

**A Summary of the Royal Literary Fund's
Report on Student Writing in Higher
Education, *Writing Matters***

by Hilary Spurling

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This is the text of a talk given by Hilary Spurling at the Royal Society of Literature, London, 21st March 2006, to mark the publication of *Writing Matters*, the Royal Literary Fund's report on student writing in higher education.

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All quotes in the text not otherwise identified come from the chapters in the Report, a copy of which can be downloaded from
www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm

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In 1999, the Royal Literary Fund ('RLF') launched a Fellowship scheme designed to place professional writers in universities and colleges all over the United Kingdom. Their brief was to offer students tuition in fundamental skills such as how to write a letter or an essay, how to draft a report or draw up a job application. From the start writers participating in the scheme were astonished by the scale of the problem it uncovered. Students' response, slow at first, rapidly became enthusiastic, and sometimes overwhelming. The impact on their work was immediate and impressive.

Since then more than 130 writers have worked in over 70 universities and colleges. Over the past seven years they have helped many thousands of students. There are currently more than 60 RLF Fellows in posts all over Britain. Their experience has yielded an extraordinary consensus. From a wide variety of backgrounds, educational experiences, political and social starting points, all have reached the same conclusion. Most contemporary British students arriving at university lack the basic ability to express themselves in writing. Growing numbers of students are simply not ready for the demands that higher education is – or should be - making of them. There may be debate about the causes of this state of affairs, and about the prognosis, but there is unanimity about what the Fellows have seen. Their findings have been the same across the disciplines at all levels and in all departments. The single word that crops up more than any other in accounts of their experience is 'shock'.

Writing Matters is a detailed report by a panel of RLF Fellows on the workings of the scheme in its first six years. This survey was originally intended for our academic partners, but its contents turned out to have such far-reaching implications that we felt they should be made available to a wider public. The RLF is a writers' charity with no political bias, and none

of the constraints imposed by institutional loyalty or financial dependence. The basis of this report is first-hand experience. It examines the nature and extent of the problem, and proposes practical solutions. It is a nationwide survey built up from individual accounts that read like dispatches from a front-line where students struggle to survive without basic training or equipment. There has been little official recognition of their predicament so far, and no comprehensive attempt to address it. Efforts within the universities to provide students with the skills and tools they lack have been too often provisional and poorly funded. Teaching writing is still commonly regarded as a remedial or menial job fit only for junior staff, post-graduates and part-timers. Inevitably students hesitate to seek help when even to acknowledge that they need it is liable to be construed as an admission of failure.

The RLF scheme, devised and implemented by writers, has no such connotations. Writers have proved notably efficient at passing on their own professional expertise at every level from the simplest to the most sophisticated. The tuition they provide is initially technical rather than theoretical or academic, a process of development, adjustment and fine-tuning that often feels ‘more like a musical master-class than a back-to-basics session’. This key shift in emphasis underlies a success universally acknowledged by the academic bodies who have hosted the scheme. They range from some of our leading old-established universities to the newest HE institutions, set up without traditional support systems and often with inadequate funding to accommodate current vastly increased student numbers. All of them report a marked improvement in performance, confidence and grades brought about by the work of RLF Fellows. Responses to the scheme from prominent academics have been highly

favourable ('immensely valuable', 'exciting & innovative', 'integral to the teaching provision of departments across the campus'). Here is part of a letter from one of our academic partners, summarising what has turned out to be the general view:

Writing Matters describes with admirable clarity a situation that is well known to students themselves, and those working with students, but not yet sufficiently widely acknowledged at the level of institutional strategy in Higher Education Institutions... Both students and academic departments have tended to see the problem as some kind of deficit. Students don't know how to address it without help and, as the problem has grown, academic departments have been reluctant to own it. Writing Matters focuses attention on the scale of the issue, the elephant in the dining room, but more importantly it advances practical suggestions about what might be done...right at the centre of Writing Matters is student need.

