



The Royal Literary Fund

March 2006

A Briefing on

Writing Matters

The Royal Literary Fund Report on Student Writing

in Higher Education

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Background and Summary

***Writing Matters* examines the difficulties that many students encounter in their written work at university and its authors propose a range of measures to address these. The report argues that much greater attention should be paid to helping students adjust to the demands of writing at university and that writing development is a key factor for driving up standards in the HE sector.**

Since 1999 the Royal Literary Fund has been working with Higher Education Institutions across Britain to improve student writing. It places published authors on campus as Writing Fellows. They work with students, mainly through one-to-one consultations, focusing on academic writing skills. Fellows throughout the RLF's UK-wide network have found that students from all backgrounds and at all levels benefit from writing skills coaching.

The RLF commissioned a panel of 14 experienced Fellows, all professional writers, to present an analysis of the current situation in British universities and to recommend practical ways forward. The resulting RLF report demonstrates how effective intervention can be made to enhance students' writing skills and proposes a range of action for HE managers and policy-makers to consider.

Chapters in the report:

- provide an overview of student writing in UK universities and colleges;
- illustrate the benefits of good writing to students, universities and society;
- investigate why students need help with writing;
- advance detailed proposals for writing development in HE;
- present an action plan for the first year of undergraduate study;
- outline employers' concerns and the role business can play in funding writing development;
- argue the case for a greater focus on writing skills throughout the education system and in teacher training.

The report recommends that all HEIs should:

- formulate and implement a Writing Development Policy as part of their statutory Learning & Teaching Strategy;
- offer a range of Writing Development provision to advance student writing skills *at all levels*;
- supply clear guidelines for students on all aspects of academic writing and conventions within disciplines;
- provide detailed feedback on written assignments; correct and effective writing should be an integral part of assessment;
- pursue a developmental approach: some students may need remedial help but *all* students can improve their standard of writing;
- give credits for successful completion of Writing Development Courses;
- introduce a diagnostic writing exercise on entry to HE to identify for each student which aspects of their written work need attention;
- establish Writing Development Centres to provide institution-wide training, expertise and resources for staff and students alike.

The authors argue for urgent sector-wide action as well as greater emphasis to be given in schools on essay writing and written communication skills. The report's appendices also contain:

- case studies from the RLF Scheme illustrating the range and nature of students' concerns about writing;
- a model of best practice in writing support provision (from the University of Dundee);
- an outline of how to establish a Writing Centre (from Liverpool Hope University College);
- reports from RLF partner institutions on the benefits of writing tuition;
- recommendations for teaching writing in schools;
- a detailed study of the effectiveness of one-to-one writing support.

The full text of *Writing Matters* is available as a PDF download from <http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm>

For further details, or to request a printed copy of the report, contact:
The Fellowship Officer at rlitfund@btconnect.com

Chapter Summaries

The **Introduction** by Alan Wall provides an overview of a situation where considerable numbers of students are arriving at university without the skills necessary to make the most of their education. In many cases, the problems occur at a basic level: poor vocabulary, inaccurate phrasing, bad syntax, incorrect punctuation, an inability to form well-constructed sentences, let alone structure an argument. The causes may lie in a lack of teaching of grammar in schools, variegated linguistic environments where students do not acquire a comfortable facility with standard English, inattention to basic writing skills in primary and secondary education, and the different forms of modern mass communication where simply reading a book may no longer be commonplace. Wall argues that much greater emphasis needs to be placed on the teaching of writing skills as these are integral to the whole learning experience, and that intervention can be extremely effective as students are eager to acquire these skills.

In **Chapter One**, Rukhsana Ahmad and Katharine McMahon discuss why good writing matters so much. At its most basic, good writing means an ability to communicate; crucially it also facilitates the ability to think and study effectively. The necessary skills involve both a technical facility with writing and understanding the conventions of academic writing. Once acquired, these have a major effect on the confidence of individual students, and their ability to participate in the learning experience and to make the most of the opportunities provided by higher education. This in turn leads to lower dropout rates, and allows lecturers to concentrate on teaching their own subject matter. Only if students can write well will the promise of mass higher education prove meaningful.

