

Can't Write: 1956 and 1976

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Harpers says (Gene Lyons, "The Higher Illiteracy," September 1976) that we're all a bunch of lay preachers, moralists with no substantial doctrine to offer. Though I don't agree, I do intend to preach to a text, included here as an appendix. This text was written two weeks ago by a bright and generally able University of Minnesota freshman as his first assignment in Composition 1. The fellow is not retarded; he has no learning disabilities and he is not in a remedial class. He is, in fact, the recent product of a wealthy Twin Cities high school, and he graduated in the top 2/10 of his class.

Work like this gives my colleagues fits; some claim that such students are "not college material." Yet this man has been certified as a top student. It is true, of course, that eight or ten years ago writers like this who found their way to college--most did not--ended up in remedial classes. Most of my colleagues who are not writing and language specialists--and many, I suspect, of yours--are genuinely perplexed by this sort of writing. They can't explain it, and have no idea what to do about it. After filling the margins with prescriptions like "watch your tenses" and "avoid colloquialism," and marking or correcting the spelling, punctuation and cliches, they tell the student to review his composition text, and hope for the best. As we know, the best doesn't happen, and the student--who wouldn't have written the cliches had he known they were cliches, and who hasn't the least notion what tense is--is reinforced in his conviction that he's not very good at English.

As a theoretical linguist and language researcher, I'm not at all disturbed by writing like this. Unbelievable as it

might seem, this fellow is not so weak in language as his work suggests, and it's fairly easy to show why he writes like this. His writing is, however, quite different from weak student work in 1956, or even 1966. More accurately, it's different from the weak writing that most college instructors faced. The "new illiteracy" is not, to use a medical metaphor, a new strain of virus; it's not something we've never encountered before. The problem is simply that writing problems formerly typical of the lower few percentiles of a class are now typical of the majority. Writing like this is typical of about twenty percent of our 3500 entering students. Another ten or fifteen percent--the remedial ones--are worse, the rest variously better, with a few--perhaps ten percent--quite excellent. I shall return to this text for some close analysis shortly.

My major purpose here, however, is to describe the simple, modest, and largely successful basic composition program at the University of Minnesota. We teach only a part of the skills legitimately called "writing," namely exposition: writing which analyzes, explores, defines and solves problems, building new concepts and new knowledge. The program looks flagrantly old-fashioned: no remarkable texts (only a simple handbook and dictionary), no remarkable classroom techniques, nothing we can wrap up and ship off to solve the "writing crisis." We talk about such familiar things as the thesis, sentence structure, word choice and paragraph structure. But--and I can't emphasize this too strongly--our program is not part of the reactionary and theoretically indefensible "back-to-basics" movement. We give our students basic skills which, unlike, say, exercises in surface grammatical structure, are genuinely basic.

The key to the program is that the graduate Teaching Associates who conduct the classes are carefully trained as language specialists; they can diagnose writing problems, and explain language structure and function clearly and simply. They can back up all of their recommendations with common-sense explanations in everyday language. The students trust them; they're pleased to have goals, almost relieved to be working on problems they know they have--even if their previous excellent grades do not seem to indicate this--and glad to be studying writing in the same un-mysterious way they might learn to set ignition timing or to make crepes.

The basis of our program is a very elegant theory of language; without it we would be working in the dark, as lost as physicians who knew nothing of biochemistry, or microbiology. Someone in or behind every writing program must know language theory. Unfortunately, little in a foreign language or English teacher's training provides the necessary theoretical information, largely because most of it was simply unavailable before now;

even now it's hard to find. The one or two basic linguistics courses required of teachers barely scratch the surface of the problem. At best, they suggest a way of thinking about language. Typically, they're too fast and too narrow, focussing on sentence-grammar, the part of language theory least useful to writing teachers. As Newsweek ("Why Johnny Can't Write," December 8, 1975) pointed out last year, most curriculum planners and text writers learn just enough linguistics to give the discipline a bad name. After teaching junior high school students to draw transformational-generative trees (or sentence diagrams, or Trager and Smith type immediate-constituent analysis, "Chinese boxes," or whatever) teachers still find them writing ritualized, incoherent, and dull essays. Any serious linguist would expect exactly this result.

