

- Mark your confusion.
  - Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)
  - Write a 250+ word response to the article.
- (If you are a teacher or student who would like to modify this Google Doc, go to File > Make a Copy. I cannot and do not respond to Share requests – my apologies!)

**dystopia:** a freakishly bad world  
**utopia:** a freakishly perfect world  
**circa:** around  
**post-apocalyptic:** after an apocalypse

**impede:** get in the way of  
**inadvertently:** not on purpose  
**unilaterally:** in a low-key manner  
**predicated:** based on

## The Writing is on the Wall

By Esther Cepeda for The *Washington Post* Writers Group, 9/20/12

In Mike Judge's brilliant 2006 satirical science-fiction comedy, "Idiocracy," viewers are subjected to a terrifying dystopia: America, circa 2505, after the intelligent people have become extinct.

In this post-apocalyptic society, our accidental time-traveler protagonist finds himself the smartest man in America and eventually delivers a frightening-yet-moving speech to the World Wrestling Federation-like U.S. Congress in which he laments that once upon a time, reading and writing were common. "People wrote books and movies, movies that had stories so you cared ... and I believe that time can come again!"

Anyone who loved this movie because they fear it could be a prediction of our dark future had to cringe last week when the National Assessment of Educational Progress released its 2011 Nation's Report Card on writing.

Just 24 percent of students in the eighth and 12th grades were proficient in writing, meaning that they demonstrated a clear understanding of the writing task they'd been assigned, organized their thoughts effectively, and provided details and elaboration that supported and developed the main idea of their piece.

But take this with a grain of salt. Though it is expected that proficient student work contains few errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization and sentence structure, note that, for the first time, the students were taking the test on a computer and so had access to a word processor's thesaurus and spell-check function in addition to cut-and-paste editing tools.

In other words, we can't really compare these test scores to the last writing report card in 2007 when 33 percent of eighth-grade students and 24 percent of 12th-graders scored at the proficient level using only a pencil and paper. But feel free to put two and two together.

On the bright side, I suppose, the majority of students tested fell into the basic category — 54 percent of eighth-graders and 52 percent of 12th-graders — which means they were able to persuade, explain or convey experience coherently and with substantial knowledge of the basic mechanics of writing, though with errors that don't generally **impede** meaning.

I don't have enough space to bore you with a laundry list of the many ways society in general (rampant misspellings in product names and advertisements), families (who **inadvertently** provide children with language-poor environments) and schools (which let instructors teach writing in many different ways) keep students from learning to write effectively.

But I think it comes down to much the same reason we have a nation of poor readers, and underperforming math, science and history students: These subjects are hard and no one likes hard work anymore. Though we pay lip service to working hard, most students are **subtly** taught to avoid it.

We drill kids with the idea that learning should be fun and show them videos so that they don't have to trudge through texts to understand meanings of challenging concepts. We teach them the language of inability by assuring them that if they are being challenged by a difficult reading passage, it must be because they are "visual learners," or if they don't like tackling tasks on their own they must be "social learners" — and everyone knows that if we push kids, parents will have no qualms about pushing back.

Let's face it, education today is a perfect reflection of our modern lives, which are **predicated** on convenience and optimized for entertainment.

The 24 percent of eighth- and 12th-graders who can write proficiently — plus the 3 percent who are "advanced" — will be the rock stars of their generation. Their hard-earned mastery of the arduous written communication of English will be rewarded as they become as sought out and well-compensated as doctors, computer gurus and scientists are today.

In this **utopia**, they'll somehow inspire future generations to work hard to write well, too.

**Possible Reflection Topics:**

- Do you think that our society is based on entertainment? Do people act like all they want is to be entertained?
- Based on this article, would it pay off to work hard at writing during high school?
- Do you find this article motivating or discouraging? Why?
- In your opinion, do students care more about being entertained or about being successful?
- Near the end of the article, the author takes a jab at the idea of "visual learners" and "social learners." Do you think teachers should make adjustments for you based on what kind of learner you are? Do you think these kinds of adjustments will be made for you after high school?

**OR:** Use this Graff/Birkenstein template.

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

The general argument made by author X in her/his work, \_\_\_\_\_, is that \_\_\_\_\_. More specifically, X argues that \_\_\_\_\_. She/he writes, “\_\_\_\_\_.” In this passage, X is suggesting that \_\_\_\_\_. In conclusion, X's belief is that \_\_\_\_\_.

In my view, X is wrong/right, because \_\_\_\_\_. More specifically, I believe that \_\_\_\_\_. For example, \_\_\_\_\_. Although X might object that \_\_\_\_\_, I maintain that \_\_\_\_\_. Therefore, I conclude that \_\_\_\_\_.