
MAKE THAT TECHNICAL WRITING PLEASE!

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If you are involved with the "how to" of clear and concise written communication on a university campus, you are no doubt aware that there is widespread belief that it takes specialists to teach mathematics, history, literature, philosophy, even wine making, but anyone can teach writing. For instance, philosophy professors who would never consider stating publicly that they could teach subjects in such areas as forestry or biology or nursing, will, without a moment's hesitation, make this very statement about writing. They could teach it if only they had the time.

For that matter, forestry professors who would choose to walk barefoot through a field of rattlesnakes rather than lecture in one of the "artsy" disciplines, hold no qualms whatsoever about their ability to teach writing. They could teach it if only they had the time.

Other disciplines follow this same line of thinking. Engineers who would not presume to be sufficiently qualified to teach even intra disciplinary courses, would turn off their calculators at any moment of any day and begin to teach writing. If only they had the time. In fact, it appears that all members of all disciplines could teach writing if it were not for the handicap of time.

If you were to question anyone from the abovementioned disciplines about what the teaching of writing entailed, he would be quick to tell you that to teach writing was to teach spelling, punctuation and basic grammar. Spelling would be given top priority. "They can't even spell the scientific terms for their own discipline, for lord's sake," is a complaint I hear every year when the tests begin to come in. Essential components of the composing process such as organization, style, audience, persona are never discussed. Indeed, there is little awareness that such components exist. Organization is sometimes

mentioned, but when it is, it is confused with layout--the amount of white space separating each segment of print.

A short while ago I was editing student papers and a colleague came by my office. He noted the amount of work I was putting into each paper and he shook his head in bewilderment. "Why are you wasting your time marking those things up like that. Just throw them back and tell them to get out their dictionaries."

I tried to explain to him that what I was writing had nothing to do with spelling errors, or for that matter with grammar. I was, I said, using the papers to teach style and organization and fulfillment of thesis commitment, and unless I took the time to point out to the student where he was being redundant, irrelevant, verbose, awkward, etc., I could not expect much learning to come from the assignment.

"Spoon feeding," my colleague snapped, not wishing to be enlightened. "They should know all of that stuff before they darken these doors."

This last statement of his is one that I have frequently heard uttered by others, and I am always perplexed by it. Why should students arrive at university fully accomplished writers of functional prose when they are only considered to be neophytes in other areas of learning? No one, for example, expects students to enter university knowing all there is to know about history, science, mathematics, etc. There is even an allowance made for creative writing. I have never yet heard anyone saying that students should know all about being novelists and poets by the time they leave high school. Yet, it is expected that they should know all there is to know about writing reports, proposals, articles for scientific journals, abstracts, specifications, just to mention a few of the areas covered under the umbrella of "writing."

This lack of understanding regarding what a course in functional writing entails is not limited to a university campus. I once asked a friend of mine who teaches business writing to civil servants if she had encountered the prevailing campus thinking that "there's nothing to it and anyone can do it." Her immediate wry smile told me that she most certainly had. "Actually," she said, "now that the economy is so

tight and job sharing is being talked about, I expect to come to work some morning and find that one of the cleaning staff has taken over part of my job." She added, ruefully, that it would never be the other way around because it was understood that she had no expertise in cleaning.

Society at large parallels this same thinking. Once when I was attending a function off campus, I was asked what it was I taught at university. I said that I taught writing in the faculty of forestry.

"Writing?" the person responded incredulously, the look on his face clearly saying that he realized the education system was deteriorating, but never to such a scandalous extent. He would not have been more surprised if I had said that foresters signed their checks by a witnessed "X." At this point, I self-consciously explained that I taught style, organization, word choice, layout, audience and so on. But it was already too late. I said I taught writing and to the listener this meant spelling and punctuation and all the basics that should have been taught in the public school.

The foregoing incidents raise two questions:

1. Why does the teaching of writing carry with it such a low image?
2. What can be done to elevate this image?

The reason for the low image has already been answered in part. The nature of writing courses is not fully understood by those who are not trained to teach them, and it is, therefore, assumed to be a less complex process than it really is.

