



# Teaching and Writing<sup>1</sup>

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Ted Ward

Confusion about the purpose and goals of higher education has accompanied the expansion of educational opportunity in North America. When things are going well, this confusion can be tolerated. But as resources for student support are now being reduced, an increasing debate over roles and purposes of higher education can be expected.

Few would dispute the importance of effective teaching. Whether it is a kindergarten or a medical college, the quality of teaching is a major concern. Students have a right to be taught well and by responsible and up-to-date teachers. On this matter there is little disagreement.

Opinions about the proper scope and the appropriate breadth of responsibilities of the college are not as widely shared. Is the college just another teaching establishment, extending high school into four more years of classrooms and sports? Are college professors merely school teachers, putting in their 8-to-3:30-plus paper-marking? “Merely teaching” is demeaning wording, because effective teaching is surely not “mere” in any sense, but the question must be raised: is there more to being a college professor than teaching a schedule of classes? Even if no professor used three-year-old notes; even if no professor were beached high and dry on a podium safely aloof from the students and their real world of contemporary experiences and needs; even if no professor were socially unapproachable by his or her juniors, the question would still demand an answer: is there more to it than serving and sharing in the immediate environment of one’s own college?

I now feel that I can best serve the president and our shared objectives for the United States and the world by returning to teaching and writing. (U.P.I., January 31, 1985.)

With these words the American Ambassador to the United Nations recently stepped from page one back into what she called the “private life” of a Georgetown University professor. The coupling of “teaching and writing” came with a familiar ring to the ears of academic persons everywhere.

Whereas school teachers teach, the work of the college professor is generally described as “teaching and writing,” or in certain service-oriented institutions such as the Land Grant Universities, “teaching, service, and research.” Within many of the smaller liberal arts colleges, since mid-century the responsibility to write had neither been significantly encouraged nor well fulfilled. Especially among the Christian colleges, the number of academic books reaching the academic marketplace other than through the “Christian publishers” is disproportionately small. In relatively few catalogs of academic and scholarly books does one find major material from the Christian colleges. Though a careful research librarian might identify more, it would seem from many years of experience that less than ten percent of the Christian colleges account for ninety percent of the few major writings that have emerged from the Christian colleges.

Depending on the purposes and goals of Christian higher education, one will either ask with a shrug, “So what?” or will ponder the circumstances and ask what might be done to change things. What is

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the proper contribution of Christian college professors to the world of scholarship in general? Are Christian professors to write only for Christian booksellers? Or worse, are Christian professors willing to leave the realm of intellectual sharing and the free critique of ideas entirely to their counterparts in secular institutions?

Professional writing has long been associated with the professorial role. Only in recent times, perhaps in response to the mechanizing of evaluation procedures in higher education, has the responsibility to write been regarded as odious. The emergence of the “publish or perish” slogan has biased the matter in a most unconstructive way. Indeed, if an educator values the sharing of ideas and welcomes the honest and open refinement of ideas in the larger community of academic scholarship, can writing be seen as a repugnant nuisance?

Evaluation of the professional contributions of a professor should surely not overlook published output. To do so would deny the validity of print itself and would raise even more serious questions about the worth of Christian contributions to scholarship. The sort of isolationism, exclusivism, and selfishness implied by the institution’s failure to reward its professors for significant publishing is surely unworthy of the name “Christian.”

Unfortunately professors in smaller colleges, especially, are expected to carry out widely scattered responsibilities. Without doubt, anguish of overworked and undercompensated teachers must be taken into account. For some, adding the responsibility for professional writing is not only a straw to break the camel’s back, it may prove to be an absurdly excessive expectation. Institutional support is crucial, though some professors have demonstrated that it isn’t essential. Such persons often risk their health and family to make a professional contribution. For many more, the crux of the issue is whether to be a scholar or a school teacher.

Excellence in teaching is a popular claim among Christian colleges—and so it should be—but such claims are often little more than a smokescreen for financial constraints that disallow productive scholarship and contribution of the professor to the discipline.

Self-doubt and insecurity work against productive scholarship. The habit of humility acquired in youthful years in academia can lead to a lifetime of resistance to opportunities to write. Few self-assessments are more self-fulfilling than the plea, “I can’t write.” This incapacity is passed from teacher to student; those who believe themselves to be incompetent writers are rarely good encouragers of others.

