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UNH English Professor is 'Write' at the Top of His Field

By [Tracy Manforte](#)
UNH News Bureau

October 10, 2000

DURHAM, N.H. -- Thomas Newkirk, University of New Hampshire professor of English, has won a top national award for his book, *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*.

The David Russell Award, given by the National Council of Teachers of English, honors research in composition. Newkirk, who is only the second UNH professor to receive the award, will travel to Milwaukee, Wis., for an awards ceremony in November. His mentor, UNH Professor emeritus Donald Graves, won in the early 1980s.

In *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, Newkirk maintains that students' personal writing can "provide a window into discourses that hold power in a wider culture outside the university."

Newkirk says the idea for the book grew out of years of teaching freshman English at UNH, and years of grading papers in which students told personal stories about their life experiences. He pored over sentimental essays on influential teachers and coaches and heartfelt eulogies of grandparents, for example.

As a professor and writing coach, he found this style clashed with standard university expectations. "Language that has power in our culture doesn't have power in the university," he says. "At the university, we're for irony, ambiguity. It's as if we're telling students, 'Write what you feel, but not exactly what you feel. Leave some room for interpretation.' "

As a result, he says, professors tend to see emotional student writing as "effusive in ways we find uncomfortable." What's the aversion? Where does that come from? These are questions that Newkirk explores in his book. His goal is to get teachers to value a wider variety of voice in student writing.

In his latest research, Newkirk studies the use of humor in writing. It's an approach that he believes may pique boys' interest in a subject that has developed a gender gap with boys lagging behind girls.

Reading students' writing with an open mind is something Newkirk learned from UNH writing pros Graves and Donald Murray, UNH professor emeritus and Boston Globe columnist.

"I came here as a 29-year-old faculty member when they were at the peaks of their careers and influence," says Newkirk. It was an ideal situation for the young professor. "One of them would say to me, 'I can't go over to England for this conference, would you mind going?' It created some great opportunities for me."

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