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How not to write a college essay about videogames

by Darius Kazemi on ~~June 28, 2011~~

in [education, writing](#)

I've taught four or five courses in videogame development to college students. In my time I've seen some pretty terrible essays about videogames. This is partly due to the fact that kids graduating from American high schools generally don't know how to write. But I think critical/analytic videogame writing by college freshmen is bad in its own special way, and I believe it's because the only videogame writing they've ever seen is from videogame review sites and magazines. In particular, students borrow the hyperbolic language of reviews. I remember one essay on Halo that contained the phrase "adrenaline-pumping action" *in its thesis statement*.

For my videogame history class, I ran an exercise where I provided a terrible essay and the class had to identify what's wrong with it and correct it. This essay was written by me, but every sentence contains a common mistake that I see in student writing. The particular example is for a type of short-form question that I often give on exams where the student has to answer a purposefully open-ended question in about 5 or 6 sentences. The student has to provide evidence backing up their claims, although they don't need strict citations since it's an in-class exercise.

Note: there are extensive pop-ups containing commentary. Please mouse over the underlined/red text to see the comments.

Question: Why is *Half-Life 2* an important game?

(The student decides to use the gravity gun as an example of something important about *Half-Life 2*. They write the following.)

Half Life 2 was released in 2004 by Valve Corporation. Which is quite a masterpiece of a game and really revolutionized FPS's. It is the sequel to Half Life which was released in 1998 by Valve Corporation. In *Half Life 2* you play Gordon Freeman who is a theoretical physicist from MIT who is forced to fight for his life so that humanity can live to see another day. You can use weapons like the USP Match, the .357 Magnum, the H&K MP7 PDW, the Overwatch Rifle, the SPAS-12, the HE Grenade, and the awesomely destructive and fun RPG.

Speaking of weapons, we can't forget the Zero Point Energy Field Manipulator (ZPEFM) which was a new weapon for the time and lets you attract and throw objects. And why limit yourself to just that? With the power of the ZPEFM you can use the environment to your advantage to solve puzzles and get rid of enemies in new and innovative ways. Half Life 2 was the first game to do this and so is very innovative.

That's an awful lot of red. Again, read the tooltips to see what's wrong.

Here's an improved version, with some more commentary.

Half-Life 2 was released in 2004 by Valve Corporation and is an important game in the FPS genre. In *Half-Life 2* the player controls Gordon Freeman, who is a theoretical physicist from MIT who is forced to fight for his life against an alien occupation. The player can use many weapons such as pistols, a crowbar, a shotgun, etc.

Among these weapons, one weapon that stands out is the Zero Point Energy Field Manipulator, also known as the "gravity gun." This lets the player attract and throw objects using the game's advanced physics engine. No major release before Half-Life 2 featured a similar weapon.

Half-Life 2 inspired other developers to include physics-based weapons in future FPS titles. The special weapons in Fracture, Timeshift, and Dead Space were clearly influenced by Half-Life 2. Due to the influence and impact that the gravity gun had, *Half-Life 2* is an important game.

So there you have it. Same argument, but about 1,000 times better written. I'm not claiming this is amazing writing but it's certainly good enough for an in-class assignment. When I did this activity with my students, their writing improved remarkably, so I'm posting this here on the blog so that others may learn from this contrived (yet depressingly true to life) example.

Update 7/20/2013: [This post at Magical Wasteland](#) is a perfect (intentionally satirical) example of the kind of essay that a student will hand in and smugly assume they're getting an "A".

{ 53 comments }



[Dan Silvers June 28, 2011 at 12:44 pm](#)

You know what's even worse than this? When there are blogs that have this kind of writing, and then complain that they don't get review copies of games or interviews with Molyneux. I can never figure out what they're expecting. No one will ever be taken seriously at anything in life if this is the way they write. This kind of writing should not only be discouraged, it should be stricken even from conversational English. Get to the point or get out, I say.



[or420 June 28, 2011 at 7:13 pm](#)

I'm sure you don't mean that there must exist a competency threshold in writing for a person to exercise their freedom of speech. After all, those kinds of people can be and are easily ignored.

In regards to this article, it seems that the students that make these common mistakes need to take a good writing class. It's a basic skill that high schools don't do well. I think they might do better if the subject matter was more varied than English history and allowed their students to write about subjects more relevant to their lives, including video games.



