Why People Need Writing Courses

Why do students have to take writing courses in college? A number of pragmatic reasons exist, such as it being the world's fundamental form of communication, it being the most efficient means of talking with ten or a 1000 individuals, or it being the best medium for relaying complex thoughts. Just for these reasons, students, business executives, or anyone should hone the craft of writing. Scratch the surface, and an individual will find more compelling and more self-serving reasons for learning to write well.

For the past decade, major U.S. employers have complained that recent college graduates, especially business majors, write poorly, and their inabilities hurt business. For example, poor writing results in poorly communicated ideas, which slows business, and that costs money. So from the point of view of many corporate leaders, too many college graduates are transforming writing into the most inefficient and costly means of communication.

The individual who separates him/herself from this stream of poor writers gives herself an advantage during the hiring process and during her career—especially if she works in the fields of finance and accounting.

Success in any career stems in part on how well an individual communicates ideas because ideas change nothing. Change comes from people who execute the ideas, and they cannot execute ideas until they understand them. They, therefore, must read about them, which means someone has explained the ideas, usually in a written form. Think of a movie, the performance medium of actors and directors. They have nothing, however, until an individual writes and revises a script. The same logic applies to most endeavors.

In other words, success hinges on good writing because contrary to images portrayed on television and in the movies about the inception and acceptance of ideas, business people want ideas in writing. Therefore, a well-communicated idea in a letter lands a recent college graduate a job interview. A concise email gives the writer a higher profile within a company. A well-written proposal lures investors for a project or convinces a customer to order more products from the company the writer represents. It pays off.

Two friends—both millionaires, one majored in psychology and the other in chemistry—earned their wealth in part because of their ability to write effectively and to convince investors of the viability of their ideas. Good writing skills also have fostered the careers of insurance investigators, land developers, telecommunications executives, and financial executives—all of whom I know as friends. They write well because they learned the most important lesson when it comes to writing: No reader cares about what anyone writes. The reader cares only about what value he/she finds from an email, letter, proposal, or report.

These executives have learned that writing is not just putting their thoughts on paper. Writing—whether electronically or in print—convinces a stranger of the value of ideas using details (facts) and logic. For example, a writer may claim an idea important, but that does not make it so. The writer must convince the reader with details and logic that the reader will find important. Notice how this essay does not discuss the joys and wonders found in writing or in the discovery of new ideas, which
frequently happens when an individual writes well. Rather, it sticks to fundamentals—earning a learning, the reason why most students are majoring in business. The essay would read differently if the readers were majoring in English—even though many points would remain the same.

Even though the history of humanity and business indicates that the written word leads to success, most people ignore writing. They prefer not to write. They find it difficult, and so they rarely consider the act of writing until they must write. They avoid writing because it opens them to rejection or to a challenge. By ignoring writing, by saying one cannot write well, by refusing to read and to write on demand, the individual sets him/herself up for failure. To get an adequate handle on any craft, people must practice. Your chance comes this semester.

In the next few years, writing—more precisely individual's reactions to your writing—changes dramatically. In the past, teachers—most individuals' primary critics—praised writing that repeated what the teacher said, that followed the “rules” of the five-paragraph essay, or that simply had no grammar errors. That will change because the demands of readers change.

Essentially, individuals write to communicate an idea to another individual or to a group of individuals, individuals whom the writer must convince about the validity of an idea. Intuitively, the writer knows that individuals, especially intelligent individuals, do not quickly accept “new” ideas, that individuals resist change, that individuals—their readers—prefer to status quo.

To overcome those hurdles, an individual must write in isolation. She must discover her ideas, she must organize her ideas logically, and then she must find the words that express those ideas precisely. The act of writing, therefore, does not come naturally—to anyone including people like Shakespeare, Twain, or Dickens. Writing requires a struggle—not in putting down the words—an easy task. The struggle comes with the discovery and organization of an individual's original ideas. You cannot write what you have not thought. It sounds so simple, but it is the greatest obstacle for most people who write.

Now, think about the act of reading. It too is done in isolation—at least in the sense that the reader does not engage with others while reading. A reader must concentrate because neurologically reading does not come naturally. The reader must think about the ideas presented. Since the reader puts so much work into reading, he demands a great deal from the writer. He demands that the material be easily understood, that the writer supports her ideas with facts or, at least, the opinions of experts, and that her ideas flow logically.

In grammar and high schools, students have not faced such a demanding reader because young individuals do not have the ability to analyze as adults. “When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child” to borrow from Saul of Tarsus. “But when I grew up, I put away childish things.” In college and the business world, readers expect students to put away their childish things, including their earlier styles of writing, such as the five-paragraph essay. Therefore, every time—every time—a student writes a tweet, email, or paper, her readers ask subconsciously this one question: Why does she expect me to give up my time to read this?

A writer is asking a friend, relative, teacher, or business associate to relinquish his or her time to read. The writer is demanding a great deal because the writer is presuming that her readers would rather read her ideas than play games, listen to music, watch television, read a novel, talk with a friend, or twiddle their thumbs. A writer, therefore, has two choices. She, as some invariably will this
semester, can ignore that expectation. She can dash off her work, she can skimp on details, and she can fail to think about what the reader has to gain from her ideas. Do so, and the reader will ignore the writer. Or she can respect that reader by giving him ideas supported with the valuable details and by presenting them in a concise and logical format.

