

## Art of essay-writing damaged by Twitter and Facebook, Cambridge don warns

Heavy use of websites like Twitter and Facebook has led to teenagers losing the art of essay writing, a leading Cambridge don has warned.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/social-media/9813109/Art-of-essay-writing-damaged-by-Twitter-and-Facebook-Cambridge-don-warns.html>

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Even pupils from top ranking schools who have won places to study at elite universities now struggle to master the English language when writing, according to Professor David Abulafia.

He said that essay skills were “going down the plug hole” as so much of teenagers’ writing today was on social networking websites, where the style used is vastly different.

He cited Twitter, which limits messages to just 140 characters, for leading to “very compressed” language, which ignored the rules of grammar and encourages users to leave out personal pronouns, articles and punctuation.

For brevity, users of such sites also opt for abbreviations such as “u” for “you” and the use of letters for words, such as “4” for “for”. Examiners have reported encountering the “text language” in exams.

Many universities have been forced to run remedial classes in English to try and bring new students to degree level standard.

Prof Abulafia, an historian at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, said: “People no longer know how to write. It is a society in which fewer and fewer people read.

“What they do write tends to be short messages in a sort of meta-language, with meta-spelling, on Twitter and Facebook.”

“We have to recover a mastery of prose,” he told an examinations seminar at Politeia think tank. “People have to realise that of all the tools that a young person can use in the humanities the most precious is the ability to articulate an argument, to convince, to sometimes pull the wool over the eyes by a real mastery of prose.”

Recent research supports the professor’s fears about poor writing skills. A survey of more than 600 university lecturers by Cambridge Assessment listed academic writing in the top three areas in which new undergraduates were least prepared.

Prof Abulafia said students no longer knew how to put together a coherent argument in clear and concise English.

“If we are talking about encouraging pupils at GCSE and A-level to look at the big picture, it means thinking about essay writing and this is a skill which seems to me to be very much lost.

“Even students from top ranked schools seem to find it very difficult when they arrive at top universities like Cambridge to write essays coherently. We are talking about a mastery of the English language – the ability to write continuous prose, elegantly and precisely setting out an argument.”

In recent years, examiners have warned schools that pupils are resorting to “text language” in GCSE exams.

Examples included “B” for “be” and “C” for “see”. Vowels were also frequently missed out of words for the sake of speed.

The professor wants to see exam questions that demand essay writing skills, particularly at A-level. Current mark schemes, which tell examiners exactly how many points to award for each bit of information provided by the candidate, should be scrapped.

“In the sort of exams I am thinking of, essay writing comes much more to the fore and examiners would be making more subjective judgements about scripts. In an ideal world there would be double marking of scripts,” he said.

His comments will spark debate about exam questions in GCSEs and A-levels. Critics say that the predominance of questions which require answers of a single word, phrase or paragraph have dumbed down papers.

In his exam reforms, Michael Gove, the education secretary, wants to see shorter, more open-ended questions which test a candidates extended writing skills.

Some teachers fear, however, that this will lead to more subjective, less consistent marking and make it harder to predict how pupils will perform.

One teacher union, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, has said that “memory skills and essay writing” are “not crucial skills for life today”.

Essex University has published a 20-page guide for its undergraduates on to how to write properly.

It includes examples of errors made by students such as bad syntax, incorrect use of tense, prepositions and apostrophes, confusing singular and plural, using inappropriate phrases, mixing pronouns and the incorrect use of capital letters.

#### **Examples of poor writing skills from student essays cited by Essex University**

*“Although the current law for establishing whether something is a fixture or fitting can be argued to be rather messy and incoherent ...”*

*“There are so many of us now that we seem to of lost a sense of community and become strangers on our society.”*

*“The law does not specify other eventualities, such as a situation where a lost item falls onto a landowners land ...”*

*“The law of averages are too unreliable ...”*

*“Being poor in society today it does not cause as many problems for the individual as it did many years ago.”*

*“One day a teacher notices that the children start missing School and arriving late ...”*