

Working at Writing

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Abstract

Anyone can learn to write well. This article contains some suggestions for writing gracefully, but also for learning to write gracefully.

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1 Working at Writing

Anyone can learn to write well. This is not some innate skill like perfect pitch. Solid, even elegant writing is an ability we acquire little by little, learning the proper uses of one verb or preposition at a time, mastering long sentences then short ones — and then figuring out how to combine the two. We learn to compensate for our own stylistic idiosyncrasies, whether these are an excessive use of adverbs or logical connectors or a tendency to write one paragraph after another of exactly the same length. Anyone can improve their writing, but they have to work at it.

The problem is, at some point in each academic's career she stops worrying about writing. She concludes that she writes well enough. Complacency blocks improvement. No one sets out to be a mediocre writer, we just end up that way out of self-satisfaction. And why not? There are precious few incentives for good writing in the academy.

Another reason we stop working at our writing is this crazy idea that some people are natural writers, and most are not. This is like telling Isiah Thomas that he is a natural athlete. (A few readers may remember the hullabaloo about his comments on this point in the early 1990s). To say this is to downplay all the hard work, intelligence, and other attributes that go into success in sports. In that case, it also implied that Black players are lazy compared to players like Larry Byrd. Of course NBA players have natural talent, but they need a lot more than that.

Writing is similar. To write graceful prose requires some intelligence, but not at a level the average academic does not have. (To write poetically or humorously may require skills that few of us can master, but they are still not as rare as we think). Much more, it requires continual work at improvement, at honing the relevant skills. Most of us give up.

A related error is to think of a draft as either good or bad. Every version of a book or paper can be improved; it is raw material waiting for the next round of editing, revising, proofing. Call it what you will: it can be a small or large transformation, but in the direction of more effective prose, table layouts, images and their captions. As well as better titles for chapters and subheads (often an opportunity for a bit of poetic imagery or memorable turn of phrase).

Academic careers offer few incentives to write well. For some it is personal pride. For me, it is that moment when a student says, "I wish I could write like you." Because I can assure them that they can, and I can try to teach them how. The natural place to start is how to revise.

2 Teach Students to Write, and to Care about Writing

It is easier to explain why academics don't care about writing than to figure out how to inspire our students to care. And if we write badly, what hope is there for teaching them? Occasional lip service is given to good writing, as to a liberal education generally, but what gets done about it?

In the United States, writing is usually taught in colleges as a distinct endeavor, divorced from regular courses and subjects. Most often it is the subject of a dull semester-long class required of first year students. Required courses face an uphill battle to start with. Those about skills like writing, often taught by adjuncts, are impossible. (Expository writing classes replaced public speaking a generation or two ago). This is an artificial approach, as though writing is something you can learn in short order, then use subsequently as you need to, like long division.

If we are going to teach our students to write, we must persuade them that writing is important. And to do that we must talk about it in regular classes from time to time, rather than

restricting it to a student's first-semester initiation. If nothing else, talking about writing in a class, even once in a semester, at least signals to students that we think it's important. Important enough to interrupt the regular subject matter.

In undergraduate classes, you have to require papers in order to teach writing. If you face huge classes and can only offer multiple-choice exams, forget it. Papers written at home provide an opportunity to discuss writing before and after the due dates. If nothing else, you can discuss simple usage problems, often drawn from amusing mistakes such as feudal versus futile. (When I taught undergrads I used to try to use examples from past courses to avoid embarrassing anyone present, even though embarrassment is a powerful heuristic). Everyone who has taught for a while has her own list of common errors. Undergraduates simply don't know how to use a lot of words. From this detailed level I usually jumped to the broadest: how to structure a paper. I discussed how to make an argument, how to adduce evidence, how to open and close. Even the best undergrads rarely understand the functions of paragraphs, of sentences. I also used to grade papers partly on how well they are written. This gets students' attention.

Graduate-student writing can also be improved. The trick here is usually persuading them that there is room for improvement. They are usually adequate writers, and have been told at various stages in their education that they are good writers. For them, I usually concentrate on the desirability of going through many revisions, in order to break them of the undergraduate one-shot, all-night approach to writing papers (as though papers were aptitude exams). To learn to write professionally is to learn to edit and revise.

