

3 April 2010

Chris—

Here's what I remember—and it was decades ago, seems like a dream—of a conversation with a fellow who taught “transfer level composition,” some threshold English course that his community college held as a requirement. He seemed to set great store by the first class meeting.

*I've done an evening English class for seven or eight years.*

*They all begin with 28 students, generally twenty-five to forty-five. A few look like high school. My guess, they all have full time jobs. Most have kids.*

*I read them as tense, and that's easily a waste of our night. So I try telling them what's ahead. Maybe get them into a less-frozen state.*

I say Hello. I give them my name. I say that this is English 110, transfer level composition. *We go down the department's student roster. I'm doing eye-contact everywhere, learning about them.*

I say good evening. It's nice to meet you, all.

I say, again, this is transfer level composition, and that, given decent results, you can take these course hours to any school, Chicago, Cornell, Harvard, Berkeley. These hours can go anywhere. They count.

We're going to meet sixteen times from 6 to 8:45, and this is one of them.

These 48 sound like a lot of hours. But, I've seen newspaper listings of the school district's grade and high school hours in math, science, English. I expect you've had 840 hours of academic talk on English.

I'm looking at you and you're looking at me, and we're wondering what to expect.

English 110 is a requirement. But you already know that.

*And I've said the word “requirement.”*

*Not long ago, I talked to a friend who's worked for years as a student counselor at a first-tier university, and who said that regardless of tested capability there's very often a "visceral" response to silly little Comp 110.*

Let's face it, this course is unlike anything else you face in academics. By no means to sell it short, take American History to 1865; it's some fact items, names, dates. And, when you find you've lost a few points on an answer about the bank scandal during Andrew Jackson's presidency, there's not much to get excited about, no question of lowered self-image, self-worth.

As I look at the people here, I see people with full time jobs. Most of you are raising kids, and you look at "going back to school" as a way to make an opportunity for something better.

*And I go on, telling them more things they can depend on.*

I see you as already successful.

And, you already knew more sophisticated things about English before you were three or four than we can cover here. You knew quite clearly, knew from the start, "big cow," "big brown cow," from "cow big," "big cow brown." Oh, I suppose we could talk in the metaphor of a funnel on its side, with the most general at the "start" or widest of the funnel, going to the most specific at its narrow "end." But, I believe you already know the trickiest parts.

What's different, here, is that this is a writing class, and there are slightly different things to keep in mind between telling a story, and writing the same thing as a story.

*I ask if any plan to major in English. No one ever has.*

I say to them this course stands between you and your reasons for coming back to school, nursing, criminal justice, pay grade increases just about anywhere.

I ask does anybody read much, a daily newspaper, a magazine, books? *Hardly anyone gestures yes.* It doesn't hurt, if you're writing, to read a variety of things. Try a *Reader's Digest* or two: in any issue are stories of people in interesting or unusual circumstances, little articles on finance, on entrepreneurs, a one-or-two page piece that's light-hearted. And the variety

of these short items makes it a little easier to get a feel for different ways to start, and then tie up loose ends to, a story.

*I pause. I begin again.*

Are any of you good at telling jokes? Know someone who has a talent for it? *And most people indicate they're not "good" at it, but some nod they know someone who is.* What we, the regular people trying to tell jokes, end up with are stories with too much or too little detail, stories with important parts misplaced until after the punch line.

When writing, you all have all the time in the world.

Right, I know it's a semester.

But we can take these short projects and just keep to the things that make both jokes and stories do their best, going from a beginning point, with not too much detail, not too little, in a right order, to an end that answers all that's gone before.

You know you can proficiency this course for thirty-five dollars. Withdraw now and save yourself money and time, if you want.

But, this is a place where you can practice. Nobody ever went to the Olympics without practice, and more, and more practice.

*I make my plea to begin creation anew.*

I've seen it more than once, that the way to learn is to teach yourself to write. For me, I don't disagree. Still, here among other people all with the same need to write better, you have an audience remarkably free of bullies. And that's rare, and that's good.

I've heard of and seen English teachers wildly picky-crabby about irrelevant things, who want the language to be what they say it ought to be.

There goes somebody who should have been a math teacher. And, better, a math teacher adding and subtracting integers, single digit whole numbers, where the rules of the game are pretty much entirely predictable.

I'm not your hurdle to this requirement. As far as I'm concerned the language is constantly developing. If I had to name the hurdle, it's a fluid kind of what-

the-big-people-capital-letter say is Standard English. But, if I had to envision your hurdle, it'd look like the next e-mail you're going to send to your boss.