One of the recurrent themes of the report is the painful confusion, embarrassment and fear endured by students who find themselves confronted with written assignments they don't understand and can't begin to tackle. The inability to write, based on lack of preparation and practice, destroys young people's confidence. Their sense of inadequacy is exacerbated by their teachers' unwillingness to acknowledge that writing can and should be taught. 'Anxiety is at the heart of many of the problems students experience with their writing. Some of them have not been asked to write an essay or its equivalent for years, and few have ever been told how to do it in the first place. Added to that, they arrive on their course uncertain about their place in the new context, faced suddenly with the need to take

personal responsibility for their studies, and bewildered by the apparently hyper-intellectual things they're reading and lectures they're hearing... many of them feel insecure, and see that insecurity as evidence that they don't belong in higher education. In short, they feel stupid'.

The result is too often a cycle of strain and disappointment, continual struggle and repeated failure. For students caught in this downward spiral, the experience of university becomes unhappy and undermining. 'Poor marks quickly lead to demoralisation... the backlog of work can become unmanageable; the stress accumulates; and the student gives up, often blaming failure on the institution and lack of support received'. The national student drop-out rate averages out at 14%. In some places more than one student in four will leave without completing the course. The cost of this wastage, in human misery as well as in financial terms, is very high.

Part of the trouble is that, until they reach university, most young people have never felt any need to write. They belong to a tick-box culture based on speeded-up electronic responses in education as in other fields. Children brought up on video games, play stations and the internet know how to access and process knowledge on an unprecedented scale (and they are, of course, far better at it than their elders). They are masters of the search engine and the text message. On their own ground they experiment constantly and confidently with new modes of linguistic usage and expression. Texting at its best ('funny, resourceful and inventive') crackles with creative energy. But students educated to value speed and range rather than depth of information attach no great importance to originality or independent thought. 'The internet and the culture it generates ... sometimes seem to elevate conformity over dissent'. However much they know, students' understanding remains limited. They are not accustomed to

explore, manipulate or shape their material, let alone to assess its reliability or relative importance. They read little, if at all, and so have no models of more subtle, searching or expressive writing to set beside their own.

‘Instead they rely heavily on quotations and definitions’, often paraphrased without real comprehension and juxtaposed at random with other unassimilated blocks of information. ‘Good writing needs some sense of more than just the essay as a log of ticked boxes and bullet points’.

At its worst this incapacity becomes a way of reinforcing rather than expanding intellectual and social barriers. ‘Poor use of language equates with poor thinking. Language is power and without the ability to use it well, students are rendered impotent. The disadvantaged remain firmly disadvantaged’. Similar difficulties apply across the whole range of ability, from students aiming for a First to those struggling to avoid a Fail.

Historians and English students find it as hard to express their ideas clearly as those learning science, business and IT. ‘What is worrying,’ wrote one Fellow, singling out three cases of particular distress, ‘is that these young people are students of English literature at an “élite” university. They ought to have attained, by this stage, a reasonably high level of written proficiency but they are plainly floundering. They have genuine difficulty in writing a basic English sentence’.

Their essays are muddled and clumsily expressed. They don’t know where to start, how to organise their subject matter or follow a coherent chain of thought. They suffer, as another Fellow succinctly put it, from lexical nullity and syntactical bankruptcy. In other words their stuff is unreadable, and sometimes unintelligible as well. ‘To put the problem simply, an inability to employ the resources of language means that a student cannot function properly. Meagre vocabulary, slack phrasing, tortured

syntax, incompetent punctuation: these degrade the work the student is doing, and mean that teachers in higher education... spend an increasing amount of their time correcting grammar, spelling and punctuation, and trying to explain how an essay is meant to be structured’.

