

Mark James Miller: Ethos, Pathos, Logos, and Why Writing Matters

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More than 2,000 years ago, in *The Art of Rhetoric*, [Aristotle](#) outlined “The Rhetorical Triangle”— Ethos, Pathos and Logos. These were, he said, the best methods to persuade an audience: Through the credibility of the speaker or writer (Ethos), by an appeal to the emotions (Pathos) or by appealing to logic (Logos).

While these principles are as valid now as they were in the 4th century B.C.E., recent tests indicate that 21st-century American students are struggling with them, and with the subject upon which they are most directly related: writing.

Writing is one of the most basic of all skills. But only a quarter of American students write “proficiently,” according to a study commissioned by the [Education Department](#), and a meager 3 percent write at an “advanced” level.

This is not news to a writing instructor. After more than 20 years of teaching writing, I know too well that students often come into my classroom clueless about forming a thesis statement, have no idea of the difference between expository and persuasive writing, and are certainly not familiar with the concepts of Ethos, Pathos and Logos. Quite often they don’t even realize how important writing is to their futures, to their success in college and then in the working world.

It isn’t that they cannot learn. I have seen students make amazing progress in their writing skills when they are given the proper instruction and assignments. But teaching good writing should begin long before students reach college.

Why are American students having difficulty with something so fundamental? You can point fingers at plenty of places: According to a [2003 study](#) by the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, writing is the neglected "R," and for many years has not been given its rightful place as an important part of a school's curriculum. Teachers have not been trained in teaching writing. Social media and texting ignore all rules of spelling and grammar, let alone sentence structure. But much of the problem also lies with the foisting of the "business model" on education.

The trend toward organizing and administering education as if it were a corporation began in the [President Ronald Reagan](#) era, and has since been pushed even harder by the so-called "reformers" who want to see public schools run as a business, rewarding schools whose students do well on standardized tests and punishing those whose students do badly.

This approach to education leaves little room for teaching writing, a labor-intensive process that requires a great deal of time spent not simply on instruction but also in grading the student's compositions. Reading and grading a single 700- to 1,000-word essay, making corrections and suggestions for improvement, can take anywhere from five to 15 minutes, even for someone who is a faster-than-normal reader. Multiply that times 30 for an average-sized class and you're talking about anywhere from 2½ to 7½ hours spent on one assignment.

And to truly help a student with his or her writing, a teacher needs to not only point out the mistakes that have been made — such as a fragmented sentence, a logical fallacy or a simple error in punctuation — but also make suggestions on how to improve a faulty paper at its core so that it accomplishes whatever purpose the author intended — such as persuading the audience to take action on an issue confronting the community or explaining a process that the reader needs to understand.

In 1978, with a groundbreaking study titled "How Writing Shapes Thinking," researchers concluded that because the connection between writing and thinking is so closely connected, giving students tough, challenging writing assignments is an ideal way for them to explore deep and serious thought in any subject they might be studying.

Writing, in other words, can be seen as exercise for the brain. Writing an essay about [Hamlet's](#) obsession with his mother or the shadows on the wall in [Plato's Allegory of the Cave](#) may not appear to have much practical value at

first glance, but seeing them as the mental equivalent of a 10K run places them in a much different light.

Writing is more important today than ever before. Two thirds of salaried workers in the United States have jobs that require writing. Writing has become so critical that a majority of employers are requiring a writing sample from job candidates, not simply to assess their writing ability but also to get an idea of how well they can communicate their thoughts and ideas. According to [Forbes.com](#), good writing skills are among the seven “universal” talents modern employers are looking for.

What can be done to reverse this downward trend? Writing must be restored to an important place in the K-12 and higher education curriculum. Teachers have to be given more instruction in how to teach writing, and they must be given the time needed to do it correctly. Whenever possible, students should be given writing assignments on topics that interest them.

Students can learn to write clearly and logically. A student of mine once wrote, “I have come a long way — from not being able to write a paragraph to being able to write eight pages on a topic. Of course I have a lot to learn, but I am now willing to go the extra mile to get to where I want to be.” Said another, “The more passion you put into your writing the more interesting it will be.”

Not all students are going to write brilliantly. Not all people are going to enjoy the writing they have to do at the job. But we all need to acknowledge how important writing is in today’s world, that it will become even more important in the future, and that it needs to once again be an important part of today’s curriculum.

If that happens, someday more students will arrive in my classroom knowing how to write a thesis statement, how to tell expository from persuasive writing, and will know the difference between Logos, Pathos and Ethos.

— *Mark James Miller is a teacher and writer, and has been a part-time English instructor at [Allan Hancock College](#) in Santa Maria since 1995. He is president of the [Part-Time Faculty Association of Allan Hancock College, California Federation of Teachers](#) Local 6185, and is an executive board member of the [Tri-Counties Central Labor Council](#). [Click here to read previous columns](#). The opinions expressed are his own.*

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