

Rigid Rules Produces Limited Creativity

Writing on a whole has been characterized and taught with strict rules on how it should look like. It must be original, it must use proper English, it must, it must, it must. The list goes on, with each rule becoming harsher and more inflexible than the next. And it is because of these rigid limitations set by society and education that we not only limit our perception on what writing is, but limit our perception on what writing could be.

A lot of how we learn to view writing in such a restrictive way comes from our schools. Between high schools fixating on the five-paragraph essay and college being driven towards correctness, education has primarily focused on formulaic writing, and often disregards the more artistic aspect of it. As mentioned in both Flaherty's article (2014) and Strong's passage (2003), students are often limited to writing for the same audience—the teacher—for years with little variety, resulting in underdeveloped skills when writing for other situations like creative writing. What's more, both authors make it clear that teachers at all levels prioritize grammar over content and thought, giving students a warped view of what writing should be. Yes, certain genres are purposefully formulaic so that it follows the same structure across papers, but not every genre requires a rigid framework, nor should it. To only teach one specific style of writing that also follows such fixed methods closes off students to the other possibilities that writing holds.

And while some of these “rules of writing” have been implemented over time, the very foundation of what is considered good writing was set by those in power, leaving those who do not fit that category to be looked down upon. For instance, writer Pattanayak (2017) notices how our belief on what is correct English is rooted in white upper-middle class culture, established in part by our founding fathers. Fundamentally, academic English

is fixed, and continues to be fixed, by those who have influence and control over society, leading to marginalized people, those with different dialects, or those who come from different backgrounds, to be devalued. For these people, they are forced to write in a way that is unnatural to them, giving up a part of their identity to fit in and are made to feel unequal. This feeling of inferiority is also found at the heart of many writers today who grapple with the fear of not being considered good enough. Edward and Paz (2017) note how the “Greats” have created a lasting image on how writers should be like: isolated, original, and always exceptional at their craft. Within this image, the concept of originality is glorified, to the point where writers are set up for failure when they are not able to live up to the unattainable expectations. Not only that, but the notion that all their ideas must come from themselves and not be influenced by external sources forces writers to produce in a way that’s often unnatural to them. As young writers, we learn by copying and through inspiration, from rewriting letters so we remember the alphabet to reusing writing techniques from a favorite author. But to stay in line, much like how marginalized people face academic English, writers must lose a part of their process and identity. In both of these findings, those that founded the rules have continued to dominate over both education and society, retaining their power over the conventional idea of what writing should look like and pressuring writers to lose themselves to fit in.

Still, there are those who choose to write their own way, but writing that is willing to break the mold is often not seen as valuable as the more hegemonic approach. According to Wardle (2017), writing is specific to its audience and medium, and sometimes requires methods that veer off from the more common, general ones. However, unorthodox writing forms are not seen as real writing in the eyes of the public. We can see this on multiple

platforms, like fanfiction or social media. With fanfiction, the goal is to write previously created characters into a story that diverges from the original source material. While it allows writers to explore alternate narratives, because the characters themselves are not new, writers of this craft are not seen as writers, but an imitation of one, tying to Edward and Paz's conversation on how the over-emphasis on originality causes society to devalue writing that reuses narratives or ideas. With social media, such as Twitter, character limits have brought upon new writing methods like abbreviations, hashtags, and the use of emojis. Additionally, because of its broad audience, the use of dialect words have become more frequent. However, since this leads to writing that deviates from the norm, much like Pattanayak's findings of non-academic English writing being seen as less than, writing on social media is not considered as real writing either. Essentially, even as times have changed and brought new methods of writing, our perception of what is considered writing has stayed stagnant, and continues to limit writing's potential.

This is why our current perception of writing is so harmful to the entirety of the craft; by forcing a single style of writing, a single type of creativity being seen as correct, it dismisses and discourages the potential that nonconforming writing brings. Countless novels and fanfiction go ignored because the plot or the characters are too similar to another, more popular story. Drafts which hold creative potential are left unfinished due to the fear of the writing being perceived as a copy. Papers with revolutionary ideas go unacknowledged for not following academic English standards. The rules that have shaped our writers have deprived them as well—from developing their skills, their thoughts, and their creativity.

In order to expand the current capability of writing, we have to broaden our outlook on what writing should look like. While there have been some attempts made to fix the issue on the educational side, with WAC programs and instructors re-tailoring their assignments to include other audiences, solutions still need to be made on a societal scale. Edward and Paz call for the deconstruction of the concept of originality and focus instead on collaboration. Pattanayak advocates for the acknowledgment of other versions of English to be valued just as highly as the academic one. Wardle asserts that all writing techniques are important to their respective situation, and demands that all writing cannot fit under one generalized category. Together, these scholars challenge current social perceptions and encourage a more inclusive view on writing. With these solutions, writing can grow to be what it should be: expansive, collaborative, and creative.

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