

In the light of the recent announcement by our new State Superintendent of Schools in Mississippi that he was doing away with one essay exam [<http://www.clarionledger.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060218/NEWS/602180319/1002/NEWS01>] , I pulled up this article from 2004. Many of our citizens may not know that many of these essays "sweated over" by our children are graded by computer. I know of one student who passed this part of his exam by writing the same sentence over and over connecting it with various adverbs and other connecting words - furthermore, thoroughly then, additionally, on the other hand, etc.

The Sup. cited too many tests as one reason for alleviating this test. Kudos for that one. Now, let's work on getting rid of a few more. We could begin with the second grade tests. Those children are too young to even comprehend the bubbling exercise.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-sartwell20may20,1,7362339,print.story?coll=la-news-comment-opinions>

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COMMENTARY

The Lobotomized Weasel School of Writing

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The other day, our 16-year-old son, struggling with his homework, asked his mother this question: "Do you know how many paragraphs an American history essay is supposed to have?"

The answer, of course, is one. Or seven. Or 700. Whatever.

But that is not what he has been taught; he's been told there's a correct number. Once I was working with him on an essay and he told me we needed exactly three arguments. No more, no fewer, although he did not know yet what they might be.

Today's educational establishment is making actual illiteracy look good, like an act of humanity and rebellion. Writing, which ought to nurture and give shape to thought, is instead being used to pound it into a powder and then reconstitute it into gruel.

The thoroughly modern grade-A public-school prose style is not creative or interesting enough even to be wrong. The people who create and enforce the templates are, not to put too fine a point on it, people without understanding or imagination, lobotomized weasels for whom any effort of thought exceeds their strength. I recently read one of the many boilerplate descriptions of how students should write their essays. "The penultimate sentence," it said, "should restate your basic thesis

of the essay." Well, who says? And why?

The teaching of writing as a machine procedure gains momentum by the day. In Indiana this year, the junior-year English essay will be graded by computer, and similar experiments have been tried in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Oregon. The SAT and the ACT are planning to test the new computer-grading software as well. That is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the entire idea of learning. If this is knowledge, then truth and beauty reside only in ignorance.

Vantage Learning, which makes the writing-assessment software called Intellimetric, claims that it "shows more reliable and more consistent results across samples than human expert scorers." Of course "reliable" entails "accurate," and I daresay there is no way to establish that without begging all possible questions.

More to the point, perhaps, machines are cheaper: It costs perhaps \$5 for a human being to evaluate an essay, \$1 for a machine. And while it takes five to 10 minutes for a human to score an essay, the computer can apparently do it in two seconds.

The actual procedures that the software employs are presumably proprietary. But the dimensions that Intellimetric evaluates are these: (1) focus and unity; (2) development and elaboration; (3) organization and structure; (4) sentence structure; (5) mechanics and conventions.

One can imagine the way a computer assesses such things: The repetition of a given word, for example, helps constitute unity, and the penultimate sentence had better recapitulate the introduction in pretty much the same, recognizable terms. There are to be three "supporting" paragraphs, and the relation of the body of each to its "topic sentence" might again be assessed by word repetition. "Development and elaboration" might, for example, be proportional to the length of words, or of sentences.

The only real argument for the quality of the software is that it is "more reliable and accurate" than human evaluators. But the human evaluators have already transformed themselves into Intellimetric software: These are the military sheep - their minds both rigid and woolly - who invented and enforce the mind-numbing five-paragraph essay form.

Every child in the United States, more or less, is being taught to write and to think in this way. I teach these kids when they reach college. I try to tell them that the idea that there is some specifiable way to write an essay is just hoo-ha made up by some bureaucrat in 1987. This makes them nervous.

I am not particularly concerned about the youth of today; if the world

goes to hell I don't really care. But I do care about coming to the middle of a semester and being forced, in order to make a living, to read 35 five-page papers written by thoroughly fried lamb chops whose writing style has been nurtured over the years by a computer.

Obviously, if your no-child-left-behind funds depend on your test scores, you will teach your kids to write essays that move a computer to tears. But the idea that computers can grade essays in the first place is one that could only have occurred to people who have no idea how to write or how to read, people whose existence is redundant and hence indefensible: in short, the people who administer the education of our children.

Feed that into your computer, chump.