Nicholas Murray and Bill Kirton, in **Chapter Two**, examine in greater depth the current situation: their message is a stark one – in the experience of Fellows, large numbers of contemporary British undergraduates lack the ability to express themselves adequately in writing. The authors believe that the lack of attention given to writing skills in education must be seen in a context of cultural and technological change which introduces new challenges. In a world of internet downloading, text messaging and information overload, it is ever more vital to provide students with an awareness of how to achieve clear written communication. They suggest that effective intervention is possible, based on evidence both from the Fellowship Scheme and from universities' own initiatives, but urgent action is required.

Chapter Three, by Carole Angier and William Palmer, proposes a range of solutions, concentrating on the practical and the affordable. They recommend that institutions recognise the importance of writing development for all students and formulate a Student Writing Development Policy to address this. They further argue for Writing Development Centres, and provide case studies showing what such Centres can achieve. Writing Centres allow a concentration of resources, provide a focus to raise awareness of writing as an issue and can offer services across an institution. Practically, they can provide courses in key writing skills appropriate to different levels, assist staff with writing

development and provide a locus for student mentoring. Crucially, they should also offer one-to-one support for students. Centres would be staffed by writing professionals, but could also provide flexible opportunities for writers and others with the necessary skills to help students.

Shahrukh Husain and Robin Waterfield, in **Chapter Four**, focus on ways of intervening to improve writing skills in the first year of university studies. Even students who do not have specific problems with grammar and essay structure can find the gap between writing at school and the much more complex writing required at university a daunting one, and they often do not understand the conventions of academic writing. The authors suggest a diagnostic for all undergraduates early in their first year to identify areas where their writing can be improved, and the chapter outlines how a range of provision can address those needs. The inclusive approach advanced here would remove the stigma often associated with ‘remedial’ help. In parallel, departments should issue clear guidelines for writing in their disciplines, and provide models of good writing. Universities should place greater emphasis on writing skills as a criterion for admission, and, where appropriate, offer writing courses prior to the start of term.

Chapter Five examines the importance of good writing in the world beyond graduation. Louise Page notes that employers are increasingly concerned by the standard of graduate writing skills at a time when technological change means that writing is more important than ever. This should be of major concern to universities as ‘market’ developments in higher education such as top-up fees lead students to scrutinise what transferable skills a university education will equip them with. Improved writing support for students is an essential institutional investment that will attract applicants in the first place, help retain students, and bolster the reputation that universities garner from their graduates. Helen Carey and Shelley Weiner argue that businesses may be willing to bear some of the costs. Literate graduates are more cost effective for companies than having to buy in work-place training. The authors examine how partnerships might be achieved.

Valerie Thornton and Yvonne Coppard, in **Chapter Six**, argue from a pedagogical perspective for an explicit awareness of and attention to writing throughout the educational system. They outline practical ways to raise the importance of good writing in higher education, providing recommendations for lecturers and policy makers and management. Students must be given guidance on how to write effectively and how this affects the assessment of their work. Improved links between schools and universities can ease students’ transition to higher education. In the longer term, higher standards in teacher training, specifically emphasising writing skills, need to be achieved for those entering the profession both in the primary and secondary sectors. Awareness of how language works is a vital component of education, along with fostering a culture of reading. Writers can play an important role in achieving these goals.

Comments on *Writing Matters* by Leading Academics

This group of essays is an extremely useful commentary on, and analysis of, students' writing abilities in higher education today. It brings together the accumulated wisdom of the RLF Fellows' experience and it makes a number of valuable recommendations.

Professor Philip Martin, Dean of Humanities, de Montfort University

I believe that this report, representing as it does a synoptic account of the views formed by RLF Fellows, is going to prove immensely valuable. Also, because it is written by writers, the whole document makes an extremely welcome change from the anaesthetic prose of too much educational development. I loved the blend of detail and wider argument.

