

The Writer's Digest

Writing for Understanding



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Communicate to be Understood

Everyone desires to be understood. This basic desire begins when children, even before they can speak, make their needs known by crying, pointing, or trying in some other way to make their parents understand what they want. Stephen R. Covey said, "Communication is the most important skill in life." If this is so, we need to communicate in a way that others can understand us; not only understand us, but not misunderstand us. Nothing can be more frustrating than having some-

one misconstrue a comment that was meant to be helpful, into some sort of criticism. Effective communication is especially important to the writer, who wishes to effectively convey life's meaning in a way that is understandable to others. Writers must express ideas clearly and simply by breaking complex concepts down into simpler ideas upon which they can build while using a variety of methods, such as stories, personal examples, and humor, to convey their message.

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Understand the Reader

Covey said, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." Seeking to understand others creates empathy in ourselves. Jack Hart, author of *A Writer's Coach* explains why empathy is so important to the writer. "The ability to see things from the reader's viewpoint determines whether a message gets through or not" (110). The more we understand of life and others' experiences, the more we are able to communicate effectively in our writing.



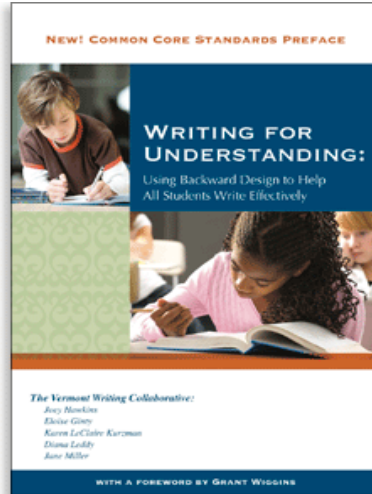
People interpret writing according to the experiences they have had to which they can relate. When people come from similar backgrounds and have a lot in common, they can relate with each other better than those who come from different backgrounds (Hart 111). The more people there are, the less probability

there is of shared experiences among them all. Hart mentions a problem most newspaper writers have experienced: "A reader calls to complain about a story, and the writer is flabbergasted by the way that reader has interpreted the copy. The two might as well be talking about completely different stories" (112). Thus the writer needs to understand the reader and use the techniques necessary to convey his or her message in a way that cannot be misinterpreted.

Know Your Subject

Besides understanding the reader, writers need to understand the subject about which they want to write. This is important to the professional writer as well as the elementary school student, who is required to write as a means to reinforce learning. *Writing for Understanding*, by The Vermont Writing Collaborative, teaches that in order for students to write effectively about a subject they must first learn about the subject through a means of “interactive experiences.” These experiences include pre-writing activities where they read, discuss, and even role-play characters from history so that they come to a better understanding of what it might have been like to live during a certain time period. For instance, a pre-writing activity could include stu-

dents’ reading accounts of slaves who lived in the South and then discussing how they might have felt living in those conditions.



Students are then able to pen a journal expressing their feelings based on the knowledge they received through the pre-writing learning experiences (TeachTCI).

Tools of the Trade

Proper mechanics are a must for writing to be clear and not ambiguous. The following rules are good to remember:

- ◆ Use active, not passive voice
- ◆ Be positive
- ◆ Avoid the double negative
- ◆ Be specific
- ◆ Use common words
- ◆ Avoid flowery adjectives
- ◆ Use “strong” verbs (Stein 100)
- ◆ Use “s” to show possession instead of prepositional phrases like “of the”

GOOD WRITING IS LIKE A PENCIL, THE MORE YOU SHARPEN THE POINT, THE SHORTER IT TENDS TO GET.



A. Farthingsworth

Clean It Up

“Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills, and meaningless jargon” (Zinsser 7). There are many things that can clutter writing and make it ambiguous or difficult to understand. A writer might think that using sophisticated words will make what he or she says sound more important. William Zinsser related an example from a letter written to alumni by the president of the university he

attended during the 1960s, about some unrest on campus. It read, “You are probably aware that we have been experiencing very considerable potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction on issues only partially related.” Zinsser explained that what the president really meant was that the students had been harassing the university about some things (8). Writers need to state ideas plainly and simply if they want to be understood.