Writers confront these matters on a daily basis. All of them know how hard it is to define what you think, and then to say it. Simplicity, clarity and coherence are their stock in trade. This is why they have turned out to be adepts at providing students with the basic construction kit – vocabulary, punctuation, grammatical guidelines, design principles – that will enable them to grasp and analyse their subjects, to articulate ideas, develop arguments and structure thinking. Within the context of the RLF scheme such skills are not usually difficult to acquire. From institutions as varied as the University of Glasgow and London College of Fashion, from Imperial College and UCL to St Mary’s College, Belfast, Trinity & All Saints College in Leeds and Anglia Ruskin University, the message is always the same: ‘Once students recognise that help is needed, and are provided with it by a knowledgeable and accessible tutor, they begin to improve and develop their writing, sometimes with impressive swiftness. Occasionally, a single tutorial is all it takes to give the student direction’. Others come back regularly for the kind of one-to-one tuition that has turned out to produce the best and quickest results.

Grades improve. So does self-assurance. Students surprise themselves by discovering that it is possible to enjoy writing as soon as they have a clearer sense of how to do it. ‘I have really felt the emotion and passion behind what I thought were the most banal parts of writing’, one student said, ‘ – the importance of grammar, of really understanding the words you are using’. They find, often to their own astonishment, that their grasp of any

given topic has been confirmed and strengthened by having to write about it. ‘The way in which one constructs, composes, argues an essay ... is inseparable from the way in which one understands the subject, whether it is literary analysis or the principles of engineering design, China’s economic policies, particle accelerators, Voltaire’s *Candide* or $E=MC^2$ ’. Their response is summed up on the first page of the RLF report:

All the students we successfully helped expressed something close to joy at the result. They wanted to be able to write, to write impressively, and they delighted in discovering that the same resources of language and expression were available to them as to the greatest writers. ... We have collectively lost count of the number of times students have said to us, ‘But no one ever told me this’.

A key factor in the scheme’s success is that RLF writers occupy a middle ground between staff and students. They work within the institution but remain outside it. They are not involved in marking or assessment, and their approach is the opposite of judgmental. They offer time and individual attention in consultations that are entirely confidential. A student can admit in private to an RLF Fellow misgivings and shortcomings that would be hard to own up to in a group (‘you can say – or ask – what you want,’ said one of them, ‘without worrying about looking stupid in front of your peers’). Writers are intimately familiar with all the issues that plague students: stress, despondency, self-doubt, blockage, fear of failure. They know, too, how it feels to be under permanent scrutiny (‘The work of professional writers... has been endlessly exposed to criticism, and most are experienced in the business of ruthless self-criticism’). Above all they recognise and are

accustomed to address the nub of the problem: ‘Students who are not communicating properly are not thinking properly’.

Writing Matters recommends that writing be incorporated into the universities’ core teaching programme, and acknowledged as part of the skills, status and career requirements of both staff and students. Detailed proposals as to how this might be done are included in the report. But the problem goes back well before students reach university, and we therefore urge schools to reassess the fundamental importance of writing. Teachers should be encouraged to move away from testing and back to education, specifically they should learn how to use, and how to teach their pupils to use, the English language. Effective writing skills should be recognised as a must for anyone hoping to go on to higher education, and proficiency in writing should become a compulsory component of teacher training. In the meantime there should be diagnostic tests for university students in their first term with writing courses designed to meet their needs. Every HEI should draw up a Writing Development Policy, and consider setting up a Writing Development Centre to raise the profile of writing on campus, and signal its proper place in the hierarchy of learning. Credits should be given (‘Writing would become an explicit component of marking criteria in all departments instead of, as now, an implicit and unrecognised one’). This would go far to raise the profile of writing centres, currently few in number, inadequately funded, and almost invariably perceived as purveying low-grade remedial services for weaker students. Removing the stigma would be a first giant step towards improving student writing across the board.

