

Why Writing Still Matters
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Arizona State University
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Synopsis

If you ever want a reason for a session on a topic such as “Why Writing Still Matters,” ask a child. Or, in my case, ask some students.:

“...preservation of history...when something is written down the original meaning and facts are kept the same no matter how many people read the information.”

“...how could you be entertained without writing? How would your favorite songs come into existence? Where would Harry Potter be? How would you put children to sleep at night?”

“If writing continues to deteriorate, I fear communication will deteriorate and people will not understand one another.”

“Any individual who desires to be taken seriously must know how to communicate through words...”

“...written words hold so much power.”

*Preservation of history. Entertainment. Understanding.
Communication. Power.*

Excellent observations from the next generation.

Keep in mind that the majority of the students who responded to my request flunked a simple grammar quiz but, that’s a story for another day!

Focus on the Medium

We’re besieged by new uses for technology and new “must do” communication methods, from Second Life to blogs to IM to YouTube Broadcast Yourself ® to interactive web sites to hand-held communication platforms and products.

Focusing on the medium suggests you don’t care enough about the message or your intended audience. How do you avoid that state of mind? How do you know which medium to use? How do you find your audience and its preferred media?

Writing for Different Media

In my class, “Writing for PR,” students must have a client, develop an abbreviated plan for that client and then create writing samples in support of the plan. They will write for traditional and non-traditional media, ranging from print news to webs to feature stories to radio spots to blogs to speeches.

How do you take the style you know and re-craft it to another style for a different medium? What do you lose as you re-craft? And what do you gain?

Writing Guidelines That Apply Across the Spectrum

While there are some differences in writing across the media, the common elements for sound, comprehensible writing remain the same. They just aren’t followed. Sentence structure and thorough knowledge of grammar and punctuation aren’t just for serious writers – they’re for all writers.

What are the top guidelines? Where can you find good resource material? Who are the really good writers? And how do you edit your own copy?

End note:

In his book, “1984,” George Orwell wrote of a world where thought was controlled, diaries were forbidden and existing written material was routinely altered to create and codify the government’s version of events.

Thought cannot be controlled as long as there is freedom of expression – via any means, including blogs, web sites and other media. But, existing material is routinely being altered through Wikipedia, on blogs, by word of mouth.

Lesson: Check and validate your materials.

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“Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many.”

*The National Commission on
Writing in America's Schools and Colleges*

Writing is a “threshold skill” for hiring and promoting among salaried employees.

Employers spend billions annually correcting writing deficiencies.

People who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired.

Two-thirds of salaried employees in large American companies have some writing responsibility.

“Applicants who provide poorly written letters wouldn't likely get an interview.”

Half of all companies take writing into account when making promotion decisions.

“Apart from grammar, many employees don't understand the need for an appropriate level of detail, reasoning, structure and the like.”

“Business writing generally calls for clarity, accuracy, and an appropriate level of detail for documenting.”

*The National Commission on Writing for America's
Families, Schools and Colleges*

“I'm not stupid...I just can't read.”

D. K., an adult illiterate rural laborer

Functional illiteracy - incompetence in such basic functions as reading, writing and mathematics. Affects 30 million Americans.

Thirteen percent of American 17-year-olds are illiterate; for minorities: 40 percent. They graduate from high school.

Five percent of 17-year-olds can read well enough to understand and use information found in technical materials, literary essays and historical documents.

Professional teachers learn how to teach professionally. They do not learn subject matter to the same degree.

Cultural illiteracy - lacking the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world.

31.9 percent of 17-year-olds do not know that Columbus discovered the New World before 1750.

75 percent could not place Lincoln's presidency within the correct 20-year span.

43 percent did not know that World War I occurred during the first half of the 20th century.

One-third could not locate France on a map of Europe; less than half could locate the state of New York on a map of the United States.

The Three Kinds of Illiteracy

Ronald Nash

"...adult illiteracy carries an estimated price tag of more than \$17 billion per year as a result of lost income and tax revenue, welfare, unemployment, crime and incarceration, and training costs for business and industry."

Issues in Literacy

"What good is freedom of expression if you lack the means to express yourself?"

Roy Peter Clark

Poynteronline

What can you and your company or organization do to combat functional and total illiteracy?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____