The task does not come naturally.

Each of us presumes that we communicate well. Our daily experiences reinforce that notion. For example, each day, we communicate with friends and relatives. We may tweet: Off to class. We may say hello to friends as we walk across campus. We may answer a professor's question in class. We think of it as communicating. Humankind, however, did not create writing for this type of communication. Writing evolved from our need to record, recover, and analyze information. We write so others will have and understand the details behind ideas. (I am excluding, in part, the writing of fiction.)

Return to the beginnings of communication. We start communicating with relative effectiveness somewhere between the ages of 24 and 36 months. We mimic parents, guardians, friends, relatives, as well as characters—real and imagined—found in movies and on digital devices and television. Sentences grow in complexity. Some of us even manage to master additional languages. Twenty years later, we remember little of the learning process. We just assume we can communicate.

That conclusion presumes that all forms of communication—such as speaking and writing—come from the same root. Neurologically and practically, they do not.

Several million years, evolution or God or whatever bestowed the human race with the most marvelous and complex brain in the biosphere. It serves us well. Its fundamental operating system evolved at a time when our ancestors needed basic skills in order to eat, stay warm, and procreate. Those skills came with the hard-wired integration in our brains of five senses—sight, speech, smell, touch, and taste. Since seeing and hearing formed the cornerstones of survival, sight and auditory centers of the brain grew over many millennia.

A key to humankind's success as a species in a variety of different environments was missing for millions of years. It came around 75,000 years ago: language. By need or chance, the human brain became hard-wired, meaning a cerebral neural system became part of our DNA, for language. Language, even in its most primitive of forms, made it easy for people to exchange ideas—a new tool humankind needed to endure strange environments, stave off adversity, create, and invent. Just as important, people—for the first time—could pass information to their children who could pass it to their children, making it easier for them to survive. As more individuals discovered more information, they could modify the “old” information.

Another great feature of the human brain—its plasticity—feed the development of language. “The three-pound, pinkish-gray wrinkly gluck in your skull contains about a hundred billion neurons. Each neuron can hook up with up to ten thousand others; hence, there are at least a hundred trillion neural connections in your brain...Not only does the brain have a lifelong ability to create new neurons; ...it has an endless capacity to build new roadways” (Marx, 2013).
Language combined with the plasticity of the human brain. It enabled primitive humankind to absorb knowledge exponentially, expanding the abilities of the brain. Today, this same plasticity enables students to learn without having the computer equivalent of a crash, although many students feel that way during finals week. Our brain resembles a computer that magically expands its hard drive and RAM capacity as we pump more information and programs into it.

Limitations, though, exist primarily because the core elements of the human brain (its cortices) evolved long before the development of language. In a simplified description, evolution gave the brain three major cortices (plural of cortex)—the motor cortex, which enables individuals to use their bodies; the auditory cortex, which processes sounds; and the visual cortex, which handles the information that people see; as well as a few others that help with touch, smell, and taste. Our primitive ancestors needed these well-developed regions of the brain to survive. We still do.

The next step did not come for another 70,000 years (only 5000 years ago): the invention of writing and reading. For the first time in millions of years, people could record what they learned and pass the information on to scores of people simultaneously and to generation upon generation. (Do you have doubts about the importance of reading and writing? Then study the decline of Europe during Dark Ages [500 CE to 1400 CE] when reading and writing declined. Meanwhile reading and writing increased in eastern Asia, India, the Middle East, and North Africa, where civilizations thrived. In fact, the writings, inventions, trade of these great civilizations fed the European Renaissance.)

Just recently, neuroscientists discovered yet another major advantage of writing and reading. These two crafts expand the plasticity of the brain. By doing either activity, an individual increases the number of neurons and neural connections. In other words, the brain and mind expand, enabling the individual to create more new and complex ideas.

What does this have to do with a writing course in college?

Language skills exist primarily in the auditory cortex. If a technician hooked up an individual to an EEG (electroencephalograph) and asked her/him to speak and to listen, the test subject’s auditory cortex would light up. If the technician asked her to read and write, several different regions of the brain would light up simultaneously. These results indicate that unlike speech, evolution has not had a chance to hard-wire writing and reading.

Like most skills, writing and reading engages a variety of cortices. In other words, learning to read and write requires the same process that comes with learning to use a tool, to cook, or to play music or a sport. In order to master these skills, you need to create neurons and neural systems that link different regions of the brain simultaneously. You have only one way of mastering a skill: Practice. The more you practice, the better you become. To read and write well, you must practice.

Education experts have tried to develop “new” ways of teaching students how to write more effectively. For example, many students learned the “five-paragraph” essay. It does not work. Why? No intelligent individual writes that way. More importantly, no intelligent individual thinks that way. Such formulaic approaches to writing belie its essential point—a means of conveying ideas from one individual to many individuals. At its core, writing reflects thought, and thought, worthwhile
thought, comes from the compounding of a variety of facts, ideas, and logic, thereby creating an idea as unique as the individual who writes it.