A second step would be to maximise the input of professional writers for whom technical proficiency is a means rather than an end. ‘Writers’ creativity, pleasure in language and the high value they place on effective

communication can complement the work of academics'. University staff have neither the training nor the time to implement comprehensive writing schemes on top of their own, often hectic teaching, research and administration schedules. 93% of academics consulted in a recent RLF survey agreed that 'one-to-one tutorials ... offered via a university writing centre' provided the best model for teaching writing. This is borne out by RLF experience. 'The one-to-one tutorial is at the heart of our practice. There is a place for class and group work as well, but essay skills are best taught face to face and step by step by practising professionals'. 'Writers themselves ... are the best teachers of writing. Basic skills ... are common to all genres, which is why the poets, playwrights, biographers and novelists of the RLF have universally found that they can not only raise standards but ... put back into the experience of writing the underlying elements many students have lost sight of in their anxiety and confusion: pleasure, passion, and the confidence not just to repeat ideas but to explore them'.

This last raises the whole question of the goals of higher education at a time when universities are concerned not so much with the pursuit of learning for its own sake as with the need to provide a workforce. The government's 50% target for university uptake presents the problem in acute form. On the one hand students assume – and universities encourage them to do so in glossy brochures and prospectuses – that degrees guarantee future jobs. On the other hand, employers complain that students lack the essential skills that would equip them for the work place. 'This becomes apparent even before they get there. Applying for any job requires some sort of writing: from the most basic application form to a C.V. or selection test. But students still fail to grasp that the first impact they will make on an employer is on paper. Once employed, graduates who bring with them only the most

elementary writing skills become more and more of a problem as they rise through an organisation'. Many large companies respond by setting up in-house training courses in basic written English. The difficulties facing smaller ones are summed up by the director of an engineering company in the Midlands:

Poor writing skills cost my business because I, and other senior management, have to spend time re-drafting documents and letters. At senior level it costs the company, in terms of advertising and interviewing time, etc., nearly £5,000 to take on a new employee. I have to make a choice between doing that and getting someone to come in and help an excellent employee who I want to promote but who is let down by her writing skills. But that could end up costing more because I've given her skills which will make her more employable by my competitors.

The ability to write has become more not less of a business asset as the growth of the internet and the use of email increasingly replace the telephone (especially now that global communication often means working simultaneously in different time zones). 'The informality of email communication has to be balanced against the fact that an email is a legally enforceable document. Sloppily or incorrectly written emails are potentially expensive ... Good writing is not about pedantry: it is concerned with clarity, logic and understanding'. The Graduate Recruitment Manager for Network Rail estimates that his organisation currently rejects 50% of graduate application forms because their content comes close to gobbledygook. 'Candidates have a lack of ability to express themselves in writing or orally, which is a shame because they may be good in other ways.

This represents a cost to business and a terrible cost to themselves'. The Director of the Head Teachers Industry (HTI) Trust is even more drastic: 'There is a growing sense in industry that graduates are no more useful as employees than school leavers. Transferable and functional skills such as communication, writing and comprehension are lacking, and companies often find it more cost effective to employ school leavers and train them themselves'.

These are views common to employers in both private and public sectors, headed by the Director-General of the CBI, who responded to a recent Government Skills Strategy White Paper by publicly lamenting the failings of the education system, and the knock-on effect on the economy. Research conducted by the Royal Mail concludes that spelling mistakes and poor grammar cost UK businesses more than £700 million a year. A joint report by the TUC and CBI cites figures estimating the cost at £10 billion.

Learning to write is no longer a purely academic issue. It is a question of our social, economic and cultural future. 'Universities today must confront the necessity of teaching not only their traditional subjects – and new ones – but also the skills to comprehend them and communicate them to others. If these skills are neglected, either students will fail, or their degrees will be devalued, and they, their employers and our society as a whole will have been cheated'. In short, what began as a private scheme devised primarily for the benefit of writers has exposed a public catastrophe. The RLF report sets out to show that it can be addressed at relatively low cost with proven success by capitalising on a resource possessed by all writers, and urgently needed by the rest of the community.