In many cases, writing skills are more important than the substance of a course, which students will soon forget. In some courses, a class period or two per semester could be devoted to writing. (I found this especially useful when I was preparing a new undergrad course, and didn't quite have enough lectures yet). In others, a few minutes of several classes.

Most colleges and universities today have writing centers where students can get help with the craft of writing. I find they are sadly underutilized, perhaps because they carry a stigma. They are thought to be — and therefore partly have become — places for people with writing "problems" (we again see the widespread assumption that either you can write or you cannot). Students resist the idea that everyone could benefit from a session there. I have tried requiring everyone in a class to go, but this is deeply resented and hard to enforce. But I would urge all faculty to try to make use of these facilities any way you can. Some faculty should go there themselves.

Writing, it should go without saying, is a broadly useful skill. If you can't write well, you are probably not thinking well either. Writing clearly helps students become better readers, too, as they are more aware of style. No other skill we teach them is so certain to be helpful later. It will stick with graduates long after they have forgotten the effects of Protestantism on early capitalism. What's fundamental is to show them that writing matters, that we care how they (and we) write.

3 Be Alert to Suggestions

I've been lucky. Over the years a series of advisors, coauthors, and editors have shown me tricks, pointed out my writing tics, and given me various kinds of feedback about my writing. Hal Wilensky, my PhD advisor, went through drafts of my grant applications, marking them up with the crazy multi-colored Bic pen that he always carried; by the time of my thesis I had learned to do the same kind of editing. When I submitted it to Princeton University Press,

reviewer Chick Perrow called my writing style “unobtrusive,” a word that annoyed me at the time but which I have come to understand and appreciate in the years since.

On my second book, my coauthor Dot Nelkin taught me to write short, punchy sentences. Unfortunately that was the only kind she wrote, leading one acquisitions editor to criticize our prose as “breathless.” I taught myself to vary the lengths of sentences, and also paragraphs, as well as to vary their structures. (Bruce Ross-Larson’s *Stunning Sentences*, 1999, was useful). We were lucky to publish this book, on the animal rights movement, with one of the large trade presses, which offer authors (or impose upon them, if they are too dense to appreciate it), intense line editing of multiple drafts. I learned a huge amount, from when a reader will need an example to how to build suspense.

With my next book I had the experience — increasingly rare — of having an excellent copy editor, Nick Murray. The most memorable thing he taught me, among many, was how to stick with a root metaphor in a paragraph. If you start with a verb such as “build,” don’t switch later in the paragraph to an evolutionary verb such as “evolved” or an organic one like “grew.” Verbs are mini-metaphors, and should cohere, so I learned to remain with words like “crafted” or “constructed” if I had begun with “built.” In other words, to take seriously the embedded meanings of words.

In helping other sociologists write better, when Jeff Goodwin and I edited *Contexts* magazine, I learned even more about different kinds of styles, different uses of words. I also learned that many sociologists think of themselves as having a distinctive writing style. In most cases “distinctive” was synonymous with “bad.” I never said that to an author, since we had enough trouble filling the magazine four times a year, but I did inflict my frustrations on grad students who claimed that my editing did not respect their style. If you have a style, I would say, you need to be able to explain what choices you make to deploy it and what impacts you want the style to have on readers. If you have a style by default, it is probably not a style at all.

I continue to try to learn more about writing, especially usage. The nuances are not always useful, such as when you use “each other” or “one another” after reflexive verbs. Who cares? Others, such as not using “impact” as a verb, may prevent you from antagonizing crotchety old readers like me.

4 Word Elimination

My favorite editing exercise in seminars is the Word Elimination Game. Everyone brings the first page of the best paper they’ve written, enough copies for all of us. We pick several. We spend five minutes going through the first paragraph individually, trying to eliminate words without changing the meaning. Then we do the same thing together combining our deletions. In many cases we can get rid of not only words, but entire sentences, occasionally the entire paragraph! We think about every word and what it contributes to the meaning. (I teach them to be especially suspicious of adverbs, because I myself am forever sticking “very” and the like into first drafts). As Mark Twain advised, “Substitute damn every time you’re inclined to write very; your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.”

