Learning to Write "Good":
A Recipe for Teaching the Recalcitrant Writer

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"I didn't want to come, but you see, I got this call from the Dean. . . ."

"You, too? I thought that I was the only one he was bugging about coming. I should be out planting grain today."

Thus went the conversation around the coffee pot as the Vermont Agricultural Experiment Station participants eagerly awaited the beginning of our "Learning to Write Good" workshop. But by the end of the day, their tone had changed:

"Say, Penny, could I come see you tomorrow morning about this manuscript I've been working on?"

"This is the best workshop I've ever attended!"

How did we (Penny Frey, Meg Ashman, and I) bring about this change in attitude in just one short day? Through a fast-paced presentation of pertinent information, laced with a healthy dash of humor.

The empty pot
Anyone who has faced the task of writing knows that it can be a painful experience; we can find all sorts of excuses for not beginning. Or—and this is even more painful—we find it

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incredibly difficult to rewrite our obviously wonderful prose that some picky editor insists is not as readable as it could be.

The associate director of the Vermont Agricultural Experiment Station was concerned that Station scientists weren't writing as much nor as well as they should. Penny nonchalantly mentioned that perhaps they needed a writing course, and thus we volunteered (in the Army sense) to teach two, one-day writing workshops in the spring of 1981.

To assure attendance, the associate director not only sent all Station scientists an invitation, but he called several of them, or their department chairpersons, to encourage participation.

Horrors! An unwilling or antagonistic audience!

A dash of humor. . .

Our first task was to anticipate the scientists' feelings about writing—and about attending the workshop—and to allow them to express those feelings. We decided to add a bit of fun wherever we could, thus setting the participants at ease. One technique was to award play money for the most astute comments made during discussions ("'One is never too old to learn,' the director just told me last week."); for the most creative excuses for not writing journal articles ("I get a severe attack of sinusitis every time I pick up a pen."); and for the best suggestions for confusing the innocent reader ("Everyone knows what I mean anyway.")

This so-called monetary reward surprised the participants at first. However, they soon began to delight in assigning value to their colleagues' comments. Knowing that "It is I" is proper construction was considered worth $10, while being able to use a passive verb in a sentence warranted a crumpled $2 bill. This sort of playfulness helped set the tone of the workshop and encouraged discussion. Then at the end of the day, we presented the coveted "Red Pen Award" to the person who had accumulated the greatest fortune.

Friendly competition was another technique we used to help the scientists tackle their fears about writing. Workshop participants were divided into three groups: The Rhizobians, the Amino Acids, and the Nucleotides. Some activities called for the groups to compete against one another; others pitted scientist against scientist. One of the more successful events was our game-show takeoff, "Stump the Editor," where groups of three scientists competed against the three editors to delete the most words

from a sentence and yet retain the original meaning. We had someone from our editorial office select actual sentences from typical journals the scientists were familiar with; this helped emphasize that somebody out there really does write verbose, convoluted sentences that don't make sense. We selected judges from amongst the participants, and they had a tough job earning their $50 fee because the teams argued good-naturedly as to which edited version was best.

Everyone had 3 minutes to work alone and then 3 minutes to come up with a group solution. Here's a sample sentence from the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*:

> If a particular characteristic (or set of characteristics) determines the marginal value product of an agricultural commodity but is extremely costly (or impossible) to observe at the time of sale, then it is conceivable that alternative characteristics known to be correlated with the characteristic of interest will be substituted for it in grading standards. (54 words)

The winning entries were about 32 words long. How well would you have done?

We editors were able to win only one round in both workshops, partly because we weren't as familiar with the jargon and subject matter as were the scientists (ahem). However, the exercise pointed out that scientists had the ability to rewrite wordy prose and have it make sense. For some of them, it was the first time they had ever played at being an editor . . . and they loved it.

We took a chance by presenting serious information in a light-hearted way. Instead of detracting from the importance of our message, however, our approach seemed to stimulate participation and to help overcome the I-hate-to-write attitude of many of the scientists.

A pinch of thyme . . .

Work expands to fill the time available, we are told. But we operated under our own axiom: information contracts to fit the time allotted. Whole PhD programs are devoted to technical writing, but we tried to teach the state of the art in just one short day.

We had two decisions to make: what information should we include, and how could we present it effectively yet quickly? Before the workshop, we asked scientists what writing skills they needed help with. This information, coupled with our collective experience of working with Station authors, led us to select the following topics: barriers to writing, techniques for beginning and keeping going,

readability, technical writing style, grammer and punctuation, and organization.

To keep us moving from one subject to the next fairly rapidly, we adopted a tag-team approach in the morning. This took the onus off of any one of us to always have an answer ready and allowed for variety in our presentation. In the afternoon, each of us led three 45-minute sessions, working with a third of the group at a time.

To make the learning experience as valuable as possible, we chose not to lecture to the participants but rather to respond to their comments and questions generated by our handouts and exercises. And we also asked them to write—right there!

Only a few of the participants indicated that they were overwhelmed by the quantity of material presented in such a short time. The majority, however, said that they enjoyed the fast pace and were not in the least bit bored, as they had fully expected to be, by a workshop on writing. In fact, they said they rather enjoyed themselves.

