“If you can not write well, you can not think well, and if you can not think well, others will do your thinking for you.”

These words were written by one of the world’s best-known commentators about abuse of power by those in authority — George Orwell. “Big Brother” does the thinking for the citizen-inhabitants of his novel, “1984,” and maintains authority through the use of language.

When I talk to students in middle and high school, I often begin by writing the word “authority” on the blackboard. “What do you think of when you see this word? What is an authority?” I ask the class.

“The cops,” is the usually the first reply, often uttered by a student in the back of the room who is more fully reclined in a student desk than would seem physically possible.

“Good,” I respond, writing “cops” on the board. “People often refer to law enforcement as ‘the authorities.’ Who else might you refer to as an authority?”

Students then add some combination of the following to the list: doctors, lawyers, teachers, parents, librarians, scientists, sports announcers, the president and other politicians, judges, ministers and electricians.

“Wow,” I say, “you have quite a list here. It seems like you have a good idea about who authorities are. Now tell me what attributes they have in common. What gives someone authority?”

“Power,” says a student.

I start a new list, writing “power” on the board. To it, other students added knowledge, control and experience.

“So,” I say, “when you have authority, you have some combination of knowledge, control, power and experience. Do you ever feel like you don’t have as much authority in your life as you would like?”

As you could predict, that question was answered with rolled eyes, groans and sarcasm. I have yet to encounter students who feel that they have ample control and power over their lives.

“I know I feel that way,” I continue. “If I work, I have to pay taxes. As a driver, I have to follow traffic laws. When I built my house, I had to follow building codes. And, since I am married, I make very few important decisions without including my wife. It seems like every way I turn, somebody is telling me how to live my life.”

I stop and look around the room. Some students look perplexed, some astounded. A few get a little riled. After all, they hold the copyright on the phrase, “telling me how to live my life.” What’s this guy going to say next, “I
didn’t ask to be born?”

I looked at them solemnly and say, “That is why I write.”

I pick up the chalk and underline the word, “Author,” contained in the word “Authority,” on the board in front of them.

“Author’ and ‘authority’ come from the same root. They come from a word that means to invent or to promote. When I write, I get to be the boss. I get to invent. I get to cause something. I’m the author — the authority.” Writing not only contributes to one’s efforts to “invent or promote,” the act of writing can help clarify one’s thoughts about a topic or idea.

Novelist E.M. Forster once said, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?”

Likewise, poet Robert Frost once called writing, “a momentary stay against confusion.”

The physical act of writing often allows writers to argue an opinion, recall a thought or organize thinking in a way that thought or conversation cannot.

What does writing have to do with being admitted to and attending college? Everything.

You write an essay on placement tests and on the SAT or ACT. But that is just the beginning. You will need note-taking and summarizing skills in every class, to help distill the importance out of the tidal wave of information washing over you from lectures, textbooks and the Internet.

But note-taking and summarizing are writing in service of reading or listening — writing to understand someone else’s experiences, opinion or research.

In college you will be writing about your own experiences, opinions or research, and much of the reading you do will be in order to support your writing. You will be asked to read contrary opinions on an issue and take a position. You will be asked to create hypotheses and find evidence to support or refute those hypotheses. You will be asked to validate theories about how the world works in light of your experiences.

You will be acquiring authority.

To become a better writer, you must read and you must write. Donald Murray, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist kept a quote above his desk: “nulla dies sine linea” — never a day without a line.

Murray also denied the existence of writer’s block. We get stuck on our writing when our expectations are out of balance with our output. We need to lower our standards! You’ll never get to the good stuff if you don’t get the bad stuff out of the way first. And if you don’t get to the good stuff, you lose the chance to gain authority in your life.

And you just might find yourself in a position in which others do your thinking for you.

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