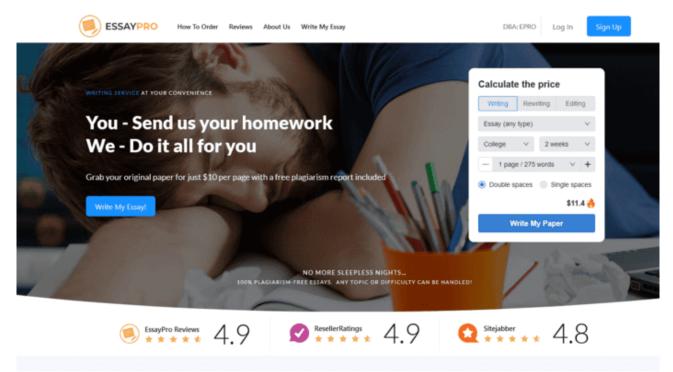
Observations on the Writing Profession in The Republic by Plato



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Questioning of the Writing Profession Plato's The Republic
For all the time today's students spend learning to write well, Plato is skeptical of those who spend their lives crafting words. In the tenth chapter of The Republic, Socrates condemns poets as imitators. In the dialogue that bears his name, Phaedrus wonders whether words in the constructed rhythms of speech or poetry will obscure Truth, the philosopher's ultimate goal. Speech-writing is just the clever use of rhetorical device, poetry is faulty

against the spoken—what Phaedrus calls the "living, breathing discourse" (276A). For the philosopher, the spoken word is superior to the written one. Composition takes on meaning when an audience hears it; even Homer's merits as a poet come from the speeches his characters give. Socrates asks: "Have you only heard of the rhetorical treatises of Nestor and Odysseus—those they wrote in their spare time in Troy?" (261B). Good writing is a tool for talk; The Iliad is better heard than read. Socrates has no use for silence. Writing is meant to be read, a...

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... philosophical conversation. But by his very existence as a writer, and by the form his writing takes, Plato satisfies the doubt, perhaps his own, that writing's risks are worth it. His written words are careful in their sound and sense, but they keep in mind the eternal search for truth. Plato's dialogues clarify only by confounding; his work preserves, but does not simplify. In its echoing, spontaneous polyphony, dialogue achieves all the truth that writing ever can. We are readers but hear their voices in our heads.

Works Cited

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