

The following essay sums up several ideas and techniques that I have been trying to teach students for years. The most important single point is that writing should first focus on the READER, not on the writer's interests, on academic principle, or on abstract idea. (The author's background is similar to my own.)

-- T. Roberts, Instructor

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## Use the period. And other writing lessons.

*Most writing teachers get even the questions wrong, let alone the answers. So says our correspondent, himself a former writing instructor. And he's got old memos to prove it.*

By Gardiner Davis / October 01, 2009

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Having waded through Stanley Fish's prolix (yes, look it up) articles in the New York Times, about teaching writing in college, I am amused that teachers still ask what seems to me to be the wrong question. They are forever asking, "How to teach writing?" The more important question is, "What is the rhetorical nature of what people read?"

Guess what? Readability has been studied so that guys like Robert Gunning in Chicago and Rudy Flesch in New York made a living teaching the writers at the NYT, the Wall Street Journal, and Time how to write so that people would read their stuff. You want to see what the best writing in America looks like? Read any story on the front page of the Wall Street Journal. Count the words per sentence. Look for the images, watch for the coherence and unity. Catch the transitions.

Sure, a lot had to do about content (do you really care about sow-belly futures?) but a lot also had to do about craft. If the piece was not crafted right, readers would bail out. And never come back.

A big part of the problem of teaching writing in schools and colleges is that it is totally (as the kids would say) irrelevant to the way students live their lives. To communicate they "message." Why are they writing a paper? Because the teacher assigned it. What is the goal? To get an "A." Yet in the world of work, the writer's knowledge of purpose and how to achieve it is paramount. A businessperson wants to persuade or convince or seal the deal. And it does not happen with glossy b.s. It happens in cogent prose.

For years I taught writing seminars to business firms, accounting firms, hospital employees, banking and insurance folks, lawyers even. (Gag them all with their redundancies.) I loved doing it. I collected samples of the

memos, letters, and reports they wrote. And when it came time to get their attention, I would project on the overhead one of their actual memos (kept anonymous) along with my rewrite. The rewrite was clearer, better organized, had a point, and was maybe 30 percent shorter. It also had the voice of authority, not that of maundering around trying to figure out what to say. Rewriting this stuff does not take the talents of John Updike. Just adherence to a few principles.

If I were to paste the first and most important principle of communicative writing, it would be this: Use the period sooner! I guarantee you that if your sentences regularly go into the third line, your reader will bail out. The scary thing I learned was that most working folks had no intention of having the words they wrote mean anything; they just wanted to scatter some verbiage around and send the piece to another computer.

The beginning of an adult writing class was always a challenge. Most of these folks had been told by their boss to take the class. And of course they thought they knew how to write, having been at it for years. Their arms would be defensively folded. But I'd go into my Ray Bolger routine and the body language changed radically. They became lost in the moment. I told them that most of what they had been taught was irrelevant. (For some weird reason all the folks who had been to Catholic schools had been taught never to begin a sentence with "I.")

Probably the biggest discovery was that they could write how they speak, grammatically. And to value conciseness above all. OK, with the engineers and the bureaucrats I had to do a routine about active and passive voice. They learned that the importance of writing was not to impress but to persuade. And this is done with small words. They did not need to imitate the meaningless important-sounding generalizations that flood American business writing every day. They could listen to the PR guy talk about how "It's important to maximize the synergies of our two new companies," without ever asking, "What did he say?" The saddest fact of American business is that if the boss babbles baloney (which an underling probably wrote) everyone else will follow.

Writing is about communication, right? This implies that there is someone else at the end of the line whose attention you have to catch and hold. And you can only do it with words. Keep in the back of your mind that writing (not pictographs) is only about 2,500 years old.

The first writing was called cuneiform. It was produced with a sharpened reed that made a mark sort of like a martini glass. Scribes (boys only!) would go to school for

years to learn how to draw and assemble their martini glasses. This kind of writing had nothing to do with paper. It was written in clay to document how much was owed to whomever and when it was due. What I love most about cuneiform is the nature of the only extensive piece of writing that over time had not been smashed to pebbles. It was written by a student who resented being whipped by an instructor not happy with the guy's martini glasses. So fear enters the process. And as the element of fear gets linked with writing we create writer's block. That's when the obsession with correctness comes in. (You think modern punctuation was created all at once? Hooey! It evolved over centuries.)

Thus begins the decade's long blood bath of "corrected" English "compositions." And that is the reason most people — not just kids — hate to write. They fear that their grammar or punctuation will make them look stupid. Did

your boss at work ever ask you to write a "composition?" No, the whole thing has been trumped up by the academics with their busy, busy red pens. Visualize Miss Grundy from the Archie comics. That is the look of an English teacher!

When your boss asks you to write a letter, memo, or report, your first question should be, "What is the purpose of this document?" The second, "What do we want to happen because we sent this message?" And the last should be, "How much do we know about the reader?"

Without first clearly answering those questions, putting ink on paper is a total waste of everyone's time.

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