Professor C.B. Knights, Director, English Subject Centre (Higher Education Academy)

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 HEIs. The case is made very convincingly that the value to students, academic departments and graduate employers of addressing student writing skills would outstrip the costs. The report points clearly to writing skills being a developmental issue, not a remedial one. I think this is very helpful. 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. The authors of the report are sensitive to the environmental changes which have contributed to the present condition of student writing and are conscious of the squeeze on resources within institutions. But right at the centre of Writing Matters is student need. The message is clear: in every sense, we fail our students when we don't act to address this. I will certainly be circulating this very useful report within my own institution and making it a focus of discussion in how we enhance the student learning experience.

Dr Judith Vincent, Acting Vice Principal, University of Paisley

The attachment of Royal Literary Fund Fellows to universities with the specific remit of helping students with their writing skills is an exciting and innovative venture which is already having positive results. Universities from all groupings and with differing missions have been involved as the problem of poor writing skills is not limited to any sector of higher education. This is an exciting scheme and it should be extended as far as possible... I commend its progress to date and wish it continued success.

Professor Nigel Palastanga, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, Cardiff University

I found the report interesting and engaging. I was particularly impressed with the range of articles presented in the volume. The booklet makes the case for writing programmes in HE and I am sure that it will act as a great advocate for the work. It provides good case studies and examples which can be adapted in different circumstances and situates the work in the new world of HE that we are all now facing. I do think it will be useful to educational developers as well as new lecturers. I suspect it could also be used on training programmes for lecturers.

Professor Mary Stuart, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Sussex

Notes on Contributors

The co-editors:

Stevie Davies is a novelist, literary critic, biographer and historian. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and a Member of the Academi Gymreig. Her novel, *The Element of Water* (2001), was longlisted for the Booker and Orange Prizes and won the Arts Council of Wales Book of the Year prize. *The Web of Belonging* (1997) was adapted by Alan Plater as a television play, *Belonging*, shown on ITV in 2004. Her latest novel, *Kith & Kin* (Orion 2004) was longlisted for the Orange Prize and for the Academy of Wales Book of the Year. She worked for the RLF as Fellow and Advisory Fellow in Wales and South-west England. She is currently Director of Creative Writing at the University of Wales Swansea.

David Swinburne is Research Fellow at the RLF. After obtaining a degree in Chinese from Oxford University, he studied linguistics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where his PhD focused on clause structure and the dynamics of interpretation. He undertook further research on the interface between syntax and pragmatics at Tel Aviv University, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Swinburne has taught English and co-ordinated a variety of academic projects. He worked for the Civil Service before joining the RLF as its second Research Fellow in 2003. In this capacity he has convened a consultative panel of core RLF partners and produced 'best practice' guidelines for new partners in the scheme. He also designed the RLF website and manages special IT projects, such as the on-line Essay Guide, and other resources for Fellows and students.

Gweno Williams is Reader in Early Modern Drama at York St John University College. Her teaching interests range from Renaissance theatre to contemporary literature. Her major research interest is early modern drama by women, particularly the plays of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. Williams has published articles, chapters, a co-authored monograph and a DVD on this topic. She has lectured widely and presented numerous conference papers and workshops on early drama including Shakespeare, in North America and in Europe. She spent a year as a Fulbright Exchange Teacher in Northern California. In 2002 she was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship for outstanding achievement and innovation in higher education teaching. She is Director of the new Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at York St John – C4C: Collaborating for Creativity.

The chapter authors:

Rukhsana Ahmad's first novel, *The Hope Chest*, was published by Virago. Several of her short stories have been anthologised, some commissioned by Radio 4. She has written and adapted plays for the stage and radio, achieving distinction in both fields. Ahmad was a lecturer at the University of Karachi and has continued her commitment to education through writing residencies in various settings. She was appointed RLF Fellow at Queen Mary University of London in 2002-3 and is now an Advisory Fellow in the national network. She is currently adapting a novel for *Women's Hour* and researching a pilot drama series for the World Service Trust.

Carole Angier is the biographer of Jean Rhys and Primo Levi. She was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2002. She has taught literature and philosophy at the universities of Cambridge and Sussex, the External Studies Departments of the universities of Oxford and Bristol, and the Open University (1975-1985). In 2002 Angier founded and taught The Practice of Biography at Warwick, which she will continue to teach at Birkbeck from 2006. For the RLF she has been Fellow and Associate Fellow at the University of Warwick, 1999-2003, and Advisory Fellow for the national scheme 2003-5. She is currently working on a book about refugees.

