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POPULAR CULTURE IS KILLING WRITING

Bronwyn T. Williams

For more than a century, common sense has been telling us that popular culture is killing writing. In 1887, Adams Sherman Hill, of Harvard, bemoaned the effect of popular culture on writing this way: "To read nothing but newspapers and second-rate novels is surely a waste of time… (and) tends to weaken the powers of attention and concentration, to diminish, if not destroy, freshness of thought and individuality of expression." While the culprits have changed over the years, from newspapers to movies to television in the 20th-century, to digital games and social media today, the concerns and complaints remain remarkably the same. Popular culture texts, according to these laments, are intellectually undemanding, too reliant on emotion, too informal, and often morally compromising (the last was also a concern of Hill's). Students who read too many comics, watch too much television, or play too many digital games, according to this narrative, will produce naïve, emotional writing that is riddled with errors.

Curiously, however, literacy has not disappeared in the years since Hill developed the foundational first-year writing course at Harvard, to combat the poor writing he attributed in part to popular culture. Literacy rates continue to increase in the U.S., as do the number of words people read and write every year, thanks to the rise in online writing. In university classrooms, as Stanford University's Andrea Lunsford demonstrates in her research, undergraduate writing students are not only writing longer papers in their courses today, they are making fewer errors of usage and style. Clearly, popular culture has not led to a generation of illiterate people. What's more, popular culture is not, in itself, the cause of poor writing and when young people engage with popular culture they are learning valuable rhetorical concepts and skills.

Yet when I tell people, whether members of the public or other writing teachers, that popular culture is not the nemesis of writing they assume it to be—and I've been researching the interplay of popular culture and student writing for close to twenty years—they can't believe what I'm saying is true. Across the political spectrum, they are convinced that popular culture is killing writing. Critics on the right fear the intellectual and moral laxity of popular culture, while those on the left fault popular culture for reinforcing harmful stereotypes and brainwashing them into becoming mindless consumers. Across the board, they are convinced that popular culture harms writing because it is too easy to understand and students learn nothing from it. In short, popular culture wastes time and minds. People complain that students refuse to read novels, or that they write emails containing typos, or that they include *text-speak* in college papers.

Even though research contradicts these anecdotal experiences, these narratives persist for several reasons. For one thing, research on memory and narrative makes it clear that all of us are notoriously bad at accurately remembering how we learned things, or how we struggled to learn things, when we were younger. In addition, people tend to distrust or discount new technologies and media with which they are unfamiliar, while maintaining nostalgia for what they did as youth. As Mitchell Stephens notes, in tracing the complaints that have accompanied new communication media dating back to the Gutenberg printing press (and including the telephone, pencils, and television, among others), "We rarely trust the imposition of a new magic on our lives, and we rarely fail to work up nostalgia for the older magic it replaces." Such nostalgia leads to narratives of a perpetual literacy crisis that are remarkably consistent decade after decade.

Perhaps most important, however, is the general misunderstanding of how people acquire rhetorical and literate abilities, particularly as they move from one genre or medium to another. A substantial, and growing, body of research on the relationship between popular culture and writing shows time and again students engaging in literacy practices that are complex and constantly evolving. There are ways in which popular culture helps student writers, some ways in which it doesn't seem to make much difference, and, yes, some ways in which it collides with the writing students do in school.

One prevailing myth about popular culture is that it is easy or simple and that's why young people like it. It's true that some movies

or video games or television programs are not all that challenging in content or form. The same can be said of many books, plays, and poems. Even as critics of popular culture find it easy to summon uncomplicated reverence for established media and genres, such as the print novel, the reality is that there is no medium or genre in which every work is a masterpiece, and no medium or genre that cannot carry substantial intellectual insights. Young people talk to me and other researchers about being heavily invested in popular culture such as television series, comics, movies, and games that are complex, innovative, and engaging their minds. People who still think television is a vast wasteland aren't watching series such as *The Americans* or *Westworld*, with their complex characters and narrative structures. People who think all computer games are mindless and don't require thought haven't played the range of games I see students playing, which require diligence, creativity, and learning to complete.

The reason students read popular culture with facility and enthusiasm, including complex and sophisticated forms, is not a matter of simplicity, it's a matter of practice. Learning how to navigate any genre takes time and practice to figure out how it works. Think about the first time you tried to figure out something in a genre with which you had little practice, whether it was a legal contract, poem, opera, or heavy metal. It probably slowed you down, was a bit confusing, and was neither pleasurable nor confidence building. Yet, if you had more practice, your familiarity and facility would increase. There is no doubt that, for the great majority of students, they have much, much more practice reading and making sense of popular culture than they do with academic articles or textbooks. Although, it is also the case that, for every student, there are genres of popular culture they do not have much experience with and are not able to make sense of easily. When I talk with students about popular culture, it is not long before they'll tell me of a form or genre that they just think is weird or that they don't get, whether it's hip hop or country music or horror films or Twitter. It is practice with reading and interpreting genres that has developed their skills in reading, movies, popular music, television, computer games, social media, and more. They read with ease, but not because the content is always easy.

