Good at Math, Bad at Writing

The biggest failure of my education was the acceptance of the “good at math, bad at writing” label. It comes as no surprise that I ended up working as a software engineer, but it took until now to see how much time I wasted hating writing, when in fact, the underlying principles are strikingly similar.

Looking at the end product, the similarities are hard to see. Books and programs are much different, but the process to generate them is quite similar. For both, the ultimate goal is to give the user/reader (“user” for software and “reader” for writing - they serve the same purpose) a particular experience by providing information in a well thought out structure. This goal is achieved using a set of tools and conventions. Software leverages programming languages with different designs (object oriented vs functional, for example) and frameworks (web application vs data application). Writing leverages spoken language with accepted structures such as short-stories, books, long-form, and poems. In both, deciding the general structure and design (picking a programming language vs picking a writing structure) is integral to creating the end experience you wish to generate.

Software engineers specialize in particular niches similar to authors specializing in particular structures. I build data applications with python to improve the experience of data scientists while poets use poems to create an experience for their readers. In the end, the best software engineers and writers are those who most effectively organize and present necessary information to their audience.

It is sometimes easy to miss when this is done well, but never hard to miss when done poorly. Everyone knows the absolute frustration of using software that is particularly difficult to understand or flat out doesn’t do what its supposed to. While bad writing leaves you lost, or worse, leaves you in apparent understanding, only later finding you completely missed the point the author wanted to get across (something I’ve had happen in my writing many a time). Both of these are results of bad information organization. At some point the creators mis executed along their path to creating the experience they planned on.

Most disciplines share the same underlying principles. These hidden connections is what makes me so sad about the all too common “Good at math, bad at writing” label given to so many students at such a young age. It is harmful to plant this idea in a young mind, blocking them from the hidden connections they then don’t bother to look for. I’ve come to realize how important and enjoyable writing is in my everyday life. Not only do you need to write more than ever to communicate with work colleagues via slack and email, but nothing can help boost memory more than writing well thought out notes about new topics and ideas.

I’m angry at any teacher who allowed this idea to propagate or ever did a shitty job teaching an English class. English teachers have such a great opportunity to showcase how important writing is to every aspect of life and they squandered it.

This realization has been very important to me. I will forever despise the “good at math, bad at writing” because of the limitations it tricks people into thinking they have.