

Column

When it comes to writing, SAT should cut the crap

David Coleman was named the new president of the College Board last summer and, thanks to him, the board is debuting a reconstructed SAT in 2015. The SAT has long been a poor excuse for a college-readiness exam. This is especially true of the essay section, which came under heavy fire at a September press conference filled with high school and university faculty from across the country. They told Coleman in no uncertain terms how detrimental the essay portion has become for students. For the first time, the College Board is listening.

In his article aptly titled “We Are Teaching High School Students to Write Terribly,” Slate.com’s Matthew Malady details how the SAT-essay-grading system rewards students for fabricating experiences instead of supporting their work with facts, which is the basis of a college composition.

One professor interviewed for the article stated there is “no concern about factual accuracy.” Another claimed that the SAT serves only to give students “a diminished view of what writing is.” The most forward of the bunch said this exam, which should be about testing command over language, is merely rewarding “the ability to bulls**t on demand.”

When testing, students get 25 minutes to plan an essay but no extra paper. They respond to vague, FCAT-like prompts by throwing up words, half of them about fake experiences. During grading, readers must meet a daily quota and essays go past them conveyer-belt style. Taking more than three minutes to score a paper gets them booted from the job. Reading more than 30 essays in an hour, two minutes or less per essay, and they earn a bonus.

The grading system means there is no time to fact-check, so the prose becomes all-important. Stuffing it with upper-register vocabulary looks impressive as readers skim past the context which, if it was read, would reveal its writer had no idea what “obstreperous” actually means. Of course, five-paragraph style is a given. Anything else and graders have to pause and consider structure, which steals points automatically.

English teachers, even in AP courses, have to spend time teaching this formula. First comes the hook, then the thesis, three body paragraphs, a conclusion and, for God’s sake,



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end it on a profound note. A personal favorite? Never cross two T’s in one stroke; the writing looks rushed, which implies insecurity. All these tricks and tactics may boost the score but serve no purpose outside the testing room. With high pressure from schools, peers and parents to achieve a high pass rate, it must be done. Unfortunately, time spent on test prep detracts from learning the truly applicable lessons.

However, AP essay questions trump the SAT’s in that they require facts — which will be checked — and often include critical analysis or document synthesis. These come closer to representing university-level writing, which asks the student to mesh outside sources to support original arguments. Meanwhile the SAT says, “Screw the facts, kid, you’re a credible source all your own.”

What SAT prep teaches students is regurgitation, which in any form yields an unoriginal and unenjoyable result.

True command of the English language means having a veritable arsenal of strategies for any writing situation. It does not mean students plunging two fingers into the back of their throats to spew nonsense and thesaurus words onto unsuspecting paper. The SAT and its lessons in spinning great tales are overdue for a facelift. For something dubbed a “college readiness assessment,” it couldn’t be farther from it. Today we thank the testing gods for David Coleman and look forward to when students get a taste of real writing.

Critical analysis teaches us to spot patterns and dissect the nuances of others’ verbal and written communications. A holistic writing education allows us to articulate a point in a graceful and novel way. Writing should be about producing a concrete communication, one with merit that can stand alone. These are important life skills. If we are to inhabit and decipher the world around us — our context — we have to stop teaching students to bulls**t their way to success.

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UWire

In praise of idleness: virtues of vacation

As a mathematician-cum-philosopher-cum-social critic who published 66 books and more than 2,000 essays, Bertrand Russell was totally unqualified to promote leisure at the expense of work. But in a 1935 article for Harper’s Weekly titled “In Praise of Idleness,” that’s exactly what he did, and by many accounts he was quite successful.

The nuts and bolts of his thesis were bold: The workday should be capped at four hours. Increases in productivity should lead not just to increases in consumption, but also to more time off; instead of organizing our lives around our jobs, we should organize them around the activities that matter most to us — activities which rarely include laboring in a factory or an exurban office park.

From a modern perspective, “In Praise of Idleness” comes off as a bit utopian — submit an essay to Harper’s calling for a four-hour workday now, and you’ll have nothing to show for it but a rejection slip.

But the wonderful thing about utopian viewpoints is that by showing us an alternate world totally in balance, they also show all that’s out of balance with our reality. In Russell’s worldview, the West — especially the United States — was so obsessed with working, with employment, with thrift, that any activity not related to our jobs was considered unacceptably frivolous. Humanistic study was shunned, self-cultivation was deemed unimportant, and political dialogue centered on getting citizens to work, but never touched upon getting them some time off.

Russell detailed many causes and symptoms of this work-obsessed cultural worldview in his essay. Like almost all of Russell’s writings, the structure and syntax of the piece is crystal clear, but unlike many of his writings — which were stubborn children of early twentieth century Britain — the observations and arguments of “In Praise of Idleness” are as instructive in 2013 as they were when first published.

In terms of our entertainment, even Bertrand would be shocked at just how passive and sluggish we’ve become.

According to a recent survey by Nielsen, the average American over the age of two watches 34 hours of television per week. The Bureau of Labor Statistics — using the somewhat suspect method of simply asking respondents — came up with the much more modest figure of 2.8 hours a day. Still, that was sufficient to account for the bulk of the average American’s leisure time, dwarfing activities like reading (18 minutes per

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day) and “socializing or communicating” (37 minutes per day).

To sum it all up, despite America’s constantly ballooning GDP, we can’t wrench ourselves away from our desks and assembly lines. We’re still subjected to traumatizing recessionary bubbles in which we’re unemployed or working our asses off to remain employed. We’ve pretty much ditched the idea of self-cultivation for its own sake, and, collectively, we spend more time watching a few popular television shows than we do pawing through novels and magazines.

If Russell’s observations weren’t true in 1935, they certainly are now.

Russell did offer a solution to this predicament, but, as already mentioned, he was a utopian. He wrote in his 1935 essay, “The Case for Socialism,” that a democratic, non-Marxian, socialist regime, arising with the slow passage of time, would be able to institute his four-hour workday without a descent into penury. His idea is characteristically bold, and such a regime might work, but it won’t arise in our lifetimes, so for now we’ll have to look for solutions elsewhere.

One source would be Western Europe where a number of countries have managed to foster leisure, without dismantling capitalism — and the innovation that comes along with it — as Russell would have us do.

At the moment, Americans aren’t mulling the virtues of this European-style leisure. As we’re recovering from a period of economic malaise, citizens and politicians alike have emphasized the need for hard work and thrift. But we ignore that fact that our production grows more efficient by the year — that this growth in productivity was especially pronounced during the Great Recession. Whatever the roots of our economic anxieties, simply working more and more won’t soothe them.

Russell said Americans were uniquely adverse to leisure; it appears he was telling the truth. For centuries we’ve deified the honest hard-worker — whether he be the yeoman farmer or the cunning industrialist. When this attitude shows its downsides, as it has in the last few years, we cling to it with more ferocity than ever before. Perhaps — in an era dominated by a never-declining workday, universal pre-professionalism, and extreme anxiety among both the unemployed and employed — it’s finally time to reconsider.

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