[Dan Silvers June 29, 2011 at 3:01 pm](#)

That's not what I was saying. I was simply suggesting that this this combination of over-expository writing combined with general incompetence needs to be discouraged from a younger age. Not only could it greatly improve game analysis, but also conversational English. That's not to say that imagery, metaphor, and the like don't have their place; they absolutely do, just not all the time.

The competency threshold is simply for when I am allowed to stop caring and walk away with nary a word said. In the case of student papers, I should be allowed to hand it back to the student after reading, "Half Life 2 by the Valve Corporation is the sequel to Half Life by the Valve Corporation." At this point, you are padding out your essay to hit the 100-word mark. Try again.



[Brian 'Psychochild' Green June 28, 2011 at 1:28 pm](#)

Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! I get to write about vidya gamez in class! I no, awesome rite?



[Ian Schreiber June 28, 2011 at 5:51 pm](#)

If I were writing this contrived example, I'd have added one more thing in the "bad" paper: a review score. I can't tell you how many student "game analysis" papers I've seen that end in "I give this game 7/10"...

As you say, I think a lot of the fault of this comes from game reviews which themselves are terribly written. Perhaps this should be a missive aimed not at teachers or students, but at professional game reviewers.

Another thing that's missing, and this IS our fault as teachers, is giving our students exposure to other kinds of game writing. Good examples might be hard to come by unless we write them ourselves, granted, but at least exposing them to some basic ideas at the start of a class might be useful. Costikyan's essay on the difference between review and critique, and last week's Extra Credits on the subject of game reviews, both cover the topic. Just last night, largely off the top of my head, I identified 12 types of game writing other than game review, and in the future I will mention these formally in my classes:

- 1) Formal analysis. What are the mechanics of the game? How do you play?
- 2) Systems analysis. What are the systems in the game? How do they interact with each other?
- 3) MDA analysis. What is the relationship between the rules, the play of the game when the rules are set in motion, and the player experience? How do we trace the experience of play back to the design of the mechanics?
- 4) Experiential analysis. What does it feel like to play the game? Don't just say it was "fun" or it "sucked" – WHAT was fun or sucked, specifically (even without getting into the WHY)?
- 5) Session reporting. What happened during play, who was playing, what choices did they make during play, and what was the outcome? Basically, a detailed description of one instance of play. (Useful for getting students to confirm that they actually played an assigned game outside of class.)
- 6) Decision-making analysis. What kinds of interesting choices do players make during a game? On what basis do they make their decisions? What kinds of strategy does a game support?
- 7) Analysis of interactivity. How do players interact with the game and its systems directly? How do they help (or harm) other players, either directly or indirectly?
- 8) Embedded narrative. What is the theme, backstory, and plot of the game? How, if at all, is this related to the mechanics?
- 9) Emergent narrative. What kinds of stories are created by the players through play? How, if at all, do the mechanics support interesting player-created stories that are worth sharing?
- 10) What are the links between the game and its surrounding culture? How is the design of the game (and its designer) influenced by culture? Does the game itself have an effect on culture (e.g. is it part of popular or mass culture, and what role does it play there)?
- 11) Market analysis. What are the predominant demographics of the people who play the game? What is it about the game that attracts these people (or excludes others)?
- 12) Player community culture. Does the game have a player community? Was it supported by the developers or did it emerge spontaneously? What mechanics in the game support (or hinder) a strong community? What is the community like, and how do the mechanics of the game shape the accepted behaviors and norms within the community?

Note that most of these do not exist in a vacuum, and a single "game analysis" paper might examine several or even all of these angles, and perhaps more that I haven't thought of. Note also that all of these have key questions to be answered, and none of those questions amount to "should I buy this game" or "what score should I give this game out of 10"...



[Darius Kazemi June 28, 2011 at 6:59 pm](#)

Yes! I completely agree that it's important to show students examples of good writing. I think the single best class I ever gave was where I showed them a series of really well-written blog posts from Gamer Melodico, Brainy Gamer, and I think Sparky Clarkson, about Red Dead Redemption. (The posts were a kind of dialogue with each other.) We read through the posts and discussed WHY they were good. At the end of class, one student told me, "Wow, I never knew you could write about video games that way." He was clearly converted :)



[Rollin Bishop June 29, 2011 at 6:41 pm](#)

Have to chime in here with links to those specific articles, as they are great, or at least what I think were the ones used based on the above paragraph.

