

# BRIDGES

Math and Reading:

A Lament for High School History and Writing

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Many of the educators, especially at the elementary level, who are subject to the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act, complain that because they are forced to spend all that time on math and reading, they have no chance to display their creativity or to teach the social studies, including history. No one seems to have entertained the possibility that by having students read history, as they used to do in the *McGuffey's Readers*, they could not only improve their ability to read, they also could improve their knowledge of history at the same time. Joy Hakim's *History of US* is very good reading for younger students of history.

Later on in high school students are assigned chapters in history textbooks, mostly written by committees, and in some cases selected readings, but **it seems very likely that the majority of U.S. high school students are never asked to read one complete history book during their four years.** In many cases the history they do read is social history sprinkled with a few historical figures, facts and dates, but the history that is omitted often includes military, diplomatic, political, legal, and economic history.

The way to learn and to enjoy history is to read it, and that is not allowed in most of our schools. An additional way to learn and to enjoy history is to write it, that is, at the school level, to do research on a historical topic and to write about it. Most public high schools, even including some elite exam schools such as Boston Latin School, no longer assign the "traditional history term paper." In fact, in most public schools, writing is under the control of the English department.

The English department, for a variety of reasons, has chosen personal and creative writing as its favorite kinds, along with the occasional five-paragraph essay. While the English department does assign complete books, of course they are fiction. Fiction, indeed, is all that many high school students have heard of. Some even think that history books are correctly referred to as novels, because they haven't heard anyone speak about nonfiction books. Some infamous historians have introduced fiction into their history books, but that news is not really current at the high school level. I recently heard a high school teacher, in a Teaching American History seminar, ask an eminent historian what made him write his "novels."

College professors almost universally bemoan the poor preparation of their students in reading and writing. **A recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey found that nearly 90% of college professors interviewed thought their students were not well prepared in research, reading or writing.** And what have they done about it? They complain. It is interesting to me that students can pass their state high school graduation tests, for example the MCAS in Massachusetts, and then find that they must take remedial courses when they get to college. *The Boston Globe* reported last year that of those students who graduate from Massachusetts high schools and go on to community college, 65% are in

remedial courses, and of those who go on to the state colleges and universities, 34% are in remedial courses. Am I the only one who thinks the college assessment people and the high school assessment people may not be talking to each other?

But while college professors of history take zero interest in the academic work of high school students of history, (**unlike the serious interest their coaching colleagues take in the athletic achievement of high school student prospects**), there is not too much they can do about high school instruction in history and in academic writing. Of greater concern is the fact that the majority of high school history teachers did not major in history (12% of them majored in physical education). This may have something to do with **57% of high school students scoring “below basic”** on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress U.S. History test.

One of the reasons coaches are given history teaching assignments is that they can't teach physics, Russian, or math; another is that it really isn't history that they are teaching. Too often it is social studies, and too often that means, as I like to call it, after Flip Wilson, “The History of What's Happening Now.” For those social studies teachers who are left over from the 1960s, “Now” includes Vietnam, Watergate, and Woodstock, and not much else. Even of the ones who know that there were French student riots in the late 1960s as well as American student riots, most do not know—and do not want to know—that much more barbarous “student uprisings” were going on at the very same time in Mao's Great Cultural Revolution in China.

Nevertheless, even high school “tenured radicals” could ask their students to read history books and write history research papers, but most do not. For some of them time stopped in 1970 or so. Ten years ago, I heard a woman who had been a nurse in the Vietnam War saying she had been a guest speaker in an elementary classroom, and one of the students said: “The Vietnam War! My grandfather fought in that!” Clearly the historical time warp almost caused her to faint away.

**People ask me why students are not writing term papers, because they know students will have to do it in college and may very well have to write something at their jobs later. It is hard to explain how full the school day can be and still have no time for real academic work, at least in history.** Teachers assign reading in the textbook, and the students don't do it, so the teacher spends the class time going over the reading, and the same pattern is repeated again and again.

Teachers used to assign book reports, but the students didn't do them, so the teachers stopped assigning them. Some teachers are given 150 students. If they assign them a 20-page paper, then when the papers come in they will have to read and comment on 3,000 pages on their time outside the classroom. This is unrealistic. When I was teaching at the high school in Concord, Massachusetts, I didn't have that many students and the papers were not that long. Yet I still called in sick for a couple of days, so I could read them at home.

