

Why Schools Need to Go Back to the Basics of Writing

Once upon a time in America's schools, teachers were instructed to teach their students the basics of good composition. According to [Bernard Sheridan](#), a school superintendent in Massachusetts in 1917, these basics included:

- 1. An absolute mastery of 'the sentence idea.'*
- 2. Freedom from glaring grammatical mistakes.*
- 3. Correct spelling of all ordinary words.*
- 4. Unfailing use of the commonest marks of punctuation.*
- 5. Some evidence of attention to matters of sentence structure and to the choice of words.*

One hundred years later, Americans are slowly waking up to the fact that these basics are no longer being taught.

One of these individuals is former high school English teacher Nell Scharff Panero. As a [recent article](#) for KQED explains, Scharff Panero is seeking to remedy this problem by training teachers with a different mindset when it comes to writing instruction.

As Scharff Panero explains, many of today's high school teachers have been taught to focus on higher level writing strategies, such as brainstorming and outlining. These techniques are all well and good, but they are unable to take a student anywhere unless they first have a solid structural foundation.

But before students can gain that structural foundation, Scharff Panero found that many teachers must overcome the hurdle of common teaching techniques, which exalt a student's expression and feeling, while minimizing factual, right and

wrong answers:

“Many of these activities are ‘closed’ in that they have a right or a wrong answer that indicates both how well students understand the writing structure, as well as the content involved. Scharff Panero is aware that many educators believe writing in this didactic way inhibits creativity and free expression, but she says students need to understand the rules of writing before they can break them.”

Although contrary to conventional wisdom in today’s educational settings, Scharff Panero’s methods of writing instruction seem to be working. The schools which have implemented her techniques have not only seen student writing improve, but have also seen improvements in student reasoning in other courses such as those of science teacher Jennifer McHugh:

“McHugh has found that the writing exercises help her see where students have gaps in their knowledge. For example, if a student uses ‘but’ incorrectly in a sentence, it’s likely he or she doesn’t understand the relationship between the two things yet.

‘It helps with their critical thinking skills because they’re thinking from multiple perspectives,’ McHugh said. She’s seen her students grow over the year and they earned better Regents scores as well.”

Today, nearly [75 percent](#) of American high school students are unable to write proficiently. Would we see those numbers improve if teachers were encouraged to once again focus on the fundamentals of writing?