

2. In his final paragraph, Gelernter claims “you cannot teach a child anything unless you look him in the face.” What does he mean? Do you agree?

Suggestions for Writing

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Gelernter? Write an essay in which you take a stand about the value of classroom computers. Focus on the basic skills of reading, writing, and math, but feel free to consider computers as teaching tools in other areas, too.
2. Gelernter wrote this essay in 1994. Do some research on how the classroom use of computers has changed since then. For example, what kinds of educational software have been developed? How much time does the average student spend on a classroom computer? Are computers used to teach basic skills? Write an essay, using your findings to support your position about how Gelernter would feel about the use of classroom computers today.

Teaching Tip

Remind students that taking a stand is covered in Ch. 9 and supporting a position with sources is covered in Ch. 12.

Clive Thompson

The New Literacy

Clive Thompson is a science and technology writer for the *New York Times Magazine*, *WIRED*, and *New York Magazine*, the video-game columnist for *Slate*, and a finance columnist for *Details*. He has received the National Magazine Award in Canada twice, and in 2002–2003 was the Knight Science Journalism fellow at MIT. His commentary can be heard on NPR, CNN, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He also keeps a blog, “Collision Detection,” which “collects bits of offbeat research... and musings thereon.” Here, Thompson discusses some counterintuitive research by Professor Andrea Lunsford on literacy in the digital age.

AS YOU READ: What did the Stanford Study of Writing discover about student writing?

As the school year begins, be ready to hear pundits° fretting once again about how kids today can’t write—and technology is to blame. Facebook encourages narcissistic° blabbering, video and PowerPoint have replaced carefully crafted essays, and texting has dehydrated language into “bleak, bald, sad shorthand” (as University College of London English professor John Sutherland has moaned). An age of illiteracy is at hand, right?

Andrea Lunsford isn’t so sure. Lunsford is a professor of writing and rhetoric at Stanford University, where she has organized a mammoth project called the Stanford Study of Writing to scrutinize° college students’ prose.

For a student response to this essay, see pp. 30–31.

Quick Start

Before reading the essay, ask students to jot down a list of their common types or ways of writing.

pundits: Critics and commentators. **narcissistic:** Self-centered. **scrutinize:** Examine

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From 2001 to 2006, she collected 14,672 student writing samples—everything from in-class assignments, formal essays, and journal entries to emails, blog posts, and chat sessions. Her conclusions are stirring.

“I think we’re in the midst of a literacy revolution the likes of which we haven’t seen since Greek civilization,” she says. For Lunsford, technology isn’t killing our ability to write. It’s reviving it—and pushing our literacy in bold new directions.

The first thing she found is that young people today write far more than any generation before them. That’s because so much socializing takes place online, and it almost always involves text. Of all the writing that the Stanford students did, a stunning 38 percent of it took place out of the classroom—life writing, as Lunsford calls it. Those Twitter updates and lists of 25 things about yourself add up.

It’s almost hard to remember how big a paradigm shift this is. Before the Internet came along, most Americans never wrote anything, ever, that wasn’t a school assignment. Unless they got a job that required producing text (like in law, advertising, or media), they’d leave school and virtually never construct a paragraph again.

But is this explosion of prose good, on a technical level? Yes. Lunsford’s team found that the students were remarkably adept at what rhetoricians call *kairos*—assessing their audience and adapting their tone and technique to best get their point across. The modern world of online writing, particularly in chat and on discussion threads, is conversational and public, which makes it closer to the Greek tradition of argument than the asynchronous° letter and essay writing of 50 years ago.

The fact that students today almost always write for an audience (something virtually no one in my generation did) gives them a different sense of what constitutes good writing. In interviews, they defined good prose as something that had an effect on the world. For them, writing is about persuading and organizing and debating, even if it’s over something as quotidian° as what movie to go see. The Stanford students were almost always less enthusiastic about their in-class writing because it had no audience but the professor: It didn’t serve any purpose other than to get them a grade. As for those texting short-forms and smileys defiling° *serious* academic writing? Another myth. When Lunsford examined the work of first-year students, she didn’t find a single example of texting speak in an academic paper.

Of course, good teaching is always going to be crucial, as is the mastering of formal academic prose. But it’s also becoming clear that online media are pushing literacy into cool directions. The brevity of texting and status updating teaches young people to deploy haiku°-like concision.° At the same time, the proliferation° of new forms of online pop-cultural exegesis°—from

Teaching Tip

You may want to pair this essay with Ch. 8, “Explaining Causes and Effects.”

Analysis Tip

Ask students to analyze how Thompson anticipates questions throughout the essay, as in paragraph 6, where he asks, “But is this explosion of prose good, on a technical level?”

Analysis Tip

Draw students’ attention to the word *serious* in paragraph 7. Why is it in italics? How does that change the way we read it?

asynchronous: Not occurring at the same time. **quotidian:** Ordinary, commonplace. **defiling:** Making dirty; corrupting. **haiku:** Japanese form of poetry having three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables. **concision:** The quality of being brief; brevity. **proliferation:** Rapid increase. **exegesis:** Explanation or analysis.

sprawling TV-show recaps to 15,000-word videogame walkthroughs—has given them a chance to write enormously long and complex pieces of prose, often while working collaboratively with others.

We think of writing as either good or bad. What today's young people know is that knowing who you're writing for and why you're writing might be the most crucial factor of all.

Questions to Start You Thinking

1. **Considering Meaning:** According to the author, what is the effect of the Internet on writing?
2. **Identifying Writing Strategies:** Where does Thompson use comparison and contrast? How does it support his argument?
3. **Reading Critically:** Who seems to be the intended audience for this essay? What is the writer's purpose? How well do you think he achieves it?
4. **Expanding Vocabulary:** In paragraph 5, Thompson writes, "It's almost hard to remember how big a paradigm shift this is." What is a *paradigm shift*? Why is this concept important to Thompson's larger purpose?
5. **Making Connections:** According to Thompson, the Internet and other new media forms are stimulating literacy. How might Sherry Turkle ("How Computers Change the Way We Think," p. 595 and e-Pages) respond to Thompson's article? What would she make of this "paradigm shift"?

Journal Prompts

1. Thompson claims that people are writing more than ever as they socialize online (paragraph 4). Consider your own time spent writing online, texting, or tweeting. Has this time and involvement made you a better writer? Why, or why not?
2. According to Thompson, students surveyed in the Stanford Study of Writing "defined good prose as something that had an effect on the world" (paragraph 7). Do you agree with this definition? Can you think of a better one? What examples come to mind?

Suggestions for Writing

1. Drawing on your own experience and observations, write an essay in which you explore the cause-and-effect relationship, positive or negative, between the use of the Internet (or another new media form) and its consequences for writing.