

## AMERICA IS FACING A LITERACY CRISIS

Jacob Babb

In a 1975 *Newsweek* article entitled “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” Merrill Sheils asserted, “Willy-nilly, the U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semiliterates.” Sheils worried that technologies such as computer printouts and the conference call were destroying Americans’ abilities to produce clear and concise prose in professional settings, warning that the decline of literacy means that they would soon find themselves back in Babel. Sheils offers a dire vision of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century Americans who were unwilling to embrace the highly structured rules of the English language and a failing education system that was shoving literacy over the precipice. Literacy, according to Sheils, was in crisis.

The notion that literacy is in crisis is nothing new. Americans have been asking why Johnny can’t write for a long time now. The United States has fought against the perceived decline in literacy since the 19<sup>th</sup> century when higher education—indeed, education in general—became more widely available to people who were not wealthy white men.

It was during this era that higher education gradually shifted away from its narrow periphery that produced clergymen and lawyers. The Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 authorized states to use federal lands to build state-supported institutions that focused on agriculture and technology. In response, many of the best universities in the country were established. Colleges and universities began to put greater emphasis on faculty research, moving away from the more teaching-focused traditions of American higher education. The emphasis on research continued to grow throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century as universities worked with the federal government and private corporations to produce the kinds of advances in

science that cured diseases, sent people to the moon, and obliterated large quantities of people with atomic weapons.

As the purpose of higher education changed and more academic institutions were established, more people began going to college. The economic and educational backgrounds of new students became more varied. And with each change that was witnessed in students, technology, and media, academics and non-academics alike bemoaned the decline of literacy.

The perennial literacy crisis has been a significant contributor to the spread of composition instruction in American universities. First-year writing emerged in response to a perception among faculty members at colleges and universities as well as members of the broader society outside academia that high schools were not providing adequate instruction in writing and reading, so high school graduates were underprepared for the rigorous demands of academic writing. At Harvard University, the faculty and administration decided that the crisis in student preparation required a temporary solution, a stopgap until high schools could improve the quality of writing instruction and subsequently send students to college who did not struggle to write clear, coherent, and grammatically correct prose. That temporary solution in the 1880s was English A, a freshman composition course that instantly became a model for other institutions across the country.

The courses envisioned as temporary have since become a staple of American higher education. The reasons for the course's lasting power are complex, but literacy crises are the primary drive behind the stabilization of first-year writing and the growth of writing instruction throughout undergraduate and graduate education. The academic field of writing studies owes its growth throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to public distress that literacy is failing.

Blame for the collapse of literacy shifts from high-school teachers to technology, television, Internet, smart phones, laptops, and tablets—the same technology we often hope will rescue us from illiteracy—to a lack of adequate funding for teacher education and the institutions that provide literacy instruction. Since education has become more readily available to people of color and the lower middle and working classes, the demand for literacy instruction has increased. Basic writing, a term coined by Mina Shaughnessy through her work with community college students in New York City in the 1970s, provided students with more time and instruction in reading and writing to prepare populations for college who, only decades earlier, would never have had the opportunity to

attend college. Writing instruction as a means of improving the literacy of the diverse people living and working in the United States is a worthwhile endeavor.

When framed as a response to the literacy crisis, writing instruction cannot help but carry a connotation of a desperate response to an epidemic. One of the chief beliefs associated with the myth of the literacy crisis is that writing instruction is basically a curricular Band-Aid, an inoculation against illiteracy that will soon go the way of smallpox and polio vaccines. Yet, well over a century after its origination, composition remains a vital part of higher education, not just surviving but flourishing as writing instructors have developed new approaches to writing instruction in light of the ever-shifting literacy needs of the American populace.