Belying its potential power and influence, writing emerges as a tender craft. During childhood and the student years it can be easily blighted by insensitive criticism or by forced misuse of the talent. This latter destroyer includes the requirement of meaningless pages of convergent parrot-talk thinly disguised as term papers and busy-work. Insensitive criticism includes the failure of professors to respect their students’ writing enough to read it and provide adequate suggestions for its improvement. It may be tolerable to put few check marks and a grade on a test, but a piece of creative or expository writing, whether a book review or a major essay, deserves nurturance: at minimum it should be given a thoughtful word of appreciation which identifies specific strengths, accompanied by a few well-directed comments about ways and means toward refinement.

The insecure professor hesitates to circle a misspelled word or mark a suggested resequencing of a weak construction. “Leave that to the writing teacher,” one says. Indeed, just who is to be the

writing teacher after the freshman or sophomore year in the required basic course? All of us who share professorial responsibilities.

Fear of writing, as many another phobia, is no trite misconception to be easily erased by a pep talk. Even for the most experienced writer, moments of panic arise from that dreadful combination of blank paper, an unrealistic deadline, and a mind full of provocative ideas that refuse to be formed into words.

For some, the fear of writing is fed by frustrations over a lifetime of disappointing attempts to break into print. Such cases often prove to be the consequence of having learned to write for the wrong reasons. Schooling assures that one can read and write; but along with the skills comes an almost universal handicap of having learned to write for an audience of one. Under this handicap, writing is a private and subjective function—one does well to keep the letters hidden and the old term papers burned.

The typical forms of scholastic writing and the real world of printed communication are miles apart. Unless challenged, the student tends to write, from first grade through the doctoral dissertation, for the audience of one: the teacher. To say what is expected or required by this focal person is deeply ingrained through years of practice. As the student comes to see it, grades depend on it, one's academic future is profoundly affected by it, and the resultant sense of worth as a student and scholar is deeply wrapped in this blanket of enforced convergence. Small wonder that so many creative writers, especially the movers and shakers of complacency, get their starts in writing after or outside their schooling experiences.

The narrowness of academic categories also works against the motivations to write. How can the physics professor in a small college with a 1970s laboratory hope to publish alongside her or his counterparts in powerful graduate research centers? The problem here may be in the question itself. Try it another way. What has any other professor of physics to say that would exceed the significance of this Christian professor's observations of the role of scientific knowledge and laboratory skills in the formation of a liberally educated undergraduate? Indeed, the paranoia and poor-mouth utterances of some Christian college professors come more often from failure to appreciate their own context and its values than from any real persecution or self-sacrifice.

Some correctives are in order. Toward the end of a broader scope of roles and responsibilities for Christian higher education, certain policies and practices can be recommended:

1. The administrators and governing boards of Christian colleges should encourage—yea verily, demand that rewarded scholarship and qualitative standards include specific attention to the professor's professional article and book publications. And further, since it is unreasonable, irresponsible, and disappointing to demand the impossible, faculty load standards that provide for academic writing should be put in place. Christian colleges and their faculties have far too much to offer for the present conditions to be justified.
2. Faculty members who are established scholars in their own field should be actively encouraged to seek appropriate publishers for at least one significant book each five years after age 40. Such publishers should be appropriate to the content field of the professor's expertise, not limited to "Christian publishers."

3. Younger faculty can develop their writing skills continuously, especially fighting off post-dissertation depression and the “never again” biases it can engender. Book reviews, written for scholarly journals and popular magazines provide excellent opportunities to gain skill while developing the habit of sharing with professional and mass readerships. Any professor can study the reviewing style, length, and technical form of a journal or magazine’s typical reviews, write an appropriate review of a new book, submit a manuscript and ask for suggestions.
4. Professors who are still engaged in graduate study can convert assigned writing exercises into some sort of draft for publication. They can try thereby to break the audience-of-one habit, negotiating modification of otherwise sterile writing exercises so they can result in useful manuscripts to share through publication.
5. Writing can be given a more honored place in the college classroom. Expecting good writing and treating with respect students’ efforts to express themselves in writing can turn around the trend toward poor writing. Assigned papers can be arranged in the form of sharable and multireader products whenever feasible. What students write can be faithfully read and given profitable commentary.

Regardless of one’s opinions of Jeanne Kirkpatrick’s approach to international relations, her statement of devotion to service provides a useful model for the professor in the Christian college:

I can best serve the Lord Jesus Christ and the redemptive objectives of God for this nation and for the world through teaching and writing.