Michael Abbott at Brainy Gamer: http://www.brainygamer.com/the_brainy_gamer/2010/05/game-in-frame.html

Sparky Clarkson at Discount Thoughts: <http://mwclarkson.blogspot.com/2010/06/gringos-who-saved-mexico.html>

Kirk Hamilton at Gamer Melodico: <http://www.gamermelodico.com/2010/06/flawed-ballad-of-john-marston.html>



[Darius Kazemi June 29, 2011 at 10:12 pm](#)

Yes! Those are the ones. Thank you.



[Chris Parsons July 25, 2011 at 10:35 am](#)

Badly written content has become the norm for video game sites. Even somewhat intelligent articles are ruined by poor grammar and usage. You are providing a huge service to these kids when you show them what good writing looks like. BTW, I was tempted to write “Your providing...” in the previous sentence as a joke, as that’s one of my pet peeves. I just couldn’t bring myself to do it :-)



[Erin Hoffman June 28, 2011 at 7:38 pm](#)

When I did this activity with my students, their writing improved remarkably,

Seriously? This is a tremendous public service, Darius. Honestly. :)

Very cool.



[Amanda Lange June 28, 2011 at 8:47 pm](#)

I will be forcing my freshman students to read this article immediately. Thank you for this!



[David Finkel June 28, 2011 at 8:51 pm](#)

Thanks for the article, Darius.

I teach a course in analysis of video games at WPI. The students write an analysis of game, and a lot of the content of the course is to teach them how to write an analysis. For example, when we discuss the gameplay challenges of games (one of many topics in the course), I tell the students that they should specifically state what kind of challenges their game has and to give specific examples from the game to demonstrate that the game has these challenges.

The students write four preliminary essays on individual topics (for example, narrative and character development). These preliminary papers are not graded, but they get extensive comments. Most of my comments are about the organization of the essay and reminders to give examples from the game to support their analysis.

I see relatively few mechanical errors in my students’ writing. (Perhaps WPI is different from other schools in this respect.) If I do see a mechanical error, I’ll just identify it briefly (“sentence fragment”) and I expect the students to know how to correct it. If I see too many mechanical errors or if I see the same mechanical error on subsequent papers, I just tell the students that there are mechanical errors they need to fix. Mostly they get it.

After the students have written the preliminary papers and received comments, they write a major analysis paper, covering all the topics we discussed in class. Mostly these final papers are very good to excellent. They write additional papers later in the course, without preliminary papers, and they are also well written.

Writing an analysis of a game is a new kind of writing for most students, and we need to give them explicit instruction in how to succeed at this task.



[Adam Parker June 29, 2011 at 4:08 am](#)

Thanks. Summates every bad piece I’ve ever read. Will dangle this monstrosity in front of the noobs next time I begin our design semiotics course, then send them to the Digma DL and gamestudies.org for a cold shower...

After which, we’ll do a rebuild as you suggest.

~Adam



[Maria Droujkova June 29, 2011 at 8:20 am](#)

What do you think about game reviews on Penny Arcade? I would like to see your opinion about the writing style, in particular.



[Darius Kazemi June 29, 2011 at 8:26 am](#)

I think Jerry’s reviews are good, but the problem is that they’re not exactly critical analysis. We’re still talking game reviews, and game reviews have a different goal than a college paper.



[Maria Droujkova June 29, 2011 at 8:31 am](#)

Here are further improvement suggestions:

“Important” is about as meaningful as “quite” and “really.” I would suggest replacing the phrase with, “Half-Life 2 started several trends in the FPS genre” or another particular description of why and how it is important.

The first phrase should be two phrases – one about the release and the other about the importance.

“who is a theoretical physicist from MIT who is forced...” – replace with, “who is a theoretical physicist from MIT, forced...”

“such as” already implies you are going to list some examples, so “such as” and “etc.” in one sentence is redundant. I suggest replacing, “The player can use many weapons such as pistols, a crowbar, a shotgun, etc.” with, “The player can use many weapons: pistols, a crowbar, a shotgun, etc.” or with, “The player can use many weapons such as pistols, a crowbar, or a shotgun.”



[Darius Kazemi June 29, 2011 at 8:37 am](#)

On “important,” the student must use it because I put it in the question. It’s an open-ended question because the word “important” is vague.