Because, these days, you're going to be pressing your own little "send" button. There's no brilliant secretary. The written sense you make will be the difference between whether you stay stuck, or go on up the ladder.

*And, always, from the heart I ask them:* Is anyone out there inclined to be the one standing up? Picture that we'll trade. I'll work as your assistant, gladly help you with your questions. Does anyone want to volunteer? We will work something out. *No matter I do short-time the offer, I need their faith.*

It's not me that's in your way. If anything, it's the world.

*So, I tell them about the course, and make some rules plain:*

There are six projects this semester. The early ones count fewer "points" than the later ones.

We'll do a Narrative, a Description (and this one's generally a better Narrative), a Comparison, a Cause and Effect, a Persuasion, and a very, very small Research Paper.

*And they're breathing in time with this stuff until they hear about a Research Paper. And they go cold. And I know they envision being blown-away by some police officer saber-slashing commas as wrong, periods wrong, spaces wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong.*

The research project isn't for me, I say, but for you.

Here's where this comes from: None of you, my best guess, have time to look into something that interests you, some aspect of a hobby, some colorful person in your family's history, some event, some place you've never been that you'd like to find out more about. This paper gives you that time.

I've had papers on dolphins, on an old family cemetery, on the varieties of grafts that can be made onto trees, on Princess Diana, on the circumstances of the hanging of the family's black-sheep ancestor, on salt mines in Poland where church buildings are carved into the underground salt, and one from a woman whose son had a rare disease, and who used the research-time to talk

to doctors in the area—and by phone to Mayo’s—for her to learn about and write on what the specialists knew of treatments.

*Always, several of the folks have been beaten down, so I do what a person can to help them see themselves completing this course.*

As far as grading is concerned, I allow one “grammar problem,” one “mechanical error,” per page of assigned paper length. I’ll mark them, but if they’re that few I don’t subtract points. After that, a misspelled word, sentence fragment, run-on sentence, is a three-point subtraction from the paper’s score.

I’ve watched somebody in the department who holds that fragments and run-ons are in some almost “fatal” category, and subtracts thirty plus points per occurrence.

I see that way of grading like holding a gun on a student while asking the person to be creative. And, nobody who has a problem with fragments and run-ons, and has subtractions of this magnitude for three or four such errors in their first submission, will have any spirit left to face a second project. Their semester might as well be over in its third or fourth week.

I’ve seen instructors be dismissive of students with insufficiently elegant presentations. I say, I’d rather have Joe Friday’s nuts and bolts, and “Just the facts, Mam,” than to see students shoot themselves in the foot working with words they’ve never in their lives heard used.

*In the old student draft deferment days, the story was that universities accepted half-again or more their capacity of first-year students, because the English Department was expected to wash-out a sufficient number of them half-way into the fall semester, that then the school’s dormitories would be filled, without students sleeping in hallways.*

This school has a rolling admissions policy, has an admissions department talking to incoming students, uses placement tests. I’m not here, by any pretentious powers-of-arbitrariness, to shut you down. I believe they hired me to empower you.

So, I will mark all the things that, in my experience, seem to cause problems, identify them by type of problem, and make these mechanicals all three points gone.

As well, each of you can re-submit two projects:

If something gets a low score, and if you fix only the problems I've marked, and then turn it back in the week after you get it, then I will give the paper the score—a score based on its content—that it had before the mechanical errors were subtracted. For your second re-submit, half the mechanical error deductions go away.

For example, the first project is to write a two or three page Narrative. But, all I do is ask you to tell a story, so it's a fairly non-threatening place to get acquainted. More than once, I've read good writers say that if you can write three or four pages, you can write a book.

And stories are everywhere. Telling someone what happened in your day, these are stories. Highly regarded broadcast news half-hours open with "Our top story tonight." The legendary television producer Fred Friendly used to ask his people to "tell me a story." We're talking about a narrative, but even the silly research paper is a story, because you need to let someone, your reader, believe in how it all ends.

And everybody's got something for this Narrative, something touching, funny, scary, that's happened to them. And you write it down: an opening, the story event, with something to wrap it up, and it's ok.

*But, we're really talking re-submits.*

And I tell you I will say that one of your choices is to write your story in the first person, "I turned the corner," "I fell," or in third person, "he turned the corner," "he fell." It depends on what kind of story it is, which might be more appropriate.