Individuals learn how to write well by using the time-honored tradition of copying the masters. Essentially, people learn to write by studying and mimicking experts, much as they learned how to speak. That means that you can learn the craft of writing or any craft for that matter—if you apply yourself.

If a person wants to learn how to play basketball, could he/she walk onto a court with a ball and dribble and shoot? Yes. Will the person become proficient? No. If that same person picks up a ball and attempts to copy players whom she/he admires, will the player improve? Yes with enough dedication. The same holds true for writing. The best and easiest way to learn to write well depends on the willingness of the individual to see how others write. That means reading.

The more you read, the better you write.

There is a catch.

Most people do not read in order to learn to write. People usually read for two purposes: to gain information or to distract themselves. Think of a student whose teacher told him to read a chapter in a text. Does he care about how the writer approached the topic? No. He wants to gather information to master the course, to get an A, to do well. Most people read for that reason. Many students are reading this for just the same thing. Others read to distract themselves. They read novels to fall into a world of other characters with other problems. Alternatively, some read sports stories to delve into the lives of their heroes and their nemeses.

The individual who wants to improve his or her writing reads to find out how and why the writer presented information—whether they are reading nonfiction or fiction. Can a person do that reading an article or book just once? No. It requires at least two readings.

If you want to learn a new or complex idea, you must read the material more than once. The rule does not apply only to students. It applies to everyone.

At this point, for example, you have forgotten information presented earlier in this essay. It has nothing to do with the essay or with you. It has everything to do with the ability of the human mind to accept new information.

Why?

It has to do with how we learn. When we read something for the first time, we store the information in what scientists call short-term memory, that part of the mind that allows us to gather information quickly. Short-term memory has a drawback. It gets cluttered rather quickly, hence why we feel overwhelmed when we read an essay or book about an unfamiliar topic. To avoid that overwhelming feeling, our short-term memory purges information.

For example, have you ever watched a movie second or third time? Did you see or hear something that you did not during the previous viewings? Most people do. It has to do with short-term memory's laundromat. During the first screening, you absorbed the visual and audio stimulation.
Your mind picked it all up and stored it in your short-term memory. At some point, your short-term memory started dumping information so it could gather newer information. That something “new” you saw during the second viewing was not new. You saw it the first time, but your short-term memory dumped it.

By watching a movie twice, listening to a lecture more than once, or reading an essay two times, you work around short-term memory's limitations. You store information in your long-term memory. Just as it stores information for a long time (even a lifetime), it takes a “long time” to store it in the first place.

The mind works hard to store in long-term memory. It must find neural connections between the new information and information already stored in the mind. The new information might even require the brain to create a new neuron. Essentially, when new information finally finds a home in your long-term memory, it becomes an organic part of you, meaning it has a neural location in your brain. There it mingles and connects with other ideas, facts, and memories. It changes ever so slightly to fit in neatly with all the other ideas and facts collected over a lifetime. It becomes yours—tempered by the ideas, facts, and experiences that go into making you you.

When you get to this point of understanding any subject, you think about the information in a manner unique to you.

Now you can begin to write.

It sounds complicated. Yes and no. It sounds complicated only because of how your teachers have expected you to learn. Most teachers want students to repeat what they have heard in a lecture or read in a book. The approach sometimes works because students must master a subject’s fundamentals. It has a drawback, though. It creates the impression that a quick recall of facts determines someone's intelligence. Wrong. A smart person does not repeat information as if he/she evolved into a Google automaton. Anyone can google information. An intelligent individual mixes the facts with other facts and ideas, thereby generating new or different insights.

Readers—especially business colleagues—want that insight. You as the writer should provide that. If you do not, the person stops reading.

Some students live under the delusion that readers care. After all, teachers read what you write. However, teachers read because they must. Teachers care because their jobs require it. The wise student remembers that before they are teachers, they are—contrary to some reactions—human. If an essay or an email from a student bores them, will the student find him- or herself in good standing with the professor? If the student submits a boring or illogical paper, will she do well? The answer to both question rings with a resounding no.

Multiply that reaction by 10, and you will understand how people in the business world react to poor writing.

At the same time, if two students submit reports with similar information but one student presents his work sloppily and the other presents her material logically, who will get the better grade? The logical presentation will receive the higher grade. Some students may call foul because the reports have the same raw information so why the different grades? The sloppy and careless report forces
the reader to work harder to understand, or more probably, the sloppy report makes it impossible to understand the writer’s point. That would not apply to the logical report.

Unlike your teachers, most people do not give a darn about what you write. They care about what you can show them as possible. Readers are asking, just as you do when you read, watch a video, listen to music: What can I get from this? If a reader dislikes the answer, he stops reading. If a reader cannot follow the logic of a report, he stops. If a reader finds that the report repeats information, he stops. When that happens, you do not get the job interview, the promotion, or the funding for a project. In other words, you get less than what you deserve because you have failed to communicate effectively.

Effective writing—at its core—convinces a stranger or strangers that you have something viable to offer. Master that concept, and you master the craft of writing.

Bibliography

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