The other points are appreciated, but I’m specifically not trying to be a stickler about grammar here, except where it interfaces with style in a major way. I probably should’ve even included the “sentence fragment” note because that’s not what this exercise is about. It’s about making a clear argument.

It’s why I frame this as an in-class writing exercise rather than as a paper. I would take your corrections into consideration if it were for a midterm paper, but I’m far more lenient if it’s a piece of on-the-fly writing.



[Maria Droujkova June 29, 2011 at 8:48 am](#)

Understood about style – I was thrown into full-editing mode by the “sentence fragment” piece, I guess :-)

I am still not sure about the phrase, “is an important game in the FPS genre” as a part of a critical analysis answer to the question “Why is Half-Life 2 an important game?” The question already states it’s important, so this point isn’t open to debate. Maybe something like this would work better: “It is important for the FPS genre because it started several interface and game mechanic trends” – ?

Thank you for starting this discussion with a clear example. I am sending it to my students.



[Tynan Sylvester July 26, 2011 at 12:21 pm](#)

To be honest I’m not a fan of intentionally vague questions that don’t call out their own vagueness. You’re practically begging the respondent to misinterpret the question.

I’d suggest clarifying the question to explicitly call out the fact that it is open-ended, and invite disagreement.

These kids have enough challenges without questions being stated in partial riddle form.



[Darius Kazemi July 26, 2011 at 12:32 pm](#)

Fair enough. It doesn’t mean that students aren’t going to encounter vague requests in the ‘real world’ after graduation, though.



[Renee Dumas June 29, 2011 at 10:14 am](#)

” This is partly due to the fact that kids graduating from American high schools generally don’t know how to write. ”

I’ll point out that you’re not showcasing your own writing skills with this sentence.

Your assignment: rewrite to eliminate “partly”, “due to the fact that”, and “generally”.



[Darius Kazemi June 29, 2011 at 10:20 am](#)

Oh please. I’m not interested in people adhering to Strunk and White (or whatever): I’m interested in people presenting ideas clearly. That’s my standard, and I feel like I held to it in this blog post.



[Renee Dumas June 29, 2011 at 2:40 pm](#)

However, you didn’t present your ideas clearly in that sentence. You used adverb “weasel words” to dilute the statement to the point of imprecision.

“Partly”? How much? In relation to what? “Generally”? How is this applied? Do you mean “generally” among different students, or the skills of each individual student, generally? I can’t tell. I have to guess and hope for the best.

“Due to the fact that” has problems all its own. Not only does this phrase pad a sentence with babble – in this case, as in others, it masks an assertion as fact. Never use “due to the fact that”.

You may feel you have high standards for writing, but if you came through my business writing class (hardly a high-level academic composition course!) and handed in an analytic paper with the same problems, you’d get it back with red ink all up and down the page.

Hand-waving away professional standards for writing, as you did in the reply above, does a disservice to your students, especially given your genuine concern about whether they can express themselves clearly. Perhaps you should add Strunk & White to your textbooks for the course, and to your personal reading list for the summer.



[Darius Kazemi June 29, 2011 at 2:46 pm](#)

I have read Strunk & White. I used to think it was important to abide by its rules. I no longer do.

<http://chronicle.com/article/50-Years-of-Stupid-Grammar/25497>



[Renee Dumas June 29, 2011 at 3:27 pm](#)

Writers do not benefit by strict adherence to any set of “rules”, but exposure to writing manuals could not possibly hurt your students. I am sure you are the sort of teacher who can explain this to a class.

I recommend The Elements of Business Writing, by Gary Blake and Robert W. Bly. It’s a short, cheap, and clear text.



[Scott Jon Siegel](#) [June 29, 2011 at 2:50 pm](#)

Academics gonna hate.



[Renee Dumas](#) [June 29, 2011 at 3:11 pm](#)

I meet aspiring video game designers (and business owners, economists, chemists, etc.) in my courses each semester who understand that they must write clearly to be read and understood. I learned what I know from a successful businesswoman who teaches at my university, and as a student at a professional school, I am not considered an “academic” by anyone here.

Everyone should learn to write well, and there are plenty of tenured professors who need to take a course or two.



[Nate Read](#) [June 29, 2011 at 2:52 pm](#)

Good Lord, I almost choked to death on the snide, condescending pedantry.



[Renee Dumas](#) [June 29, 2011 at 3:03 pm](#)

From the original post, you mean?