A bushelful of ideas

Our May workshop began with an easy-flowing discussion of feelings about writing (fear, panic, elation); of barriers to writing (not enough sharpened pencils, too much other work to do); and also of techniques for getting started (writing the discussion section first, tape recording thoughts as they occur *during* the research). This was followed by a handout of sample beginnings for articles.

For the June workshop, we tried something that worked even better. The participants each received three note-cards. On the first they listed their thoughts about one of two questions: "How do you go about writing an article?" or "What are your feelings about writing an article for publication?" On the second notecard they selected items from their list and wrote a paragraph to answer the question. And on the third notecard, they revised their paragraph.

Next, they read their paragraphs aloud in small groups. The listeners could respond to only two questions: "What interested me most about what the person has written is . . .," and "What I would like to hear more about is . . ." This exercise not only gave the participants *positive* feedback about their writing, but it also taught them one technique (listing-drafting-revising) for actually beginning to write (Lefevre and Dickerson, 1981).

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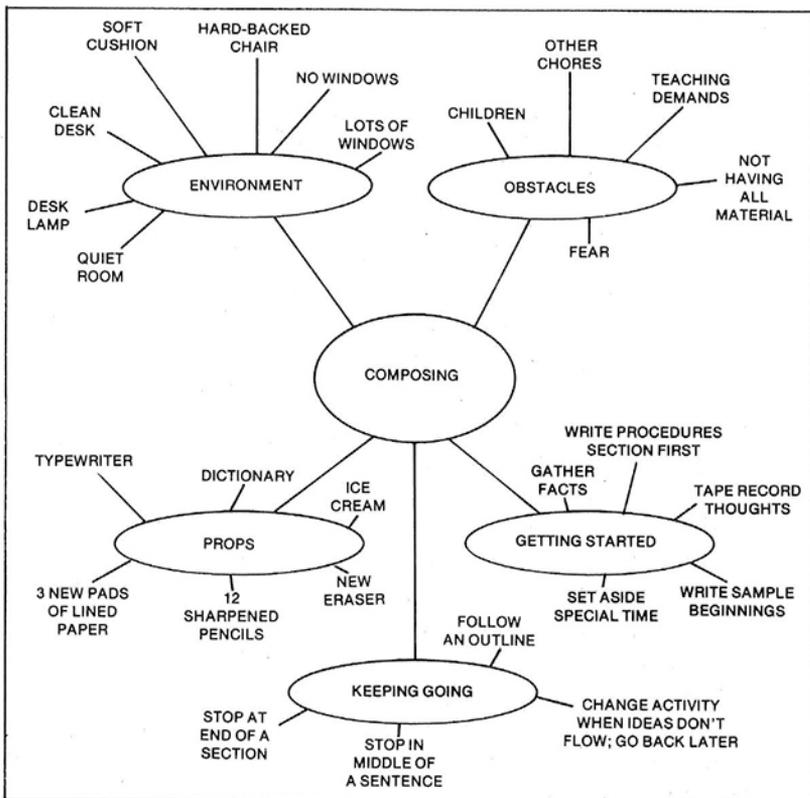CHANGE ACTIVITY
WHEN IDEAS DON'T
FLOW; GO BACK LATER

Figure 1. Cluster chart on composing.

With the whole group, participants shared their ideas from the notecard-writing exercise as I recorded their comments on the blackboard in a cluster fashion (see Fig. 1). Again, without being pedantic, we taught the participants another way (cluster chart) to organize their thoughts and begin writing (Winterowd and Crane, 1980). Later in the day, they had a chance to practice a third technique, outlining.

But getting started is only part of the problem; knowing how best to say what you have to say can be equally frustrating. Before we could prejudice the conversation about what constitutes good technical writing style, we gave participants six versions each of one passage supposedly from a technical journal, and asked them to select the most readable and the least readable versions (Kirkman, 1980). This way the participants had to identify their own criteria of

readability, and subsequently defend those criteria before the whole group.

The discussion was lively. However, one passage consistently got the highest rating. What made it most readable were the following characteristics:

- thoughts broken down into manageable paragraphs;
- average of 21.2 words per sentence;
- primarily active verbs;
- minimal use of special vocabulary;
- judicious use of personal and impersonal constructions; and
- varied sentence length and complexity.

Cast aside as less readable was the version filled with "we's" and colloquial phrases; the version belabored with ponderous prose and scientific gobbledygook; and the version packed with information in short, adjective-filled sentences.

The benefits of such an exercise were that the participants were able to identify qualities of good writing on their own. And whenever a question of style arose later in the workshop, we were able to refer to the results of this exercise as proof of why, for example, it is preferable to say "the temperature rose 6°C" instead of "it was determined that the temperature showed an increase of 6°C."

The morning session was flexible enough to allow us to address important questions as they arose. For example, worth $50 in play money was the comment made by a participant that, "The journals I write for never use personal pronouns." At this cue we distributed a list of "Fifty Journals in Which Vermont Agricultural Experiment Station Scientists had Articles Published Since Mid-1979, or to Which They Submitted Manuscripts (or Wished They Had)." For the second workshop, we increased the number to 77.

