The Ticket to Your “Dream” Career?
Clear, Concise, Error-Free Prose (cont.)

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firms are spending $3.1 billion dollars each year to remedy the writing deficiencies of their employees (Writing: A Ticket to Work 18). This figure, however, “does not include employees in government or the retail and wholesale trade sector, neither of which is represented among respondents. The total cost to the economy of providing writing training is, therefore, likely to be considerable higher” (18).

Writing in State-Level Positions

This is not only true for business or “white collar” jobs, but state-level jobs as well. For example, I remember one student a couple of years ago who said he wanted to become a police officer. When I brought up his poor writing skills, he said that he’d be on the street fighting crime, not behind some desk. However, he was surprised to learn that the average police officer spends more time taking notes and writing reports than he does “walking the beat.” Consequently, his poor penmanship and writing skills would impact his ability to become an officer.

This is true not only in police work, but in other state level positions as well. The National Commission on Writing surveyed fifty state human resource directors. Out of the fifty that were surveyed, forty-nine responded. The results, published in their 2005 report, entitled Writing: A Powerful Message from State Government, discovered that --

Writing is considered an even more important job requirement for the states’ nearly 2.7 million employees than it is for the private-sector employees studied in the Commission’s previous survey of leading U.S. businesses. (3)

In fact, according to the collected surveys, many state employers are now looking for employees who can write logical, coherent, and well-supported arguments. Not only that, but “Nearly 100 percent of [state] respondents agree that accuracy, solid spelling, grammar and punctuation, clarity, documentation and support, sound logic, and conciseness are either ‘important’ or ‘extremely important’ characteristics of good writing” (19). In fact, grammar and reading comprehension questions are now included within the civil service exams for clerical and support positions (12).

As a result, your ability to write clearly, concisely, and without errors is not just an “English thing,” it is a “real-world needed job skill thing.” So if you truly want to make yourself a desired commodity for today’s job market, then you need to master the basic rules and protocol of writing and its various genres (and yes, that includes grammar!).

Criticisms of College Graduates’ Writing Skills

Due to the frustration and problems private business and state-level employers are experiencing with college
graduate employees who lack even the basics of writing, the following criticisms were included with the National Commission on Writing’s 2005 report:

The skills of new college graduates are deplorable – across the board; spelling, grammar, sentence structure…I can’t believe people come out of college now not knowing what a sentence is.

- Recent graduates aren’t even aware when things are wrong (singular/plural agreement, run-on sentences, and the like). I’m amazed they got through college.

- People’s writing skills are not where they should be. Apart from grammar, many employees don’t understand the need for an appropriate level of detail, reasoning, structure, and the like.

- Recent graduates may be trained in academic writing, but we find that kind of writing too verbose and wandering.

Does this mean that coming to college now is a waste of time? No, what it means is that English faculty, like myself, cannot do this job alone. You must be an intricate part of the learning process. You cannot just come to class, sit there listening to me speak, and expect that you are suddenly going to write like Stephen King! Writing is one of those skills that only improves as you practice, practice, practice! Not only that, but we as faculty need you to ask questions in class. Believe it or not, I cannot read minds, so if you have a question regarding some aspect of writing, such as what is a pronoun-antecedent agreement error, how to set up a particular quote, or how to document a source, etc., you need to raise your hand and ask! This sounds simplistic, but you would be amazed how many students will sit through an entire class period and not ask a single question.

As a result of the comments made on the surveys, The National Commission on Writing had the following recommendation for colleges and universities:

Educational institutions interested in preparing students for rewarding and remunerative work should concentrate on developing graduates writing skills. Colleges and university leaders, as well as school officials, should take that advice to heart. The strength of corporate complaints about the writing skills of college graduates was surprisingly powerful. (19)

“Are Students Cutting Their Own Throat?”

Consequently, based upon the current research and attitudes of business, “white collar,” and state-level employers, when you come to college with the attitude that writing is not that important, particularly to your long-range career goals, you are, in effect, “cutting your own throat.” I’ve personally heard a number of students say, “I just can’t wait to get out of English, so that I won’t have to write anymore.”

However, these same students expect to graduate college and apply for a “high-paying salaried position.” I wonder how many of those same students will be surprised when they do not get that “dream” position due to their inability to write a clear, concise, and error-free sentence?

The Current Challenge

To give you an idea of the challenges most educators face with student writing today, I thought I would include the following personal observation. I have made it a practice at the beginning of each semester to note the amount of errors that are made on the surveys, The National Commission on Writing had the following recommendation for colleges and universities:

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college), but by “forcing” yourself to sit down and to write anyways, you develop the discipline you will need to be successful at writing.