[Dave Mark](#) [June 29, 2011 at 3:05 pm](#)

When “writing rules” trump “communication clarity”, you know you’ve been in the English Teacher Cult for too long.

I wrote a technical book on math, decision theory, and programming — obviously not frilly topics. However, it has been described as a “page-turner” by more than one of my readers. Why? Because I wrote in the manner of personal conversation rather than by adhering to a rule book. Other books that would likely meet your pristine standards are next to impossible for people to get through without significant pharmacological assistance. It is similar to how some lecturers are engaging and other induce comas.

For example, my copy editor tried to remove a particular usage of “for the sake of saking” stating that it was “against the rules” — until the managing editor pointed out that it fit the style of my writing and the scenario I was describing at the time.

Can I communicate in writing or speech and precisely follow the established conventions? Absolutely. Do I find it advantageous outside the halls of overly-pretentious academic institutions? Generally no. After all, I’m talking to humans.

That said, I would venture to suggest that your “business writing” course is not as important to real-world communication as you feel it is. In the template of your advice to Darius, perhaps you need to step away from the tower, put down your reading list for a summer, and get some fresh air. You might be allergic to all that ivy you are cloistered in.



[Renee Dumas](#) [June 29, 2011 at 3:16 pm](#)

I am not an “English” professor, nor am I a member of the “English” department.

I teach professional writing at a professional school for exactly the sort of students Darius describes here.

In other words, I teach people to write for non-academic audiences. These professional writing courses remain incredibly important for all of the reasons Darius explained above, and I do not doubt his genuine concern for the issue.



[Renee Dumas](#) [June 29, 2011 at 3:03 pm](#)

Let me give you a possible revision:

“I lay part of the blame on many American high schools that do not teach kids to write.”

This revision makes it clear that the “part” you’re speaking about relates to the special problems of writing about video games (or “videogames”, a perfectly acceptable neologism) as another “part” of the blame for the issue. It’s still imprecise, but greatly improved.

It also makes clear who is making the assertion and gets rid of “generally” – for the imprecise “many”. That’s far from perfect, but grounds your “general” observation in a recognizable noun (and I’ve had to guess which is the “right” one).

Finally, it makes clear who is doing what.

This revision may not communicate the meaning of the sentence properly. As I said above, I’ve had to guess what you mean in some instances. However, you can see the benefits of proper writing.



[Dave Mark](#) [June 29, 2011 at 3:12 pm](#)

Your version is different than Darius'. He did not lay blame on the school — only that, somehow, children were managing to graduate without the requisite knowledge. The fault could be that of the student, the parents, the failure of society to put any emphasis on the subject, etc.

If you are going to rewrite someone's work (and be condescending about it) you might as well preserve his original intent.



Renee Dumas [June 29, 2011 at 3:18 pm](#)

I don't know his original intent. We clearly disagree, as two readers, on the statement's basic meaning. This was the point of the post, as I explained.



Renee Dumas [June 29, 2011 at 3:21 pm](#)

In fact, you've identified the problem with Darius's writing with perfection. His sentence observes students having something done to them, and dodges questions of who, how, when, etc.

Writers can certainly acknowledge unknowns like this and still write clearly. But they DO have to ACKNOWLEDGE them.



Nate Read [June 29, 2011 at 3:15 pm](#)

Oh, stop. You're missing the point by a country mile.

To answer your smug, rhetorical equivalent of 'stop hitting yourself' from above, since I can't reply to comments nested four levels deep, I was referring to your post.



Chris Lewis [June 29, 2011 at 10:30 am](#)

OK, I'm going to come out and go to bat for some of the undergrads here.

While you say that the writing skills are the fault of the high schools, you do a very nitpicky job in the first paragraph! I'm presuming that the first paragraph, while written by you, is actually inspired by some experience you already have. In the siloed US system, I don't think you really have the luxury of judging the means of expression rather than the content. Recommend he/she takes a writing class next quarter. Are you seriously dinging students in your mind as to whether they spelt Half-Life with or without the hyphen?

I very strongly agree with Ian's statement that if students aren't producing essays in the ballpark of what is expected, it's because the educator hasn't done a good job of setting expectations. I am glad that you are trying to expose students to other forms. That said, even game reviews aren't completely valueless, at least in the beginning of the class. Most students have never even thought about games at that level of criticism, let alone any deeper.

