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Will Fitzhugh: About Assessing Writing

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Will Fitzhugh is the Founder/Editor of *The Concord Review*, a quarterly review of essays by students of history. Since 1987 *The Concord Review* has published 748 history research papers by high school students on a wide variety of historical topics. This quarterly is the only one in the world for the academic work of secondary students. In this interview, he responds to questions about the need for writing, and some of his current endeavors.

1) I understand that you have just finished a stint on the **ACT/NAGB Steering Committee for the 2011 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) Writing Assessment**. What was that like? (And what does NAGB stand for?)

WF: NAGB is the National Assessment Governing Board, which runs the NAEP, "America's Report Card," as they say. I was glad that Diane Ravitch recommended me for the Steering Committee for the new national writing assessment scheduled for 2011. I was very impressed with the intelligence and competence of Mary Crovo, representing NAEP, and Rosanne Cook, who is running the project for American College Testing. Many people on the Committee were from the National Council of Teachers of English and the College Composition world, which have little interest in having students read history books or write history research papers. In fact that world favors, or has favored in the past, personal and creative writing and the five-paragraph essay, **which do a terrible job of preparing high school students for the nonfiction books and the academic term papers most will be asked to cope with in college.**

2) Given the paucity of writing that goes on in the high schools of America, is it really fair to ask high school students to engage in a robust writing assessment?

WF: It would not be fair to ask high school students to play in a football game if they hadn't had an opportunity for lots of practice, and it is very hard to ask high school students to do the sort

of academic expository writing they should be doing if they have never done it in all their years in school. **But we need to start somewhere. Every high school student does not need to be able to play football, but they all need to be able to read nonfiction books and write serious term papers.**

3) On the other hand, since so much of the college experience is writing, are high school teachers doing students a disservice by NOT requiring more writing?

WF: High school teachers would make terrible football coaches and their teams would lose most if not all of their games, if the teacher/coaches did not have time to practice their teams. We take football seriously, and we take band seriously, so ample time and money are made available to produce the best teams and the best bands the high school can manage. We allow really no time for a public high school teacher to work with students on heavy-duty term papers. **We don't make time for them, because we don't think they are that important.** Not as important as drama practice, yearbook, chorus, debate or a host of other activities. As a result our high school students are, once again, ill-prepared for college reading and writing. AP courses in history do not require, in most cases, that students read a complete nonfiction book, and most of the AP teachers say they don't have time to ask the student to write a research paper, because they "have to get students ready for the AP Exam."

4) Most English teachers would cry "already overworked" or "dealing with under-prepared students" if we asked them to do more writing instruction. Is the answer smaller class sizes? Or fewer mainstreamed kids?

WF: I have suggested the "Page Per Year Plan," which would ask first-graders to write a one-page paper about something other than themselves, and so on, with 8th graders writing an 8-page paper, 11th graders writing an 11-page paper, etc. This would provide English and History teachers with more students who were ready to do serious term papers, and the students would not all have to be started from scratch, like someone going out for football for the first time in their senior year in high school. In addition, if we are serious about term papers and book reports, English and History teachers should be given five class days each semester to supervise such work, and to assess it when it is handed in. **We don't do that now, so most teachers feel they are really too busy to assign these vital projects to their students.**

5) I have often seen "The American public wants more attention paid to writing" phrase. In spite of public outcry, educators or politicians don't seem to respond. Are there just a lot of lone voices crying in the wilderness?

WF: When there is a response, as from the National Commission on Writing in the Schools, **the writing sought is almost inconceivably superficial, formulaic, sentimental, and bland. It is hard for anyone concerned about writing to understand how these and other groups concerned about "Adolescent Literacy" keep their standards so very low.** Young Adult sections in bookstores and libraries are full of fiction which panders to teen interests. None of

the great history books can find a place there, as teens are assumed to be interested in only little fictional stories which are basically about them and their friends. Dumbing Down doesn't get much plainer than that.

6) Doing a national assessment of writing must involve a lot of different opinions about writing. What were some of the fundamental issues discussed at this meeting?

WF: The assessment planned was hobbled by the need to do the evaluation on two 25-minute **samples which require no background knowledge, and could be written by students who had never spent a day in school. Nothing learned in school is required and the prompts are accordingly necessarily superficial.** In addition, the claim is that "writing on demand" is somehow the standard to be met. Some claim that they are asked at work to produce something written in a short time (not 25 minutes I suppose), but even that writing is based on all the knowledge they have from their job and their schooling. For the most part, any decent writing, whether at college or in the workplace, depends on time to gather knowledge, to write, to reflect, and to re-write at least at a basic level. Writing for a prompt in 25 minutes tells us basically nothing about students' ability to acquire and understand knowledge or to organize their thoughts in a paper. A lot of work was done on this assessment, but **I believe the constraints imposed requiring no knowledge and no time for thought or re-writing, make this assessment sadly uninformative about the real academic reading and writing skills of our students.**

7) You recently published "Math and Reading: A Lament for High School History and Writing" in *The Historical Society's Historically Speaking*, November/December 2006, pp 36-37. What were the main point that you were trying to make in that article?

WF: My basic concern is that if Edupundits don't care about serious reading and writing, and Educators limit their students to fiction and to writing very short personal stories and the like, **we cripple our children's ability to read and write at the necessary level.** There seems to be no awareness or desire for awareness of the absence of nonfiction books in our high schools and our (*The Concord Review*) study from 2002 found that the majority of high school teachers are no longer assigning 12-page term papers. Many of our high school graduates find that they need remedial writing courses when they get to college, and many also find the nonfiction books on their reading lists overwhelming, which is not surprising. If they had not played football in high school, they would not last long on a college football team. **When it comes to reading and writing, we seem content to deprive our students of the practice they would need to manage college work when they get there. Many drop out as a result of this, in my view.**

8) Good writing, like good piano or violin playing, probably takes time, effort, and energy. But what are the payoffs to good writing for high school students?

WF: **Reading is the path to knowledge** in the liberal arts, not to slight the value of science labs and the like, and **writing is the path to making knowledge one's own.** If students have not

practiced academic reading and academic writing they will literally be “**out of mental shape**” as they approach more difficult academic material. Some will adjust, but many too many will not, and we will lose them, at least for a while, from the opportunity for a higher education.

9) What question have I neglected to ask ?

WF: Why have history, which might have helped us as we considered our plans in Iraq, and academic writing, which allows thinking to develop, been so neglected in our schools? There is a tremendous interest in the Arts, which are thought to be good for the soul, and for science, which is thought to be the key to economic success, but as one of the major foundations told me, “We are interested in Math, Minorities, and Science” so they can’t support history, writing, and the like. But Minorities also need to read and write, and so will all our future legislators, mayors, judges, teachers, lawyers, and all citizens of our democracy, no matter what their path in life. We need science and math, of course, but we also need, desperately, I believe, to do a better job of teaching academic reading and writing to a higher standard than we have allowed to prevail in our schools.

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