How many, we asked, contained at least one article that uses personal pronouns (I, we, my, our) in its most recent issue on the shelves at the University libraries? They all do. This surprised most of the participants (and us, as well).

If scientists can readily accept New Math, we argued, then why can't they entertain the idea of a New English? The intent is not to present simple-minded writing, but to simplify writing where appropriate to make it more readable. Times are changing, and so is our language.

Round-robin eggs . . .

The three afternoon sessions dealt with the more concrete issues of grammer and punctuation, style, and organization. Meg led the grammer and punctuation session, a potentially boring subject that instead started everyone's vocal chords vibrating. Participants took 10 minutes to read several pages of handouts and come up with their own answers to proper usage before debating such things as when to use *that* as opposed to *which*. Or whether $7 *is* or *are* too much to pay for lunch. Or whether it is more appropriate to use parentheses (some people perfer them) or dashes—others prefer these—to set off explanatory material.

Penny led the style workshop, which expanded upon our earlier discussion of readability. She focused on use of short or precise words, eliminating roundabout phrasing, use of effective transitions, and the difference between abstract vs. concrete expressions. It was demonstrated to the participants that in light of what experience has shown, considering the fact that the occurrence of roundabout phrasing is demonstrably prevalent, inquiry needs to be made with reference to this subject. Whew!

She also taught them some easy ways to confuse, irritate, perplex, confound, distract, disconcert, and bewilder their readers:

- Always use *etc.* at the end of a sentence, especially if you run out of things to say: "Gather everything you need before you start—hammer, toothpicks, dictionary, etc."
- Never get specific: "The cost will be well under the million-dollar estimate."
- Don't tell your reader who is making the statement or assumption: "It was determined that birds can't fly."

Penny's message was not that one particular phrase or passive expression or multisyllabic word is bad; rather, the cumulative effect of all of these words or phrases makes much of technical writing difficult to grasp.

My session focused on how to organize material within an entire report as well as within a paragraph. We discussed 12 approaches to organizing a piece of writing: Simple approaches would be to review or summarize a topic while more complicated approaches include analyzing and evaluating (Clarke, 1979).

Using facts I supplied about Liechtenstein, the participants outlined a potential journal article, following one of

Clarke's organizational approaches. Next I taught them the "formulaic paragraph," a simple technique that allows you to put together a four-sentence paragraph when all else fails (Clarke, 1979). As a group, we then wrote a paragraph from one of their outlines—all in 45 minutes.

The proof of the pudding

Adding humor and moving at a fast pace definitely helped make our message more palatable. The smiling faces and general goodwill at the end of a long, full day convinced us that our gamble had worked.

We had shown that:
- nearly everyone experiences the same emotions (anxiety, guilt, fear, anger, pride) when it comes to writing or rewriting;
- active verbs, personal pronouns, concrete phrasing, and relatively short sentences improve readability;
- even mere scientists can delete extraneous words when they set their minds to it;
- correct use of grammar and punctuation can be learned; and
- by using a few simple techniques for organizing thoughts, just about everyone can write a cohesive report.

Participants left the workshop with a thick notebook filled with reference materials to help them make future style and grammar decisions on their own. They also received a stylish 8½ x 11'' certificate acknowledging their attendance (Fig. 2). Some participants, we have heard, even have had the nerve to frame the certificates and put them on the wall next to their diplomas from Harvard and Morehead State College.

One of the most satisfying results of the workshop is that several scientists have come to us, manuscripts in hand, and were enthusiastically willing to make their writing as readable as possible. In February 1982, Penny and I took the show on the road to the Station scientists at the University of Delaware. And then in June 1982, we incorporated some of our techniques into a University of Vermont summer school course entitled, "Technical Writing: A Relatively Non-threatening Course for Those Who Are Afraid to Write." Many have said that they learned a lot and enjoyed themselves in the process. We'd like to believe this is true.

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is in receipt of the aforementioned certification for having been in attendance
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DATE _May 11, 1981_   REDACTORS IN RESIDENCE   _Meg Ashman_
Meg Ashman
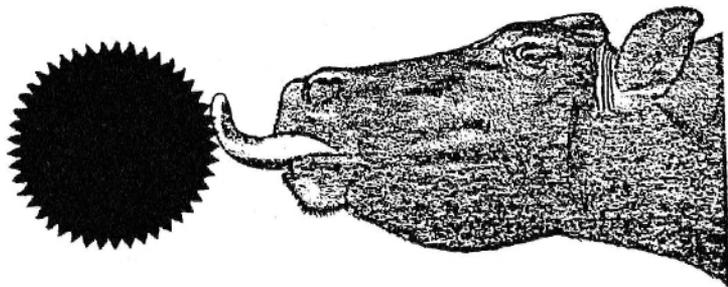
Penny Frey
Penny Frey

LaRae H. Wales
LaRae Wales

Figure 2. Classy award certificate.

And so editors, take heart. Teaching technical writing
need not be distasteful; in fact, it might even be an unex-
pected treat.

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