**Opening Activity:** Take a couple minutes and “skim” or preview the text below…Consider words that pop out to you, or maybe try reading the 1st, last, or certain paragraphs. Then, in the space below, tell me what you are noticing or thinking about this article…

**Teaching 'Taco Bell's Canon'**

Today's students don't read. As a result, they have sometimes hilarious notions of how the written language represents what they hear.

Is it true that college students today are unprepared and unmotivated? That generalization does injustice to the numerous bright exceptions I saw in my 25 years of teaching composition to university freshmen. But in other cases the characterization is all too accurate.

One big problem is that so few students are readers. As an unfortunate result, they have erroneous, and sometimes hilarious, notions of how the written language represents what they hear. What emerged in their papers and emails was a sort of literary subgenre that I've come to think of as stream of unconsciousness.

Some of their most creative thinking was devoted to fashioning excuses for tardiness, skipping class entirely, and failure to complete assignments. One guy admitted that he had trouble getting into "the proper frame of mime" for an 8 a.m. class.

Then there were the two young men who missed class for having gotten on the wrong side of the law. They both emailed me, one to say that he had been charged with a "mister meaner," the other with a "misdeminor."

Another student blamed "inclimate weather" for his failure to come to class, admitting that it was a "poultry excuse." A male student who habitually came late and couldn't punctuate correctly had a double-duty excuse: "I don't worry about my punctual errors."

To their credit, students are often frank when it comes to admitting their shortcomings and attitude problems. Like the guy who owned up to doing "halfhazard work." Or the one who admitted that he wasn't smart enough to go to an "Ivory League school." Another lamented not being astute enough to follow the lecture on "Taco Bell's Canon" in music-appreciation class.

Many students have difficulty adjusting to life in dormitories. One complained that his roommate was "from another dementian." Another was irritated by a roommate's habit of using his "toilet trees" without asking. A female student, in describing an argument over her roommate's smelling up their room with cheap perfume, referred to getting in her "two scents' worth."

Some find you can't go home again. After several weeks at school, one coed returned to her childhood house only to find life there "homedrum."

To be fair, many of the young men and women I encountered over the years are capable of serious thinking on social issues and international affairs. The Iraq War, in what one student called "nomad's land," was very much on their minds. Some were for it, some against it. The most ardent supporter was the guy who described his attitude as "gun-ho." One student lamented that we're becoming a society that "creates its individuals in a lavatory." Another worried that education reform might result in school being in "secession" year round.

When it comes to relationships, it is, in the words of more than one undergraduate, "a doggy-dog world." But I'm sure most of us could sympathize with the girl who said she resented being "taken for granite" by her boyfriend. Some learn the price of intimacy the hard way, like the coed who referred to becoming pregnant on "that fetal night." She might have been better off with the young gentleman who spoke of his policy of keeping relationships "strictly plutonic."

One struggling freshman summed it up for all of us when he wrote, "Life has too much realism." Maybe so, but I don't recommend coping like the guy who referred to getting away from it all by spending the day "sitting on a peer."

Among students' biggest complaints is that they have to write so much in college. In his end-of-semester evaluation, one honest soul complained that "writhing gives me fits." Sad to say, it's not uncommon to hear students remark on how much they look forward to being done with English.

Who knows what language they'll use then?

Mr. Courter recently retired from teaching at Western Illinois University in Macomb, Ill.

*A version of this article appeared July 10, 2012, on page A13 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Teaching 'Taco Bell's Canon'.*

**Possible WN topics:**

**-Are current students entering college unprepared? Is our current education systems working?**

**-Have you seen a decline in language and English skills?**