

The Best Writing Program? Math and Latin

In her recent article at Intellectual Takeout, Annie Holmquist [gives three reasons](#) why college freshman can't write, a problem that is the topic of constant complaint of college professors.

Her reasons are good: They are not receiving good instruction in reasoning and in writing; they don't receive constructive criticism in school; and they are the victims of grade inflation, another species of low standards.

But I can't help thinking there is another reason.

My children were homeschooled and then did some of their coursework at a cooperative classical school that met once a week. Generally speaking, they were classically educated, but my wife always used to worry that they did not get enough training in writing.

Composition is one of the hardest subjects for a homeschool mother to teach. In fact, it's not the easiest thing for teachers to teach either, a problem which is compounded by the way they are taught to teach writing in their education programs (which have become a menace to real education). Teachers are now encouraged to abandon traditional methods of teaching composition that emphasize spelling, grammar, and organization, and to teach according to "process theory," which emphasizes the process rather than the product of writing, and which privileges "creativity" over things like structure.

My wife taught using a traditional program, but she always felt they would crash and burn in college because she didn't spend enough time teaching them writing.

But when my children attended college, they not only did well on their papers, each became the go-to person among their fellow students when it came to writing help.

How did this happen?

The first thing is that what little composition my wife *did* teach my children was traditional: It emphasized an organized way of teaching students how to write in an organized way.

But there is an even more important aspect of their education that I think made the biggest difference, and it was this: They studied Latin.

Studying Latin, if done right, teaches a student the system of formal grammar. Latin is very organized and systematic. It allowed them not only to know and tell others what the rules of grammar were that their professors told them they had violated, but it formed their minds in a way that systematized their thinking.

You can't *write* systematically if you can't *think* systematically (a point Holmquist makes in another way). So how is it that you learn how to think systematically? By studying systematic subjects systematically. And the two best ways to do this are 1) the study of mathematics; and, 2) the study of a highly inflected language (one with an organized noun and adjective system) like Russian, German, Greek, and best of all, because it is so well organized, Latin.

Forget all the talk about "critical thinking skills" programs. The study of math and Latin will take care of it for you.

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