Those who say students should learn to write academic papers in high school, and not many do, do not allow teachers time to assign the papers, and guide students through the research process, or to do a decent job of assessing them when they are turned in. Some private school teachers have more time. A history teacher I know—with a Ph.D. in history, teaching at a private school across the street from CalTech—checks every endnote of every paper that comes in. Not many do that.

**Lots of public high school teachers who are assigned social studies classes have never read a history book and never had to write a serious academic research paper themselves, certainly not if they went through the usual Social Studies Educator degree program. It is hard to convey either the excitement of history books or the satisfactions of work on a long serious academic paper if you have never read the one or written the other.**

Time to bring out the silver lining. International Baccalaureate students have to write a 4,000-word Extended Essay for the Diploma. Some high school students read nonfiction books on their own, for some reason. David McCullough reported that Harry Truman read scores and scores of history books not assigned in class, and almost unthinkably in this politically correct day and age, Truman said (and found that),

**“..‘Reading history, to me, was far more than a romantic adventure. It was solid instruction and wise teaching which I somehow felt I wanted and needed.’ He decided, he said, that men make history, otherwise there would be no history. History did not make the man, he was quite certain. His list of heroes advanced. To Andrew Jackson, Hannibal, and Robert E. Lee were added Cincinnatus, Scipio, Cyrus the Great and Gustavus Adolphus, the seventeenth-century Swedish king. No Jeffersons or Lincolns or Leonardos were part of his pantheon as yet. Whatever it was that made other boys of turn-of-the-century America venerate Andrew Carnegie or Thomas Edison, he had none of it. The Great Men by his lights were still the great generals...” David McCullough, *Truman*, 1992, p. 58**

When I was on sabbatical from teaching history at the high school in Concord, Massachusetts in 1986/1987, I considered that a few of my students had written much longer and better history papers than they had to for my classes. It seemed reasonable to assume that in the 25,000 U.S. high schools, 3,500 Canadian high schools and in other high schools in the English-speaking world, there would be other diligent students of history. I thought that if I offered a quarterly journal of essays to these students, they might send me their best work. So, in March of 1987, I incorporated *The Concord Review*, and that summer sent out a brochure calling for papers to all the high schools in the United States and Canada and 1,500 overseas.

By the time I had finished paying back for my sabbatical by teaching another year, I had papers from many schools and even subscribers from fourteen states and four other countries. I donated my last \$100,000 to get started, assuming that (1) many more good research papers would come in and (2) enough schools would subscribe to meet expenses. Assumption one was spot on. We have now published 748 exemplary history research papers by high school students from 44 states and 33 other countries. Assumption two was way off. **Schools which could see the benefit of having students published could not see the benefits of having their students read the essays written by their peers.** There are exceptions. Santa Catalina School in Monterey, California has had several class sets of the journal since the first issue in Fall 1988, and this year, Singapore American School signed up for 50 subscriptions. One of the teachers there said:

**“I passed out *The Concord Review* at the beginning of class. I didn’t say anything except: ‘Take a look at this.’ Here it is 10 minutes later, as I type this, and everyone is reading it and not saying a word. Amazing! What a powerful tool...”**

But so few schools did subscribe that I worked for 14 years without a salary or benefits, and in the process of seeking support, I was turned down by more than a hundred foundations, and the

Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities (several times). I had to suspend publication twice for lack of funds, in 1991 and 1995. Enough support did come in to resume after that, and I am now working on the 69th issue. We publish eleven essays in each issue and we accept about 8% of the ones we get.

Still and all, the major organizations concerned with writing in the schools, such as the College Board, the National Commission on Writing in the Schools and numerous Literacy Initiatives have such low and nonacademic standards for writing that they really do more harm than good. Much has been written about the superficiality of the SAT Writing Test, on which facts are not considered important, and for which tens of thousands of students pay services to help them prepare essays in advance.

Even though some high school students, for whatever personal reasons, continue to read history books and write serious history research papers (we get a lot of independent study research papers, some inspired by our journal), the **Educators hold almost all students down to reading fiction and writing personal stuff and the five-paragraph essay**. I suppose if Educators were limiting all students of math to fractions before college there would be an uproar, but similar astonishingly low expectations for reading and writing are in place, with narry a murmur from the general public or from nearly all of the Edupundits.

Will Fitzhugh founded *The Concord Review* in 1987 to recognize and distribute serious history research papers by high school students in the English-speaking world. For more information about this unique publication, please visit [www.tcr.org](http://www.tcr.org), or write him at [fitzhugh@tcr.org](mailto:fitzhugh@tcr.org)



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