The language theory motivating our course goes beyond sentence grammar into more mysterious areas of psycholinguistics--particularly language acquisition and change--and discourse pragmatics. We do not, of course, ever bring technical terminology into the classroom. I don't even use much technical language in training the Teaching Associates who, after all, are literary scholars for the most part. The point is simply this: to teach writing you must never give an unclear, under-described or false suggestion to your class. Nor can you hide behind traditional prescriptions delivered as law. Many teachers have acquired the ability to direct and explain language behavior clearly through hard experience or instinct. For the less lucky ones of us, a theory of language can guide our work, and keep us from repeating traditional nonsense, violating our students' intuitions, and thereby loosing their trust. Theory keeps you out of traps and blind alleys. I recommend, simply, that writing teachers be practical language experts. Work in language theory relevant to our jobs is just now starting to become available in University courses. More will be available soon. It saves time and agony to know enough about your own business to mind it. And most of us suffer tremendous handicaps in seeing why our students behave as they do.

I would like to take a fast but necessary detour through some rough theoretical terrain. I can say more about how we teach composition by discussing what constitutes the "new illiteracy" than by describing exactly what we do in the classroom. My major thesis is simple: they are not like us. And we are not like them; we never were. Intelligence, ethics, native analytical ability, and taste have nothing to do with this generation gap: a gap in linguistic rule-knowledge and text-processing ability. We're verbal folks--even the anti-intellectuals among us. We engage in lengthy discussion of issues. We're surrounded by people who question us, attack

our logic, present counter positions and question our evidence. Generally, we are inordinately fond of language ability and since we have been able readers and talkers since early childhood, cannot conceive what it would be like to be otherwise.

Most academic speakers I've questioned deny that their normal language is any different--vocabulary aside--from that of other speakers. Nothing could be less true. Comparison of transcripts of teachers' conversations with transcripts of high school students everyday speech reveals great differences in discourse structure. Their language is situated, to use a term from my own theoretical work; its meaning is inextricably linked to contexts, and supported by vast mutual knowledge. The utterances are short with multiple deletions. Our students are, I think, more intimate than we. At least they have smaller circles of acquaintances. They speak most often to close friends to whom much can be communicated with a simple linguistic "gesture" toward a well-known fact. Typically, their speech is conversational, two or three sentences to a turn; long speeches are rare, and almost never is proof or evidence for assertions demanded or offered. One of our new freshman found it amazing, in discussing an essay with me, to find that I didn't know that "P.B.R." uniquely referred to Pabst Blue Ribbon, and that the phrase lacked all affective power for me. In Pittsburgh in 1962, I fondly recall, we called them "blues."

Another childhood memory, earlier and more telling: I am sitting in what now seems like a movie set for a 40's nostalgic film, but it is in fact my family's modern living-room, circa 1949. I'm on the floor with my ear against the huge radio console, listening to The Lone Ranger. The Lone Ranger rides his great horse onto a wooden bridge, twirls his lasso, and ropes the fuse attached to a keg of gunpowder under the bridge, saving things in the knick of time. Crucially, what I recall is not a verbal text but a clear visual image, constructed of Pittsburgh scenery. By the time I was five years old I could easily and automatically process verbal narratives into visual images. I'd been practicing since I was eighteen months old, with stories read to me, stories told to and by me. Significantly, my visual image perfectly represents the viewpoint of third-person omniscient narration. I see the bridge from a point upstream; the visual field is exactly large enough to frame all of the significant action. It is exactly the perspective of story-book illustrations, which are drawn, of course, by artists entirely familiar with the rules or conventions of narrative fiction.

We are only now discovering that these abilities are culture-specific, learned, and rule-governed. Not governed, of course, by grammatical rules, but by more abstract rules

governing discourse structure. Conversation, and long discursive prose text are similarly governed. If, as seems to be the case, these same rules (operating in reverse) are the means by which writers turn visual or logical conceptions into coherent texts, then people unfamiliar with such language use--a television and conversation oriented student, say--would find these things quite mysterious. Even if they are competent interpreters of extended discourse--and this is by no means certain--they may lack the ability to produce it. Such things are simply not part of their lives. Most of us cannot conceive how anyone could lack such ability. It's like not being able to walk or talk--but, of course, we learned to do both of those.

Bad writers of 1956 or 1966--many of us as freshmen, say--had style problems; "vague," "wordy," no sense of elegant sentences, most often pretentious: heavily passive, nominal and latinate. Teachers could get by with a sort of linguistic "broad-spectrum antibiotic": tell the student to "simplify," to "be more precise," or, worst of all, to "write like you talk." These are virtually meaningless recommendations, but like tetracycline, they somehow cure things. We all read Swift, Vance Packard, essays in Atlantic, and Time, and our style problems, like our acne, eventually cleared up.

