

What Aristotle and Stephen Colbert Have In Common

By Chris Howard, Elizabeth J. Deis, and Lowell T. Frye

The debate about the “writing revolution,” sparked by Peg Tyre’s recent *Atlantic* article, is grounded in a false dichotomy—the notion that somehow creativity and an expressive voice exist in opposition to lucid expository, analytical, or persuasive writing. Our experience teaching writing at Hampden-Sydney College and the success our writing program has enjoyed for more than 30 years have convinced us that this stark opposition is both unnecessary and counterproductive.

Good writing is clear writing, no doubt. But the best writing—writing that informs and persuades simultaneously—is engaged, passionate prose that unites head and heart in an individual voice. Writers and teachers since before Aristotle have understood the powerful link between reason and emotion, structure and style, that is essential to powerful, persuasive writing and speaking. How else can we account for the lasting impact of Pericles’ *Funeral Oration* or Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address* or *Second Inaugural*? How else can we explain the persuasive arguments of Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” or his “I Have a Dream” speech?

We sell young writers short—and wall them off from access to the world’s conversation—when we imply that readers will be willing to plow through disordered personal impressions. But we also sell them short when we tell them that no one cares what they feel or think.

Hampden-Sydney College is one of four or, depending on how one counts, five liberal arts colleges for men in the country, and teaching students to write and speak well has been a primary focus here since our founding in 1775. With that in mind, it’s not surprising that our former students include such wordsmiths as William H. Armstrong (*Sounder*), Michael Knight (*The Typist*), and Stephen Colbert.

But not all of our incoming freshmen are naturally gifted with words. Our college has made writing a high priority for all students, and since 1978, the college’s rhetoric program has been the institutional center of that effort. Our students read and analyze classic American works by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, along with essays by E. B. White and George Orwell, Annie Dillard, and Virginia Woolf. But they also read contemporary creative nonfiction by Scott Sanders, Rebecca Skloot, Pico Iyer, Lee Gutkind, Anne Fadiman, and Phillip Lopate, among many others.

Our students read not just to encounter or appreciate these writers. Instead, they examine how these authors combine an attention to structure with creative and innovative personal styles, all in the service of what they wish to say. In this regard, writing classes at Hampden-Sydney no doubt resemble those at other colleges nationwide.

But Hampden-Sydney’s rhetoric courses also embody the belief that familiarity with our language’s rhetorical structures prepares students to use sentences and paragraphs purposefully, and thus helps them develop an individual writing voice that is clear, engaging, and persuasive.

Even as our students study the broader structures of analytical and persuasive prose, they learn how to wield sentence grammar and syntax, the tools our language supplies (here we actually agree with Tyre). Like other writing instructors nationwide,

we show students how to organize their thoughts while helping them break loose from formulaic patterns for writing (such as the five-paragraph essay). We help them learn to express their thoughts not just lucidly but powerfully by combining, expanding, or reducing their sentences in multiple ways.

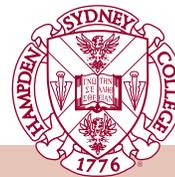
Like successful writers everywhere, our students learn to state their ideas in different ways, with different effects, for different audiences—and that’s true whether a student is writing an academic essay about the battle of

Antietam or introducing an argument for the preservation of historical sites with a personal reminiscence about a Holocaust survivor’s suicide. Students learn, in fact, that no matter what they are writing about, they cannot assume an audience’s interest in what they have to say. They have to earn it.

The late writer-educator Richard Marius used to say, “Writing is hard work, and no book can make it easy.” Nor

can any one method, no matter how much it dominates the national conversation at any moment. The “writing revolution” at New Dorp may feature a particular method, but we suspect, given our experience at Hampden-Sydney, that other factors play even more crucial roles in the improvement of writing and learning at this one high school.

First, like the program at New Dorp High School, Hampden-Sydney creates a culture in which writing is important. Our rhetoric program engages the active participation of



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faculty across the college. Students see that writing well is important in biology and political science, just as it is in English and history. Students at Hampden-Sydney hear again and again about the features of good writing; they are held to a consistently high standard of quality for the writing they do in all of their academic courses. As a result, students develop and sustain good writing habits.

Second, if the bar for achievement is set high, the same standards are enforced across the board, and significant support services are made readily available, students will work hard to achieve success.

Finally, the program is grounded in the belief that developing creativity and an individual writing voice is as important as understanding the structures of argument and the basic building-block of any written work,

the sentence.

By the time Hampden-Sydney's young men graduate into careers in private enterprise or public service, they know how to use the written and spoken word. We frequently hear from our alumni this familiar refrain: "I am the writer. When an important assignment needs to be written or edited, my co-workers inevitably give it to me." Because they were taught to write and edit, and because doing so properly is rare these days, they are often christened with the unofficial title of "CWO" or "Chief Writing Officer" at their respective organizations.

It seems that graduates of New Dorp High School will be able to make the same claim or, more accurately, inherit the same responsibilities. The students' demonstrated improvement in writing—and therefore in academic achievement more generally—is

laudable and no doubt in part the result of a renewed focus on analytical writing across the curriculum. But our experience at Hampden-Sydney suggests that the transformed culture at New Dorp is at least as important as any single pedagogical method.

Writing is a complex, demanding craft; there are no magic formulas that make good writing easy to teach or learn. But we are convinced that America sorely needs citizens with these skills today, just as it did back in 1775 when America was on the brink of another sort of revolution—and Hampden-Sydney College was welcoming its first class of students.

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LEFT: MUSEO NAZIONALE ROMANO, ROME; RIGHT: REUTERS