But sometimes, when people write in the third person, "he"—and maybe because they're re-telling their own experience—after about the first paragraph the narrative continues "and then I," and so forth, shifted into first person. Now, I've told folks more than once that this risk exists in this project, that they need to make verb tenses appropriate and continuous. *I'm doing it for the first time now.* But a paper or two comes in started in one person, and then, early on, changed to another.

That's ok, it's pretty innocent, and it's an error virtually impossible in later projects. But picture me at the kitchen table making little Xs in the margins

of the first project and subtracting three points for every error-in-person for a page-and-a-half or two. On a really interesting story, well told, it is possible to have enough of those little Xs and minus-threes that the number I put at the top of the first page is a negative number. A good story? There goes the semester.

By the math, on a ten-point system, even if everything else is high-A, the semester is a C. What a horrible mess. Stub your toe one more time and you're gone.

Once, or twice, maybe several times, whenever I've noticed this sort of pending embarrassment as a paper is being handed-in, I say to the student to fix the first-and-second person problems, and bring the paper back next week. Then I'll accept it for reading. It won't be late—how can it be, here it is, the night it's due—but we'll save a week or two of back-and-forth if it physically comes in then, not now.

If I demand minus-thirty, minus-forty per fragment, per run-on, and don't have provision for re-submits, there could be no reflection of anything you'd have picked up in this class. All that the first few projects would tell me is where your last English teacher left you.

And, you'd have hit a brick wall and dropped out.

I will do what I can not to be your last English teacher.

None of these written English “mechanicals” represent morals or ethics or honor. *I know you can hire people to fix those messes if you tell a fine story.* It's only because writing has proven to be immensely powerful that any of these concerns matter.

*I go on naming the elephant in the room.*

I say to you now, and I believe you'll sense it true, I've never worked with someone in one of these classes who can't write a decent story. That's what these evenings are about, are stories.

There is no moment more important—and more delicate—for a writer who knows he's standing, she's standing, in harm's-way, than very aware of a first-reader.

*And they'll observe me going back for a little, then going on, them aware, I know, of a slight restiveness in my hands, eyes, legs, breathing, as I read.*

*I'd once sat to the left of a woman who passed me a story of the difficult birth of her (then-still-infant) child. As the story existed, it wasn't readable.*

I've found it's best to work with each of you as individual students, as individuals. So, at some early point, I'll sit and read your project, your paper, with you nearby, so we get the best sense of your story.

*So, we looked at the sequence "how" the new mother unfolded her story, that it was fine. Once that moment settled, we looked slightly technically at the manner of her unfolding. I helped her visualize it as if edited. And she learned, and she got better.*

The only thing I want out of this close-reading is to find the best story inside your words, the one you wanted to write, the one you thought you'd written. And we can do this.

*Later in the semester, we'll go with some student-to-student, but, now, I continue working to establish some more trust.*

Take a look at two things: you writing, someone reading.

On "you writing:"

Your reader only wants the content of your subject.

You're a film director, who hardly ever pops-up as an actor in the work, but in a hundred ways crafts every scene. You're the attractive packaging, but the reader wants the tasty food inside. You're one of the cones to carry the ice cream.

*It's as if they're in a trance. I swear, I keep saying stuff like this until they visibly shake off the sleepiness.*

If you do it right, it doesn't matter how tall or short, how black, red, yellow, white, you are, whether you have post-graduate degrees or are early in a community college writing course. Writing has a magic.



Picture these numbers: a person speaks at about 125 words per minute, reads at maybe 250, and thinks at 500.

I've come to respect that when I'm talking to you, you've got such excess capacity that you can think rings around what I'm saying. You can be checking off what you need to do after class, remembering what your boss said, watching a movie in your head, all at a four-to-one rate to my talking.

Life's like that.

Picture yourself sitting and writing. Imagine what's physically going on. Even if you can type 90 words a minute, your brain still races far ahead your fingers. Picture my predicament, me starting with a ball point pen.

Writing something down is swimming-in-quicksand slow.

On writing? For me, it's a miracle something's on paper.

So, I accept that the sentence I have in mind when I put pen to paper is likely not the sentence I'm writing in its middle, and has even less likelihood of being on the start-track as it ends.

So, don't fall in love with your first draft.

Look at what you've written and try to remember what you had in mind when you were writing. Sometimes what you'd typed as one sentence is really two or three things, each that deserve their own sentences. So, give them each their moment.

If you see in your first draft a place where you wrote something, and later did the same thing in better words, draw a line through the weaker one, and keep the stronger. Maybe move the stronger back up.