The ease with which students can interpret a form of popular culture has developed with practice, which at some point included struggle, help from others, and accumulating knowledge—in other words, learning. Another myth about popular culture and writing

is that people learn nothing from it. Students learn a tremendous amount about rhetoric and communication from their engagement with popular culture, most notably about rhetorical concepts such as genre, audience, and style. When researchers talk with students about their popular culture reading, the students talk knowledgeably and even critically about these rhetorical aspects. Students may talk about a romantic comedy in terms of genre conventions, for example, discussing the kinds of character types that typically show up, whether as protagonists or sidekicks. Or, ask students to discuss the people who frequent an online popular culture discussion forum and they will be able to describe the audience there, as well as the kinds of posts that are viewed positively or negatively. Young people may not always discuss these elements using the specific terms we use in academic settings, but they are familiar with these key rhetorical concepts.

It is not the case that the rhetorical abilities students learn through their extensive engagement with popular culture transfer seamlessly to their classroom writing. Like any of us learning to write in a new genre, students need writing classes that help them understand the conventions, and the reasons for the conventions, of that new genre. Still, when we talk with students about key rhetorical concepts of audience, genre, and style—elements crucial to negotiating any writing situation—we need to understand that students enter the classroom with a vast range of experiences with these concepts. If we help students understand and articulate the knowledge they have learned from popular culture in terms of audience, genre, and style, it is easier to get them to consider how all writing works within particular genre conventions. If we can help them see how they have learned the conventions of popular culture through practice and discussion, they can see how they can do the same if they learn and practice the conventions of academic texts. I should also note that when students understand more about genre and rhetoric, they also become more creative and critical readers and writers of popular culture. Learning is best when the bridge goes both ways.

People do not necessarily connect the ideas of guidance and instruction to how students learn popular culture. Certainly, it is true that young people are exposed to some popular culture forms, such as television, from an early age and do not need to learn how to interpret many television programs in the same way they have had to learn to read. On the other hand, there are popular culture forms, such as computer games, that take more explicit instruction

and guidance to learn. Even within familiar forms such as television or music, new genres and unusual songs or programs can be confusing to young people. They do, in fact, need instruction or guidance to help them with their struggles to understand unfamiliar popular culture. At these moments students typically turn to their peers for advice. You don't need to spend much time around young people before you can hear them arguing about, or explaining to each other, the meaning of a song or movie. The development of online forums has offered another popular source of advice and guidance. Research with students with a variety of interests demonstrates that they go to online forums about everything from computer games, to music, to movies for reviews, tips, or discussions. It is important to remember that these discussions happen through writing and reading.

Indeed, one of the results of the advent of an online, participatory popular culture is that it has led to an explosion of reading and writing. Although there are other modes of communication online, such as video, there is still a tremendous amount of reading and writing taking place in online spaces. In fact, compared with thirty years ago, when television and film dominated popular culture practices, young people today are engaged in significantly more reading and writing. What they are learning from writing and reading in online spaces is, again, a more sophisticated and critical appreciation of concepts of audience, genre, and style, as well as concepts of authorial presence, collaboration, and remix. If you make the time and effort to listen to young people who write and read online, they can talk at length and with insight about how, for example, they consider audience and their online persona when creating a social media profile and posting comments on that page.

Again, when students talk about rhetorical concepts such as audience or genre, they may not articulate their knowledge using these terms unless we make that connection for them. Even so, they do understand the effect of rhetoric on communication. They understand that context influences the choices they make when communicating, and consequently they usually understand that they should use different rhetorical approaches in different contexts. I have not interviewed or observed a single student over the years who did not understand that there were differences in expectations for genre and style between posting an update on social media and writing an essay for a university course. They understand that they are supposed to switch from popular culture genres and language use when writing for a course. (Indeed, linguist David Crystal,

among others, demonstrates that stories of students incorporating text-speak in academic papers is largely an urban myth.) That students understand that writing in an academic setting necessitates a different kind of writing than popular culture does not mean they can do so automatically and effortlessly. Learning to write in a new genre always results in uneven moments of struggle and a tendency to make more errors of usage. Still, the issue is switching from one genre to another, not that one of the genres happens to be some form of popular culture.