The field of writing studies has developed many excellent strategies for teaching composition that encourage students to reflect on their own writing processes, to interact with other readers and writers, and to produce complex texts in media beyond alphabetic writing. However, scholars have also repeatedly asserted that a single course or two cannot fix student writing. Since the 1970s, scholars such as Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, James Britton, and Mina Shaughnessy have shown that writing is not a skill people simply gain and attain. In recent years, scholars such as Kathleen Blake Yancey, Anis Bawarshi, Mary Jo Reiff, and Elizabeth Wardle have argued that writing teachers must face the challenge of transfer, the idea that students often fail to transfer knowledge from one class or field to another, if first-year writing is to succeed in its mission of improving student literacy.

However, no single course or course sequence could solve our nation's literacy woes, especially as the concept of literacy becomes more complex. Culture now maintains a higher standard for information literacy and digital literacy in addition to the expectation that students read and write well. Colleges and universities have built many different initiatives to continue the work of teaching students to write well by building writing centers to offer student writers individualized attention and by providing writing across the curriculum programs to teach professors in other disciplines to use writing as a means of helping students learn.

So when the next version of Newsweek's "Why Johnny Can't Write" emerges and ignites public fears of illiteracy, the public will be looking for answers. It is so easy to blame K-12 schools for the demise of literacy as we know it. Federal and state governments introduce new initiatives to fight against that perceived demise,

whether those initiatives come in the form of No Child Left Behind or the Common Core or whatever the next solution to all of education's problems ends up being.

It's also easy to blame colleges for not meeting the literacy needs of the populace. Ironically, many state-supported universities are no longer able to offer remedial courses for students who may need some additional help to succeed in college, in part because state legislatures, ready to trim university budgets, do not want to pay for courses that may limit a student's ability to finish a bachelor's degree in four years. So the courses that have often helped students prepare for the rigor of academic writing and the sophistication of writing informed by knowledge of rhetorical principles are actually being cut even as the public continues to declare that literacy is in decline.

Rather than thinking of writing instruction as a form of triage, inoculation, or clinical diagnostic generated to protect the middle class from the ravages of illiteracy, we benefit from thinking of writing instruction as a means of helping students improve their abilities to engage in public discourse in all its varied forms. What writing teachers have known for generations is that writing is not an end in itself—it is a method of invention that gives shape to our view of the world and empowers us to engage in discourse with our fellow humans. There are few things more important than that.

There is no literacy crisis. Instead, the concept of literacy continues to become more complex as we expect people to know how to produce and understand texts in multiple forms, whether written, visual, or otherwise. Like all human institutions, education is inherently flawed, and teachers, students, parents and others must always consider ways and initiatives to improve literacy education.

**Kingsborough Learning Center  
Writing Center**

**“America Is Facing a Literary Crisis” Article Reading Comprehension  
Level 2 Structure, Analysis, and Vocabulary-in-Context Questions**

**Directions:** After reading carefully the “America Is Facing a Literary Crisis” article by Jacob Babb, answer, in complete sentences, the following five questions below. The first two focus on the structure of the article, the next two focus on text analysis. The last one focuses on vocabulary in context:

**A. Structure**

- 1. How does the opening paragraph's reference to Sheils' article give context for the main problem that the author seeks to discuss? How does it highlight the importance of the issue of literacy?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2. What history does the author track in paragraphs 3-7? What is one important educational trend that the author highlights, and how does this trend reflect the new demands of society?**

## **B. Analysis**

- 1. What metaphors does the author use in paragraph 8, and how do these metaphors contribute to his overall point about the oversimplification of the contents and purpose of writing curriculum?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2. In paragraph ten, it is pointed out how the entire notion of literacy has become much more complicated and fluid due to cultural demands. In what ways do you think technology and social media has re-defined and even outdated both the idea of literacy and the traditional response to the lack of it?**

## **C. Vocabulary-In-Context**

- 1. In paragraph eleven, what meaning has the author given to the word “demise” in the phrase “the demise of literacy” in the fourth line? How does the word choice contribute to the overall presentation of the problem discussed?**