There is, however, another reason for the "anyone can do it image." A well-written piece of functional writing looks so easy to execute that it does, indeed, give the appearance that anyone could do likewise. And if it is so easy to do, surely teaching how to do it is equally easy. Looking at the finished product of an accomplished writer of functional prose is much the same as viewing the act of an accomplished juggler. The effort that went into refining the act is nowhere in evidence. Nor should it be! Similarly, a reader should not be aware

of the effort that went into a piece of writing. As M.A. Zeidner said "words are tools, the stuff that technical writers are made of. As tools, they are most impressive in their absence. They achieve greatness when, after the last line is read, there is a clear and lingering memory of facts and ideas, but no consciousness of the language used to convey them."¹

What can be done to give the teaching of writing a better image?

I am not certain I have the answer, but I have an answer. Never say you teach writing. Say you teach technical writing. Technical has the proper metallic sound for a computer-oriented society. It connotes instruments and graphs and machines that go "beep" in the night. It is not for the layman to dabble about in.

I decided upon the name change after I had discussed with a student a piece of research he was doing. The research was titled "Morphogenesis of Stool Shoots of the Pinus Species." I was very impressed. Actually, I was awed. But then he removed the Latin and the jargon and my awe dissipated instantly. I was even lulled into thinking that I could carry out that research if only I had the time. I came away from the discussion convinced that there was something in a name. Henceforth, I would teach TECHNICAL writing.

Students appreciated the name change of my course. Writing - FOR 2901 was translated by them to mean "English," and "English" was something they took in public school. It was not a suitable course for a professional in the making.

These days when anyone asks me what it is I teach, I no longer mumble "writing" and hope that someone will abort the conversation by shouting "Fire!" I say I teach technical writing and when after an awed silence, the person asks what technical writing entails, I do not say organization, style, commitment to thesis, persona, audience etc., and etc. Certainly, I do not mention spelling, grammar and punctuation. I say it entails constructing proposals, feasibility studies, specifications and so forth. Of course, you know and I know that these are just terms to cover specialized bodies of writing, and what I really teach is organization, style, commitment to thesis, persona, audience, and yes,

to a degree, spelling, grammar and punctuation. In other words, I am still teaching writing, but now everyone does not think he can teach it if only he had the time.

¹M.A. Zeidner, "PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF," The Technical Writing Teacher, Vol. IX, No. 3, Spring, 1982.

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TOPICALITY AND MEANING: AN ANALYSIS OF TOPIC STRUCTURE IN THE WRITINGS OF BUSINESS STUDENTS ADDRESSING A MARKETING PROBLEM

Janet Giltrow

TOPIC, MEANING AND COHERENCE

When we listen to or read a text, we try to figure out what it is about: we detect or postulate connections among individual assertions, making hypotheses about what they have in common. If we have trouble figuring out what the text is about, we may blame ourselves for failing to perceive the common ground individual assertions share, or for making faulty hypotheses about this common ground. Or we may blame the producer of the message for failing to make the connections clear. But wherever the weakness lies, it shows up in the receiver's inability to determine what the text is about. In extreme cases, the frustrated receiver may judge the text as meaningless, or nonsensical. And this can happen even when the text-producer expresses himself with plain syntax and familiar diction.

The quality of a text being about something ascertainable--having, that is, a TOPIC--is closely related to the notion of MEANING. A crowd of assertions gathered together for no apparent reason is a text without meaning, even though the receiver may recognize and acknowledge the truth or acceptability of each individual assertion. It may follow then that a text's MEANING is in some sense equivalent to its TOPIC.

Topic comes about in a text by means of the relationships among separate assertions. And a reader or listener's understanding of the meaning of the text depends on his capacity to detect these relationships. Conversely, the text producer's success in making a meaningful text depends on his success in establishing relationships among the individual assertions of the text. Taken together, these relationships are the text's COHERENCE. Topic is generated by coherence.

The pattern of a text's coherence is the pattern by which assertions are interpreted relative to one another and are dependent on one