Finally, while this is not the place to address concerns people have about the effects of popular culture on morality, I do want to challenge the idea that popular culture makes young people lazy and shortens their attention spans. Simply put, how do we reconcile the argument about shorter attention spans with young people flocking to popular movies that are more than three hours long, or playing video games for hours until solving a particular problem, or reading book series such as *Harry Potter* or *The Hunger Games* that run for thousands of pages? Instead, we should ask why they are willing to spend so much time and effort on these popular culture texts and yet are often less interested in lengthy academic texts. One reason, as I noted above, is that having had more practice with popular culture they are able to engage with it more skillfully. Yet, another reason for the appeal of popular culture for students is that the movies, games, and music they engage with on their own time are usually under their control. Students' interpretations of popular culture are not dictated by their parents or evaluated by their teachers. According to researchers on motivation, control over our activities and of the meaning we make of those activities usually increases our motivation to engage in such activities. We rarely take as much pleasure in work that is assigned to us as in projects that we engage in by choice. Perhaps rather than fretting about popular culture we should be worrying more about the damage that relentless standardized assessment is having on student motivation.

Please understand, I am not going down the road to "everything that is bad is actually good for you." Popular culture can be problematic in many ways. The representations of gender and race and violence can be deeply disturbing, as can cynical appeals to emotion—from advertisements to cable news talk shows. What's more, the kind of extended, evidence-based argument common in academic writing is much rarer in popular culture, where narrative and collage are much more prevalent rhetorical forms. Students who have more of their experience reading and writing popular

culture will have some learning to do in college to practice and master the genres of writing expected there. The point is, however, that students would have to learn to read and write in new genres when they get to university, regardless of the genre knowledge they had when they arrived on campus.

If we understand this last point—that students will always have to learn, and struggle with, writing in new genres at university—then we can understand why popular culture, regardless of the form, has been the source of so much complaint for more than a century. Too many people still believe that you can be taught to write once, and that such knowledge should serve you for the rest of your life. First-year writing courses are often regarded as providing the single inoculation for writing—and against popular culture—that students need. Instead, we must understand that writing and reading are abilities that we acquire through learning and practice, and that we never stop learning them. The more we are immersed in texts, the richer understanding we have of the genre, style, audience, and rhetorical context for which they were produced. Students are adept at reading and writing popular culture because they practice it, learn it, control it. Given the same conditions, and motivation, they can learn to do the same with other forms of writing.

Further Reading

For more about the many literacies that students negotiate in and out of school, see Daniel Keller's *Chasing Literacy: Reading and Writing in an Age of Acceleration* or Jennifer Rowsell's *Working with Multimodality: Rethinking Literacy in the Digital Age*, along with these collections of essays, listed by editors' names: Donna Alvermann and Kathleen Hinchman's *Reconceptualizing the Literacies in Adolescents' Lives* (3rd ed.); Cathy Burnett et al.'s *New Literacies around the Globe: Policy and Pedagogy*; Ito Mizuko et al.'s *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*; or Marc Lamont Hill and Lalitha Vasudevan's *Media, Learning, and Sites of Possibility*. I have also written about these subjects in *Shimmering Literacies: Popular Culture and Reading and Writing Online*; *Tuned In: Television and the Teaching of Writing*; and *New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders* (co-edited with Amy Zenger). To learn more about fan communities, identity, and online writing, see Rebecca Black's *Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction* and Angela Thomas's *Youth Online: Identity and Literacy in the Digital Age*.

Keywords

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Bronwyn T. Williams is a professor of English and director of the University Writing Center at the University of Louisville. He has taught writing and studied the connections between popular culture and students' writing and reading practices, both in the U.S. and abroad, for more than 25 years. He is the author of a number of books on the teaching of writing, popular culture, and student identity. Twitter: @bronwyntw. Website: bronwyntwilliams.com.

BAD IDEAS ABOUT WRITING
edited by Cheryl E. Ball & Drew M. Loewe

Bad Ideas About Writing counters major myths about writing instruction. Inspired by the provocative science- and social-science-focused book *This Idea Must Die* and written for a general audience, the collection offers opinionated, research-based statements intended to spark debate and to offer a better way of teaching writing. Contributors, as scholars of rhetoric and composition, provide a snapshot of and antidotes to major myths in writing instruction.

"*Bad Ideas About Writing* offers its readers a wealth of good ideas for countering the dangerous myths, harmful stereotypes, unfounded folklore, romantic delusions, and fanciful thinking that too often surround questions about how best to improve written expression. It features recommendations for achievable goals from an incredible variety of top scholars and models good writing practices itself in its contibutors' insightful, accessible prose.

Students, policy makers, parents, and instructors will all benefit from its constructive criticism, which is made available to the public online in an open-access format. For those tired of moral panics that Johnny can't write, this book is a readable and refreshing correction to hyperbole and humorlessness and provides a great replacement for the just-so stories and dreary textbooks that currently fill too many shelves on the topic of rhetoric and composition."

Elizabeth Losh, author of *The War on Learning, Virtualpolitik,* and co-author of *Understanding Rhetoric*.

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