grammar, spelling, and other elements, typed in a different color within the body of the submissions, which are returned to student authors for corrections before final copies are printed out. Completed compositions are usually stored in permanent student portfolios that enable teachers to monitor their progress.

The older *tried and true* methods of writing that were so methodical and time-consuming are inefficient compared with 21st century writing methods – using computers and powerful, full-featured word processing programs such as Word or Word Perfect. But computers, like typewriters, are simply tools that can help the writer perfect his/her writing. I wasn't

required to write very much as a student. Although some required English term papers were demanded of me, most of my undergraduate classes required no writing at all. The first truly important writing I had to do was a master's degree thesis. It was an excruciating shock to my ego. The most important writing lesson I ever had occurred when my major professor in graduate school sat down with me and dissected my dissertation manuscript word for word, line by line, punctuation mark after punctuation mark, and logically criticized the organization of what I was trying to say. I was shown what was correct, and why, as well as what was incorrect, and why. I believe I became a writer at that stage, and I sadly deplored the fact that no one had done that with me earlier. This experience had such a profound effect on me that I vowed thereafter to give my students similar lessons. Certainly it was time-consuming, but most of my minions became pretty decent writers. A few became outstanding writers. They report that when they began using computers, their output and efficiency increased exponentially.

I do not criticize the experiences and opinions of Dr. T. J. Ray concerning his students' writing. They surely are valid, though they are not shared by those of my many friends who make their living teaching students to write, nor are they similar to mine. Most early student writing *is* truly execrable, but I believe that students are more likely to write more, and potentially better, on word processors than I was able to do as a student with pen and ink and a typewriter. I agree with William F. Buckley that writing on a computer is a joyous, liberating experience.

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