Helen Carey is the author of *Lavender Road*, *Some Sunny Day* and *On a Wing and a Prayer*. She also contributes to various journals and magazines and has both written and edited business games and careers literature. She has taught creative writing on courses at Bath University and for numerous other organisations. She was the RLF Fellow at University College Worcester for the academic year 2003-4.

Before becoming a full-time writer she worked for Shell International and for the Careers Research Advisory Council in Cambridge where she ran management programmes for students and young managers from industry and the public sector at universities throughout the UK and Republic of Ireland. She went on to run her own management consultancy which specialised in graduate recruitment and junior management training.

Yvonne Coppard writes mainly for children and teenagers but has also written non-fiction for teachers in the areas of child protection, drama and creative writing. Before taking up writing as a full-time career, she was a secondary school teacher for some years and then an adviser to the Cambridgeshire Local Education Authority. As an author, she still visits primary and secondary schools regularly. Coppard was RLF Fellow at APU in Cambridge in 2003-4 and then Fellow at the University of Essex where she'll be continuing in post in 2005-06.

Shahrukh Husain began publishing short-stories and articles as a teenager and worked as a journalist in the UK, writing for women's magazines and broadcasting regularly for the BBC World Service. Her first book was published in 1984 and her first best-seller was *The Virago Book of Witches* (1993). She has published seventeen books including fiction and non-fiction for adults and children as well as having several screen and theatre plays commissioned. She has taught business people, MPs and diplomats going to South Asia and has been a trainer in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy as well as occasionally teaching Creative Writing courses to adults and children. She was an RLF Fellow at London College of Fashion for two years and is now an Advisory Fellow.

Bill Kirton was a university lecturer in French, has written and performed revues at the Edinburgh Festival, written, directed and acted in stage plays in the UK and USA, and written and presented programmes on Grampian Television. He writes promotional brochures, training, environmental and safety videos, websites and other commercial materials. He has published two crime novels and has written six more, including one set in Aberdeen in 1840. His radio plays have been broadcast in the UK and in Australia and he has won a translation prize for his verse rendering of Molière's *Sganarelle*. He spent two years as an RLF Fellow at the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen and is currently in the second year of his Fellowship at the University of Dundee.

Katharine McMahon's new novel, *The Alchemist's Daughter*, will be published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson in 2006. She is the author of four previous historical novels. McMahon has taught English and Drama in comprehensive schools and ran a creative writing course at the University of Hertfordshire. She worked as the RLF Fellow at Hertfordshire for two years. At the University of Warwick she taught the Communicative Science Course where she also coached MBA students in writing skills. McMahon conducted a study for the RLF entitled 'What's Going on with Student Writing?', and as an Advisory Fellow she has mentored fellow writers in six universities.

Nicholas Murray is the author of several literary biographies – including lives of Franz Kafka, Andrew Marvell and Matthew Arnold – as well as a collection of poems and two novels. His biography of Aldous Huxley was shortlisted for the Marsh Biography Prize in 2003. He is a regular contributor of poems, essays and reviews to newspapers and literary magazines. In 1996 he was the inaugural Gladys Kriebel Delmas Fellow at the British Library Centre for the Book and he is a member of the Welsh Academy and of English PEN. He has lectured at literary festivals and universities in Britain, Europe and the United States. He is currently RLF Fellow at Queen Mary University London and is working on a book about the Victorian travellers and explorers to be published by Little, Brown.

Louise Page has worked primarily as a dramatist but has also published a novel and short stories. Her stage work includes 'Salonika' (Royal Court Theatre), 'Golden Girls' (Royal Shakespeare Company), 'When Adam was a Gardener' (Chichester Festival Theatre) and 'Hawks and Doves' (Southampton), and a play about pain called 'Kissing Better'. A great fan of radio drama, Louise has written 20 original radio plays and spent ten years as a scriptwriter on 'The Archers'. She was an RLF Fellow at Trinity & All Saints College in Leeds and is now in her second year as Fellow at Edge Hill College, Ormskirk. Her new play 'Taste' opened at the Le Preau Festival in France in November 2005 and will tour England in 2006.