**Tip #2 – Practice Analyzing Articles/Editorials**

A few times per week, choose an article or an editorial from the newspaper. These are relatively short and a great place to begin learning how to analyze a piece of writing. Once you’ve chosen a piece, then do the following:

* As you read it, highlight or underline the main idea (what the piece is about), as well as all the supporting ideas (what reasons or information is provided to that they are even making errors) and get them to the point where they can write prose that is almost “error-free.” It is a hard, arduous task that demands much from both the instructor and the student. By the end of the semester, most papers were between 0 – 40 errors (or 0 – 10 errors per page). It’s not as much as a drop as I would like to see. I’m waiting for the day when each student leaves my class writing clear, concise, error-free prose, but when students are not willing or able to put in the time or effort to learn the basic rules and protocol of writing, to learn what they need to do to correct their writing, then the vast improvements students and I would like to see in their writing does not occur.

**6 Tips for Improving Your Writing Skills**

If you know that your writing is not where it should be, there are certain things you can do to begin to help improve your writing and acquire those skills that you will need for that future career. To help you in that journey, I’ve included the following tips:

**Tip #1 – Write Daily.**
The first tip for improving your writing skills is to write every day. You might keep a daily journal or diary. This provides you with a place to practice your writing in a non-threatening environment, and at the same time, it provides you with a daily opportunity to develop support or back up the main idea.

* Look to see where the main idea is located within the text (beginning, middle, or end), and where the supporting ideas are located in relation to the main idea.

* Then try and imitate the organization and structure you’ve identified by writing a short article or editorial of your own. This could comprise your journal entry for the day.

**Tip #3 – Study the Works of Writers You Admire**

Once you’ve gotten the hang of analyzing articles and editorials, try your hand at some short stories or poems written by your favorite author or poet. This will not only provide you with some additional practice in textual analysis, but it will provide you with a deeper appreciation for your favorite writer:

* Read through the piece and highlight or write down what you see to be the theme (or main point) of the piece.

* What does the writer do in the text to back up and support that particular idea?

* As you read through the text, are there any ideas, views, or perspectives that you see implied or suggested by the writer (but not specifically stated)?

* Now write a short, short story (2-5 pages) or poem (300 words or less) that imitates the techniques used by your favorite writer. See if you can write a story or poem that sounds like he or she wrote it.

**Tip #4 – Study Books about Writing**

There are many books out there that have been written to help people who find writing intimidating or who need help to improve their writing skills. Some books I would recommend would be the following:

* Joel Saltzman’s, *If You Can Talk, You Can Write: A Proven Program to Get You Writing & Keep You Writing* (A great book if you find writing intimidating!)

* Natalie Goldberg’s, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. (Another great starter book!)

* Peter Elbow’s, *Writing Without Teachers.*

Tip #5 – Practice Proper Grammar and Mechanics When Sending E-mails.

One place where people get really lazy regarding their writing is e-mail. People think that just because it’s e-mail that it’s okay to violate whatever rules or protocols they wish. However, according to the National Commission on Writing’s 2005 report,

E-mail is one of the leading causes of miscommunication....The sender is composing on the spot. You might do a spell-check, but you can’t do a ‘thought-check.’ It’s a little like blurtting something out without thinking it through, or considering how it’s going to be understood by the recipient. (18)

One of the other surveys had the following to say regarding the atrocious writing one finds within e-mails:

The use of e-mail has had a negative effect on writing clarity. For some, it’s just a higher order of Instant Messaging. Punctuation has disappeared. Nobody uses a period. There’s no capitalization anymore. It’s more like a stream of consciousness and often hard to follow. (18)

Consequently, practice writing standard American English in your e-mails. By doing so, you will develop the habit of writing correctly, regardless of the medium (which may pay off for you one day in that future, salaried position).

Tip #6 -- Read, Read, Read!

If you are going to improve your writing skills, it is essential that you read a wide variety of texts and that you take the time to read often. Through reading, you acquire vocabulary, various ideas and perspectives on different topics, as well as exposure to different types of sentence structures and paragraph formats. All these things go into a type of “writing reservoir” where it waits for you to draw it out and use in your own writing.

Many students have difficulty with writing because they do not read, and so their “writing reservoir” is empty. This causes unnecessary frustration for students, and it makes them erroneously feel that they are unable to write. When in reality, they could write if they had just taken the time to “fill up” their “writing reservoir.”

Another reason you should spend time building your reading skills is because reading is an implied part of the writing process. You read when you are writing, when you go back to revise and edit your work, and you read when you are completing the final draft. And if you want to learn how to revise and edit your work well, you need to train yourself to read closely for details.

The final reason reading is an important part of improving your writing skills is because your writing skills will never exceed your reading skills. If your reading skills are poor, your writing skills will remain deficient, but if you improve your reading skills, then you raise the potential level of your writing skills.**

Works Cited