Todays students do write like they talk. Unfortunately, talking in everyday conversation is governed by rules generically different from those of written language, and today's students more often than not lack all familiarity with the rules or conventions of written discourse. They also have all of the old style problems, small vocabularies and even smaller ranges of experience to draw on, but these are the least of our troubles.

The new illiterate student lacks three types of linguistic knowledge which are basic to forming and understanding written texts:

1. Most cannot form extended discourse, except for simple narration. The idea of making an assertion and then giving the reasons for thinking it valid is quite foreign. That explicitly stated logical connections must link statements is even more so. And these text-creating abilities almost certainly have cognitive correlates: our students are simply unable to see how a problem can be decomposed into smaller units, examined, and solved. They stop after observing that working as a busboy is both boring and illpaying. They react to our pushing with puzzlement: "What economic, political, and psychological issues?" "What about

comparisons to other menial work?" "What do you mean 'say how could the conditions be improved'?" The students are neither stubborn nor lazy; they simply can't see these things as we do. And so much the worse for us as teachers: we can't see how things are with them.

Most crucially: they cannot set a point in time and space different from the present, and relate all elements of the text to it. This failure alone produces most of the organizational chaos. We know--in our bones--that text-time differs from real, or perceived time, and that the tense system, used consciously, links one to the other. In everyday speech, however, time relations are almost always clear even though speakers seldom use more than simple past, present and future tenses. Past perfect, for example, almost never occurs in conversation. "I went by Rick's but his mom said he left to get Lynn. They'll meet us at the game." Clearly we understand, as this speaker did, that Rick's leaving to get Lynn occurred before the speaker's arrival at his house. Why should the speaker say that Rick's mom said that he had left, when no additional information is communicated? Mutual knowledge, here, as in all situated language, fills in the gaps.

2. They have no conscious awareness of style levels and the affective consequences of style. They do, of course, style shift automatically in their speech and use stylistic variants for effect. But they know not what they do. In this case, the intuitive knowledge, the "knowing how" knowlege, is present. What they lack is the explicit conscious knowledge--the "knowing that" knowledge--which gives mastery of the process.
3. The most obvious and most intractable problem is that they lack the surface conventions of written language. They can't spell, punctuate, or form conventional organizational units. Most of the fuss focuses on these matters, since they are easiest to see; a computer can recognize a comma-splice. Unfortunately, these matters are hardest to teach, simply because there is no underlying regularity. Students must simply memorize their culture's tastes in spelling and use of orthographic conventions, and the process is slow and boring. At first they're amazed and amused to learn that the syntactically, semantically and phonologically unified forms "anotherwords,"

"alot," "alittle," and "doggydog"--as in "doggydog world"--are really not spelled that way, but when the work in the writing lab begins they tire quickly. It would, I think, have been easier for them to do this work in the lower grades.

Now to return to the text, which provides ample illustrations of all of these problems, but under the chaos reveals a complex and promising order. I shall ignore the largely phonetic spelling which is entirely self explanatory. Punctuation, however, is more interesting; it accounts for the greater part of what most teachers would call grammar errors. The second sentence, for example, is easily translated into written English by (1) inserting discourse-marking punctuation or an occasional and at the places where spoken pauses would have the same function, and (2) substituting the formal word emphasized for his rock/street culture verb-phrase brought down:

"It is possible that education will continue much as it is: concerned only with words, symbols and concepts, and based on the role of the teacher--further (emphasized) by teaching machines, computerized knowledge and increased use of tests and examinations."

The sentence is still repetitive and vacuous, and shows his unfortunate subservience to his teachers' style--nominal, passive, and full of educational jargon--but it rivals Henry James for complex syntax. The one sentence contains: (1) three types of conjunction, (2) conjunction reduction, (3) appositives, and (4) embedding at three levels. A grammar lesson will confuse and bore him.

His tense-time relations are the worst problem: he writes "like he talks," forgetting that in writing the time relations must be set by carefully controlling tenses and other markers. The first sentence of paragraph three--"I think the teacher or professor should be mostly disappeared"--sounds crashingly ungrammatical and a bit hostile. It is neither. What he means is that after the revolution in education he predicts teachers as we know them will be obsolete. Be and have are close cousins, used as semantically empty auxiliaries, and often freely vary in conversation, as they do in his naive writing.

