

# English Prof: 'My Students Can't Write to Save Their Lives'

By now you've probably heard that American students [can't write](#). This rumor is underscored by stats from the [Nation's Report Card](#), which show roughly 3 out of 4 high school seniors unable to achieve proficiency in this area.

Unfortunately, that proficiency doesn't magically improve once those students get to college, a fact which English professor Joseph Teller bore witness to earlier this week in [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#):

*"My students can't write a clear sentence to save their lives, and I've had it.*

*In 10 years of teaching writing, I have experimented with different assignments, activities, readings, approaches to commenting on student work – you name it – all to help students write coherent prose that someone would actually want to read. And as anyone who keeps up with trends in higher education knows, such efforts largely fail."*

So why do so many professors fail in teaching students to write? Teller gives a number of answers to that question in his lengthy essay. The overarching one, however, seems to be that teachers don't give their students the basic tools they need.

Scared into being termed rigid and too traditional, many English professors have turned to a feelings-oriented approach to their craft. Instead of being the sage on the stage, they have become the guide on the side. They place greater emphasis on the thoughts and feelings or political ideas students put

into their works than whether or not students are following – or even knowing – the grammatical rules of writing.

The way to remedy this problem, Teller writes, is for professors to fall back on traditional teaching methods and lay the foundation before building the tower:

- “Students need to write an actual essay and receive feedback on it from me very early in the course.”
- “Students need to spend less time on difficult texts and more time writing arguments. The more time one spends on content, the less time one has for structure and form.”
- “Not every essay requires multiple drafts or peer response. ... Unless one believes a writing teacher’s feedback carries no more weight than anyone else’s, this is unnecessary for every essay.”
- “My job is not to save my students from cultural impoverishment. It is to teach them how to express themselves effectively in writing. The development of cogent, clear prose is at the heart of freshman composition.”

Do you agree with Professor Teller? Would students in every discipline be better served if their professors focused on teaching the basics of their craft, even if such a method is considered “‘boring,’ ‘hard,’ and ‘a lot of work’”?