

The act of writing in the age of numbers

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Revised Response to Literary Quantification In his essay, " The Act of Writing in the Age of Numbers," novelist Stephen Marche argues that we must insist on " nonchalance," or " pretending not to care about" the numbers involved in a piece of writing (Marche). Marche explains that the whole of the history of literature in the English language has been filled with this nonchalance, from the point at which poetry was first fixed with rules that had to be followed. He also argues that, while it was historically easy to pretend not to care about those rules, and the numbers that accompanied them, advances in technology like electric typewriters and social media posts make it increasingly harder because they make readers focus far more on a piece of writings numbers than on its content. While Marches argument seems a little odd, he does make a good point that readers should not get into the habit of thinking that how many words a piece of literature contain, or how many times it has been shared, are what makes it so special.

One example which shows very well what Marche argues is that of a post made to Facebook or another social media website by someone who is a celebrity. This post would immediately be shared widely, and would get high numbers that might make it seem of huge importance to everybody.

However, those high numbers would not necessarily mean that the article is really important. On the other hand, an post shared by a regular person might actually be very meaningful and highly relevant, despite not being widely shared. This is what Marche talks about when he says that " relevance has become nearly identical with its quantification." (Marche)

Another area where words of a different sort matter is that of essays written by students in college courses. As Marche points out, the first attempts to put a word count on an essay assignment resulted in students paying too

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much attention to it, and not to the essays content (Marche). By making such a big point out of the number of words that an essay contains, a professor might be teaching students to make sure that the essay is the right length first, and make sure it has a good argument second. It would make more sense in this case to focus on what the essay does, rather than its length. In works of literature like poems and novels, Marche argues that far from numbers never having mattered, they are where English literature " begins." (Marche) While he is right that poetry and verse rely on numbering systems to be effective, he also discusses that a lot of poets continually struggled against these restraints. It is this idea which makes Marches overall argument so compelling. It is not that we need to totally disregard any numbers given with a piece of literature. Rather, we should use the numbers to guide in the creation of that literature while still making sure that the content, and not just the numbers, is what matters.

In conclusion, Stephen Marche is right to point out that numbers are not what makes a piece of writing special. Just as a Facebook post by a popular celebrity will appear to be much more relevant and moving than a post by an ordinary person does not mean that it is. Likewise, a student essay which is exactly a certain number of words long might not do what it is supposed to in terms of arguing a point. Finally, with literature, the numbers are helpful in establishing guidelines, but slavishly following them results in the quality of work dropping in most cases. As Marche suggests, readers today should definitely continue to be skeptical of the numbers attached to writing, and should at the very least pretend not to care about them.

Works Cited

Marche, Stephen. " The Act of Writing in the Age of Numbers." Los Angeles <https://assignbuster.com/the-act-of-writing-in-the-age-of-numbers/>

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