I’ll share a few common examples of unnecessarily wordy construction, some of which I hope will sound familiar. These are the kind of thing I look for in the Elimination Game. (The ASA Style Guide provides a good list of examples).

There is the obsessive use of logical connectors, like “however,” or “thus.” If the relationship between two successive sentences isn’t clear without these, from their internal substance,

you're already in trouble. (I could have said, "then you're already in trouble," or "thus you're already in trouble"). There are also phrases that mean nothing at all, like "In this regard..."

Here's an example: "Young people long to experience participating in something like consciousness-raising groups." Here we see a doubling of the verbs, "experience participating in." It's much better — in reality and writing — to experience something, or to participate in something, than to experience participating in something. As with this gerund, nouns are often put in sentences to do the work of a verb, which is fine if they replace the verb, less so if they just duplicate it. For instance: "Race and class were not simply added on as an afterthought." Well, an afterthought IS something added on, so we can just say, "Race and class were not simply an afterthought." Or more simply, "were not an afterthought." Adverbs like simply (or "very") should always raise suspicions.

Another way of complicating our prose is to create a clause where a participle would do: "Young and old people who are today actively working for human rights..." need only be, "Young and old people actively working for human rights..." A relatively smooth participle replaces a whole awkward clause. Those who were trained in high school to diagram sentences can appreciate or at least recognize how to simplify them.

On the other hand, some verbs can simplify the work of a gob of nouns and prepositions. "They worked to implement laws against pre-trial detention" easily becomes, "They worked to ban pre-trial detention." Three words become one. We could even write, "They fought pre-trial detention."

The principle in all these cases is the elimination of unnecessary words and phrases. I ask of each word, would the meaning change if it were removed?

The result is a kind of spare, Strunk-and-White style. And unless you're a poet-turned-sociologist, I can almost guarantee this is the style that will be best for you. You avoid the embarrassment of a pseudo-literary effort that falls flat, while serving your readers in getting your argument across in the least painful way. You keep them reading.

5 Good Writing Is Not Overwriting

When Jeff and I edited *Contexts* magazine, I dealt with sociologists trying to break out of their normal writing habits. When sociologists try to reach broader audiences, they tend to over-write, adding similes and descriptions they think are "literary." They know that novelists observe details, and they think they should do the same thing, without really being able to distinguish a new trope from a hackneyed one, a unique trait from a demographic fact.

So when they switch from talking about, say, "39% of the females in our sample" (admittedly a deadly construction), to talking about an actual woman, she becomes a "tall woman," or a "tall, Black woman." Now, being Black, or being a woman may be an important demographic variable, but it is dull prose. (I won't even touch the fact that sociologists, so critical of racial stereotypes, often add racial identifiers even when they have no relevance).

This is what we do *not* hear:

Her whole figure [...] gave an impression of perfection, fixity, completion and acceptance, as if there were no room in her for change, emendation or denial — like the days that are ended, like legends, like the liturgy of established religions, like the paintings from centuries past that no-one would dare to touch" (Marias, 2007, p. 6).

That's how a novelist observes things. And in fact that *is* what Marias had seen, a woman on a train, the scene that inspired him to write *A Man of Feeling*.

If we could make up new images and metaphors like that, we'd probably be poets, not sociologists.

Another kind of overwriting comes from the abuse of the thesaurus. I use my word processor's thesaurus all the time. But you need to have a writer's sense of which word on the list has the right nuances, something you get mostly from years of reading English novels from the nineteenth century. (That was my version of a misspent youth, which I should have spent playing pool and chasing girls). You shouldn't use it just to vary the words you use, as you can easily pick a synonym that jars the reader rather than imparts nuanced (often subconscious) information. This is a special challenge for non-native speakers of a language.

In the end, there is no reason we cannot improve our writing. It takes work, like everything else, and it may not always be worth the effort. I understand that many younger scholars are engaging editors to improve their prose. I think that is great, a sign that they care and can acknowledge room for improvement. This has always gone on, but not always out in the open, as though there were something wrong with trying to improve your prose. A final word of advice: don't just hire others to edit your prose. Also study how they do it, so you can learn how to do it yourself and pass it on to others.

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