Make the story you'd imagined. Your mind will always be ahead of your hand. That's what it is for everybody.

Too, you can easily have two or three sentences in a row, and each adds only one word to the presentation. So, look at your sentences, find their good words: from "It was a gravel path." "It was long." "It was narrow." and take less time, make "It was a long, narrow, gravel path.

You have better writing because you use fewer words to achieve the same result. For your reader, you more closely match reading to thinking, and the story's more engaging, more stimulating.

John Keats wrote he liked “loading every rift of the subject with ore.” The reader thinks that the writer is better, and subliminally, magically, that the writer is smarter.

The point is, don't quit at a first draft.

A second point, “on writing:”

Picture a fourth draft. You've got it virtually memorized. Your eyes, now also driven by your mind, set down only a time, maybe two, on a line.

And what you don't see is what your reader will get.

So, what to do? I hold the point of a pencil or pen—a point—just above the page, and only slightly under the first word of the first line. And I move the point smoothly, as slowly as needed, across and under each of the lines, while at the same time quietly mouthing to myself the words I'm looking at. I'm not just “eye reading” them, but am “saying” them. I have my eyes and brain see what is really, actually, written and spelled on the page.

I find two things happen. First, my eyes don't jump. Too, I see that I have letters transposed in the middle of a word. I see I've forgotten a period inside some quotes. I am “seeing” the sentences using a new part of my brain. And, I can now “hear” because I say the clunky verb tense, the bad subject agreement.

If you can get a handle on looking at your first draft, and can truly proofread your last, you'll go a long way to keep from shooting yourself unnecessarily in the foot.

That's a start on “you writing.”

“Someone reading,” almost by definition, means a person reading something for the first time. And as is writing, reading is both intellectual and physical.

Your reader wants to believe that you tell the truth about your subject, that you say what is agreed on, and bring up what is uncertain.

In academic circles, it's pretty much "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." In the world, there's a little more persuasion involved, a publisher's stance, pro or con, conservative, liberal, a question of advertisers and their interests, but, for the reader, the end result of written pieces still needs to be a sense of a reasonable "the truth."

Consider that a reader begins at the beginning of a piece, and reads to its end. Imagine a very long clothes line, you know, one of the plastic-coated ones, and imagine that your story is printed along that line. A reader starts at the near end of the clothesline, and walks forward as the story goes on, and on to its end.

And the writer, the story-teller, needs to give the reader a sense of moving forward.

Recollect, we've all had to stop in the middle of a page, a little lost. We skim back up the story until we come to a place we recognize. And that's fine. Most often I say I must have been dozing, pretending to read while distracted. Happens all the time, thinking at 500 words per minute, reading at 250.

But, imagine me at the kitchen table submersing myself in a student story in which the writer and her sister-in-law went somewhere. About half-way into the second page, when "then Jill said to me" turned up, I went back to the first page to see what I'd nodded through, and didn't find anything. Later, talking to the person who'd written the story, her sister-in-law's name was Jill. Background detail can be tucked away, so introduce "my sister-in-law, Jill" on the first page. There's a little moment aside set off by commas—"Jill"—but the essential story continues to unfold.

On a railroad, shifts from the main track to a siding, where a smaller or slower train can go to the side to let a larger, faster, one go on ahead, only come after some tell-tale colored directional lights, and track switches have been set.

Too, when you have to do some moving around, some shifts of focus as you tell stories, use code words and phrases, "at the same time," "though," "sometimes," "but," little signals to your reader that you're momentarily shifting, so your reader will stay in time with you. Signals cut down on train wrecks.

In another metaphor, imagine you're in front of some friends on a hike, and you come to a stream-crossing that you know, and they don't. What to do? If

you're a friend, you'll tell them to step left foot on such-and-such a tuft of grass, that one's solid ground, right foot on this rock, not that other one: it looks ok, but I've had it dunk me.

As a writer you're most often expected to know the lay of the land, what ground is firm, what's solid. And, to be believable, what you find soft.

And that's a little bit of "someone reading."

I say, where you've learned the way, help your readers, your friends.

*And I talk a little more about the semester's projects, ask for questions, do what I can for answers, and that's about it for the first night.*

21 April 2010

Chris—

There was more, but the whole thing has problems.

Part of me says, it's a rant.

Similes, metaphors, parables? They prove what?

ISO 9000-2001 in-house auditor training tells me, if you can't quantify something, you don't know what you have.

If everyone can't teach like that, no one should.

It smells like cult-of-personality.

Keep up the fight,

John.