William Palmer has had seven books published, and many stories, reviews and poems in journals and the national press. He reviews regularly for *Literary Review* and the *Independent*. His most recent novel is *The India House* (Jonathan Cape, 2005). In 1997, he was awarded the Society of Authors' prestigious Travelling Scholarship. For three years from 2000 he was the RLF Fellow at the University of Birmingham, then Creative Writing Project Fellow at the Birmingham and Midland Institute 2003-04 and he is now working for the RLF at the University of Warwick.

Valerie Thornton writes poems and short stories. Formerly an English teacher, she has been teaching creative writing for 20 years at all levels from primary schools to universities. She is currently writing a book on writers' craft for 11 to 14-year-olds and developing an online CPD course for teachers with SNAP (the Scottish Network for Able Pupils). She also teaches fiction writing online for the Open University and edits *New Writing Scotland*. Thornton was RLF Fellow at Glasgow University in 2001-3 and is back at the University this academic year to start a new RLF post in the Faculty of Education.

Alan Wall is a novelist and short-story writer, whose books include *Bless the Thief*, *The Lightning Cage*, *The School of Night*, *China* and *Richard Dadd in Bedlam*. In 2003 he was awarded an Arts Council/AHRB Fellowship to work with the particle physicist Gron Tudor Jones on ways of describing developments in modern physics. They recently addressed the Description and Creativity Conference in Cambridge together. Wall was an RLF Fellow at the University of Warwick and at Liverpool John Moores University. He is now Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at the University of Chester.

Robin Waterfield studied Classics at Manchester University and was a research student in ancient philosophy at King's College, Cambridge. After a few years as a university lecturer, mostly at St Andrews, he joined Penguin Books as a copy-editor. He became a full-time writer a couple of years later producing many translations of classical texts, academic articles, as well as general non-fiction and children's adventure gamebooks. Waterfield has been a visiting lecturer at Williams College, Massachusetts, and has given public lectures in the UK and USA. While working as an RLF Fellow at the University of Sussex, Robin developed a series of writing skills workshops. As a Project Fellow, he delivered these workshops at South Bank University, Westminster University, Heythrop College (University of London), King's College (University of London), St Mary's College Twickenham (University of Surrey), and Middlesex University.

Shelley Weiner is an author and creative writing lecturer, whose novels include *A Sisters' Tale*, *The Last Honeymoon*, *The Joker*, and *Arnost*. Her short stories have appeared in various anthologies and on Radio 4. Shelley has chaired the judging panel for the *Jewish Quarterly* literary prizes and is training director of Words at Work, promoting good written English in the private and public sectors. Among the institutions she has taught for are the Open University, the Taliesin Trust, the British Council in Israel, and Durham University Summer School. She lectures on the creative writing programme at Birkbeck College and is currently the RLF Fellow at Middlesex University.

Contacts for Further Comment

The following panel members may be contacted by email for further comment:

Yvonne Coppard	yvonnecoppard@aol.com
Katharine McMahon	katharinemcmahon@lineone.net
Nicholas Murray	n.murray@britishlibrary.net
Louise Page	lpage50824@aol.com
William Palmer	william.palmer5@btinternet.com
David Swinburne	swinburne@dsl.pipex.com
Shelley Weiner	shellweiner@btopenworld.com
Gweno Williams	g.williams@yorks.ac.uk

List of Current RLF Partner Institutions

Anglia Ruskin University
Birkbeck, University of London
Chichester University College
City & Guilds of London School of Art
City University London
Courtauld Institute of Art
de Montfort University
Edge Hill College
Imperial College London
Kingston University
Leeds Trinity & All Saints College
Liverpool John Moores University
London College of Fashion
Middlesex University
Newnham College, University of Cambridge
Office of Lifelong Learning, University of Edinburgh
Oxford Brookes University
Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh
Queen Mary, University of London
Roehampton University
St Mary's College University of Surrey
University College London
University of Brighton
University of Dundee
University of East Anglia
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University of Kent
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