On close and generous examination, we can see the time and modality structure he intended but failed to express. Basically he uses two fictive times: the present, the time of his writing, and some future point, the utopia after the revolution. All future, and some present statements are

modally hypothetical; some of the present statements are intended as full-fledged certainties. In the first paragraph he is anchored in 1976, looking ahead speculatively. He sees two possibilities: more of the same or big changes, and--unlike most naive writers--tells us why the big changes are most likely. He has a thesis, and states it as his ostensible second paragraph. Then, in the third paragraph, the big confusion: mentally, he is in the future thinking about the role of teachers. The switch lasts only for one sentence, however, since the future tense he uses through the remainder of the third paragraph indicates that he is back in 1976 again.

The last paragraph reveals another great leap. Inspired by his thoughts about students of the future, he shifts there again, at the same time changing point of view. We are now observing the thoughts of a hypothetical student who looks back over his education and likes what he sees, then looks ahead to years of continuing studies.

It would have been nice if this student writer had told us about these time shifts, instead of assuming that we had privileged access to his mind. Crucially, though, he has the syntactic resources he needs, and he has a rough and ready sense of how arguments are assembled. To force him "back to basics" with grammar drills will bore and anger him, and convince him that English teachers are fools. He needs to have the mental and linguistic operations of writing explained to him systematically. He needs extensive directed practice in spelling and punctuation. He needs a chance to write a great deal under skilled guidance and on intellectually rich topics. Perhaps most, he needs to be allowed, encouraged, even forced to stop trying to please the authorities. This essay is ironically two-faced. He predicts revolution with words and phrases like "learning experience," "pleasurable," "stimulating individual and group initiative," "skilled," and "in depth": the language of his oppressors used to call for freedom. A genuine course in writing will also raise his consciousness.

So, as we see it, writing teaching succeeds if a few simple principles are followed uncompromisingly. We try to do four general things in our course:

1. We treat our students as intelligent, if uneducated, adults who can understand things clearly explained.
2. We teach a course whose subject matter is language, not studied as a linguist or psychologist studies it, but as a language user does. All information is practical. A rule must explain problems writers actually face. All instruction is by example. We begin with texts--

often the students' own work--explore their intuitive responses, define the linguistic basis of the intuitions, supply or elicit further illustrations and assign practice in the skills centering on the linguistic or rhetorical phenomenon under examination. Where the students lack the necessary knowledge--as in the case of conventions of writing--we provide it and insist that they master it, however much drudgery it takes.

3. We give the students intensive directed practice. They write a lot. They receive comments on all they write. They rewrite all major work.
4. We refuse to apologize, to retreat behind prescriptions from authority, or to enforce a taste in ethics, style, politics or academic disciplines. We also refuse to accept alienated, ritualized formula papers. For example, we use writing conferences to allow students to comment on their own work. At first, as you might expect, they are politely deferential, but after some encouragement from the teacher they readily admit that boring work is boring. Within a few weeks they are rigorous critics who will not allow their classmates to pile words on top of words without information, envolvement or interest.

The response is consistent. Students find the course hard--writing is hard. But they are not bored, and at the end may feel they have changed.

APPENDIX

Student Essay--Fall, 1976

In the near future learning will have to be changed. It is possible that education will continue much as it is, concerned only with words; symbles concepts based on the roll of the teacher further brought down by teaching machines, computerized knowledge and increased use of test and examinations. this is possible because eductors are showing a greater resistance to change than any other institutionalg group. but i think this is unlikely because a revolution in education is long over do. the unrest of students was only part of it.

I think schools will be greatly deemphasized in favor of a more open, broader learning experience to be more pleasureable to the student.

The teacsher of professor should be mostly disapered. His place will be taken by a stimulator of learning, chosen

for his learning attitudes as well as his knowlege. he will be skilled in stimulating individul and group initiative in learning, skilled in handiling discussions indepth of the meaning to the student in what is being learned. he will be focusing his major attion on the prime period for learning, from infancy to age six or eight. the child will learn to be an individual not a faceless conformist. i dont think it will be like a preparation for living it will in its self an experience in living.

Because learning has been exiting, because he has participated heavily and responsibly in choosing the directions of his learning, because he has descovered the world to be a fantastically changing place he will wish to cintinue his learning into adult life. communities might set up centers which are rich environments in learning, the student will never be graduated. he will always be part of the commencement.