I'm with Maria, and I am also going to say that I don't believe "Why is Half-Life 2 important?" is a very good question. It's a stressful question that doesn't set expectation, leading students scrabbling around looking for an answer. I can't imagine how I would feel seeing such a question under the pressure of an exam setting. This doesn't seem much different to "Why are oranges important?" I don't know. Vitamin C? How about this question instead: "Half-Life 2 was an important game in the history of video games. Choose one unique aspect, and illustrate how it has affected games since." That question provides the open-endedness you require, but does so by clearly defining what a successful answer would look like.



Darius Kazemi [June 29, 2011 at 10:37 am](#)

1) I normally wouldn't care if they spelled Half-Life without the hyphen, except that it's *right there in the question they were asked on the exam*. I really don't care otherwise. It just shows they don't read very carefully.

2) I agree completely. This is why my classes are like 30% writing instruction, 70% game dev stuff. The students need the writing instruction, and I encourage them to use the school's writing resources as well. I don't expect them to be great writers when they start my class. I do expect them to be better when they finish my class. For the most part, they are!

3) Your question is better than mine. Good suggestion.



Amanda Lange [June 29, 2011 at 11:02 am](#)

I wonder if the people who have shown up to be extreme sticklers about the writing have actually taught freshman-level game students in video-game related courses? The idea behind the exercise is to elevate the writing from one level to another. It is not so that the students will all become expert writers, but just to improve their future output in an incremental step. Not all of the students have the luxury of, for example, taking that writing class next quarter. Video game students sometimes have a lot to learn in a short amount of time and general classes can fall by the wayside.



Amanda Lange [June 29, 2011 at 11:13 am](#)

To say, in other words, after re-reading your comment, I kind of agree with you about how tough it can be for the new students, but it can be tough on the teacher too to come to have the right expectations.



Chris Lewis [June 29, 2011 at 12:00 pm](#)

Yes, I have taught Freshmen level students.

I am pleased that Darius is able to improve his students' overall writing ability, but, particularly in the quarter system, you simply don't have time to try fighting against the tide of rudimentary writing ability. You have to pick and choose: do you want to spend time actually teaching them concepts about

games, and critically thinking about them, or do you want to spend time trying to get them to write better? You can't really have both (as much as I would love that to be true). I have generally found that students can show the critical thinking about games that we want, without them necessarily having the most capable means of expressing it.

American universities do at least have writing classes that students can take, and it seems that they are the places that students should go to become better writers, so we can focus our time and energy on the real, pertinent concepts that you can only learn in a games class.

I am no less concerned or dismayed about writing abilities than Darius or yourself. It is a huge shame that it appears the university system has to basically get students up to the standard that we expected high school would have got them to in Freshmen year. However, I do think it is wise to pick one's battles carefully.



[Darius Kazemi June 29, 2011 at 12:05 pm](#)

Unfortunately, you don't have control over what happens in those writing classes/resources either. I've had students come back from using a school's writing center and the tutors there had almost nothing to tell them about writing a critical essay. In one case I was teaching Freshmen in the fall, so my class was the first college course they'd ever taken. Not much I could do about that except help them with their writing.

This is why I'll spend 30%-40% of my time teaching writing to students, even when I don't have to. That's a ratio I've ended up settling on experimentally.



[Chris Lewis June 29, 2011 at 12:09 pm](#)

Yeah, fair enough. If the timing doesn't match and/or the writing classes are non-functional, you would need to step in. It's a shame that 30-40% of your classroom time has to be dedicated to it, though. I think that the methodology you present here is certainly a positive means of addressing the problem (even though I disagreed about the way it was framed).



[Ian Schreiber June 29, 2011 at 12:40 pm](#)

To be fair, writing is a skill that's useful to game developers in general, so spending some time on writing skills in a game dev class is not wholly inappropriate. Why should writing be a self-contained, walled-off skill that is only ever taught in an English department or the Writing Center? Are students meant to assume that only English majors ever have to write a coherent essay, as if game designers never have to write design docs, programmers would never have to write technical specs, and no one ever has to write emails or memos?

There are some skills that are just too broad-based to be relegated to a single course... teamwork, leadership, and so on. I think you could make the argument that writing skills fit in this category, since everyone in every discipline has to know how to express themselves coherently. Rather than just having a single course and calling it a day, weaving these broad skills through many (or all) courses in the entire curriculum would be the ideal, although of course that requires cooperation and collaboration throughout an entire department or school at the curriculum level. Any takers?



