

Opinion: Death to high school English

By Kim Brooks, Salon

Like so many depressive, creative, extremely lazy high-school students, I was saved by English class. I struggled with math and had no interest in sports. Science I found interesting, but it required studying. I attended a middling high school in central Virginia in the mid-'90s, so there were no lofty electives to stoke my artistic sensibility – no A.P. art history or African-American studies or language courses in Mandarin or Portuguese. I lived for English, for reading. I spent so much of my adolescence feeling different and awkward, and those first canonical books I read, those first discoveries of Joyce, of Keats, of Sylvia Plath and Fitzgerald, were a revelation. Without them, I probably would have turned to hard drugs, or worse, one of those Young Life chapters so popular with my peers.

So I won't deny that I owe a debt to the traditional high-school English class, the class in which I first learned to read literature, to write about it and talk about it and recite it and love it. My English teachers were for the most part smart, thoughtful women who loved books and wanted to help other people learn to love them. Nothing, it seemed to me at the time, could make for a better class. Only now, a decade and a half later, after seven years of teaching college composition, have I started to consider the possibility that talking about classics might be a profound waste of time for the average high school student, the student who is college-bound but not particularly gifted in letters or inspired by the literary arts. I've begun to wonder if this typical high school English class, dividing its curriculum between standardized test preparation and the reading of canonical texts, might occupy a central place in the creation of a

generation of college students who, simply put, cannot write.

For years now, teaching composition at state universities and liberal arts colleges and community colleges as well, I've puzzled over these high-school graduates and their shocking deficits. I've sat at my desk, a stack of their two-to-three-page papers before me, and felt overwhelmed to the point of physical paralysis by all the things they don't know how to do when it comes to written communication in the English language, all the basic skills that surely they will need to master if they are to have a chance at succeeding in any post-secondary course of study.

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I've stared at the black markings on the page until my vision blurred, chronicling and triaging the maneuvers I will need to teach them in 14 short weeks: how to make sure their sentences contain a subject and a verb, how to organize their paragraphs around a main idea, how to write a working thesis statement or any kind of thesis statement at all. They don't know how to outline or how to organize a paper before they begin. They don't know how to edit or proofread it once they've finished. They plagiarize, often inadvertently, and I find myself, at least for a moment, relieved by these sentence- or paragraph-long reprieves from their migraine-inducing, quasi-incomprehensible prose.

Sometimes, in the midst of this grading, I cry. Not real tears, exactly – more a spontaneous, guttural sob, often loud and unpleasant enough to startle my husband or children. There's just too damned much they need to learn in such a short period of time. It seems almost too late before we've begun.

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