[Maria Droujkova June 29, 2011 at 12:56 pm](#)

@Ian – this is an excellent point: “Why should writing be a self-contained, walled-off skill that is only ever taught in an English department or the Writing Center?”

There is hope that purposeful writing will “click” for students when they encounter it in meaningful and more particular contexts.



[Amanda Lange June 29, 2011 at 12:29 pm](#)

Thanks for your reply, and sorry if I was rude by asking about your experiences. I completely agree: it's a shame we don't have enough time to cover everything, or even half of everything.

I guess sometimes I think, when I digress for a writing lesson, at least they're getting the chance to learn these lessons while writing about something that interests them. It's better that students come away with a bit more critical writing lessons from an intro course, than come away with nothing at all.



[Dan Silvers June 29, 2011 at 3:14 pm](#)

There is one other issue to take into account, and that is that the student may have never played Half-Life 2. Blasphemous or not, there could have been legitimate circumstances to this. Perhaps they have never owned a computer powerful enough to play it, or prefer tabletop games. The issue is not specifically about Half-Life 2, but the fact that you are saying, “Tell me something about a game I played,” instead of “Tell me something about a game YOU played.” The problem is that your specific question can have Half-Life 2 replaced with a more obscure title, for instance, “Joust was an important game in the history of video games. Choose one unique aspect, and illustrate how it has affected games ever since.” Even I would be stuck with, “Uh, Ostriches!” As the teacher, you are not there to judge the students on what games they have played and what games they have not. You are there to make sure they can apply the skills you have taught them to their own experiences.



[Ian Schreiber June 29, 2011 at 3:41 pm](#)

Dan, it depends on the course. I assume if the students are being asked about Half-Life 2 that they have either played it, researched it, or at least discussed it previously in the course. Let's assume for the purposes of a discussion on student writing, that the student encountering this question knows the answer already and must simply articulate it. (And yes, I have taught a class where students are exposed to a variety of historically notable games and must research what was important or influential about them as homework.)

[Dan Silvers June 30, 2011 at 12:53 pm](#)

I agree, it's good to know about specific pieces of art, especially if they were taught. I find, though, that as a learner, it is more challenging, and therefore more stimulating, to apply my knowledge to my own experiences instead of quoting a textbook.

[Mache June 29, 2011 at 12:09 pm](#)

Hi Darius,

Thanks for these examples, they are very useful. Just a few comments:

1) You can't blame students for having poor writing skills. They are constantly exposed to advertisements and cheesy exaggerated marketing, instead of classic literature.

2) The essay question "Why is Half-Life 2 an important game" could potentially be confusing...

Who thinks it's an important game?

Should I think it's an important game?

It's important? I didn't think it was important?

I didn't really enjoy the game, but I have to figure out why it's important...

I never played the game, but I guess it's important...

Your students probably just watch too much TV. Maybe encourage them to see the difference between the persuasive, exaggerated language used by advertisers, and their own real thoughts/opinions about a specific game.

:-)

[Peter Haigis Jr. June 29, 2011 at 6:05 pm](#)

I both appreciate the tips and agree with you fully, Darius. As a current Game Dev student I can attest to students, including myself unfortunately, believing that game reviews are an example of critical analysis. From my perspective, when I look around at fellow students, it seems like the main issue is that many Game Dev students approach the industry as fans despite the fact that they are seeking a career.

Since I was once a student of yours I can state that you truly did attempt to correct this mindset; as well as many other practices and misconceptions. At the risk of coming across rather harsh however, there will always be those individuals that cannot distinguish between being part of game culture, and being part of the game industry. There truly are fellow students I've come across that believe that a career in the game industry is similar to what is seen in the movie 'Grandma's Boy' sadly. Fortunately, in a true academic setting or through the blessing of a good educator they will find out that isn't so, and will either find a new career path or be weeded out due to poor performance.

[Kerry Johnson June 29, 2011 at 8:32 pm](#)

You can see that he was trying to fluff up his word count.

[Dan July 1, 2011 at 12:43 pm](#)

I agree. That was the first thought in my mind when I read the "red" version.

I am also grateful for the discussion that this post has generated. Videogames aside this is an excellent article on how not to write a paper, period.

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I'm Darius Kazemi. I live in Somerville, MA and I'm glad you're here.

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