The Importance of Clarity

Patricia Daniels, editor for National Wildlife and Time-Life Books, said, “[Clarity] is the single most important element of nonfiction writing.” Jack Hart (author of *A Writer’s Coach*) agrees. He says that you should “never have to read a well-written sentence twice—unless it’s for the sheer pleasure of the experience” (xi). So what does

clarity really mean, and how can writers achieve clarity in their work? Daniels said that to her, clarity “means conveying information to the reader so that she [or he] not only understands it completely, but also understands how that information leads to a central point or conclusion in your article or book.”



http://i236.photobucket.com/albums/ff128/lajimi/Political/nixon_clear.jpg

Organize It!

Writing clearly begins with thinking clearly. Writers have to be sure about what they want to say and not be confused in their own ideas. They need to think before they write. W. Somerset Maugham said, “Some writers who do not think clearly are inclined to suppose that their thoughts have a significance greater than at first sight appears. . . . It is very easy to persuade oneself that a phrase that one does not quite understand may mean a great deal more than one realizes.”

This does not mean that there is no room for “free writing”—



Reddy, Steven B. “Clutter.” 2012. Flickr. Web. 18 June 2014.

the kind of writing where one just starts to write whatever first comes to mind, without regard to whether or not it is organized. Ayn Rand taught that the writing process itself helps to organize the writer’s thoughts (Cooper 14). Hemingway

took this approach. He described it as writing in “hot blood,” like the kind of writing someone does when he is mad about something, but then goes back later to edit the material after he has cooled off (Cooper 14). Doing this can actually help writers organize their thoughts.

A series of logical steps, where one step leads to another, can help writers lead their readers to greater understanding of what they are trying to say. Rand found that her study of syllogistic logic (i.e. if $A=B$ and $B=C$, then $A=C$) helps her to organize her thoughts (Cooper 14).

Humor Can Help

Nicholas Petterssen found a way to engage readers of the *Swift 3D V5 User Guide* by using humor. After giving clear instructions as to how to use the software, he concludes, “In addition to the basic content of this Use Guide, we’ve thrown together a smattering of additional resources for your

educational pleasure. Actually, the truth is we found that the more educated our users are, the less tech support we have to deal with, so it’s also a little bit of a self-serving maneuver” (10).

Erma Bombeck was well-known for her humorous quips about every-day life. She made her points clear by using humor to help people relate.

Did you ever notice that the first piece of luggage on the carousel never belongs to anyone?

—Erma Bombeck

www.brainyquotes.com

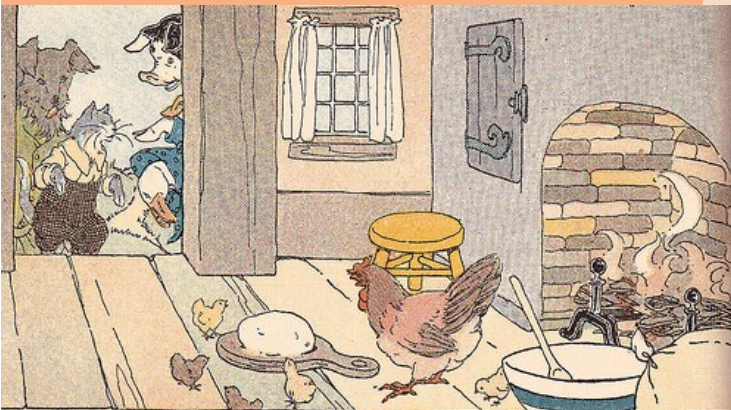
The Value of a Good Story

Stories and analogies can be a great way to keep readers involved. Good examples help readers to relate ideas to themselves, thus conveying understanding (Stein 104). Who can contest the value that great parables have, such as “The Little Red Hen,” or “The Tortoise and the Hare,” in helping people understand the concept of rewards that can be acquired through hard work or perseverance? But the audience must be able to relate the stories to themselves.



Fisher, Blanche. “Who will help me plant this corn?” Illustration. 1921. Kathy McMillan. Flickr. Web. 5 June 2014.

When using stories to enrich ideas, writers need to make sure their audience is familiar with how a story relates to the point they are trying to make. If readers are not familiar with the meaning in a story, it makes little sense to use the story to illustrate a point.



Fisher, Blanche. “Who will help me eat this cake?” Illustration. 1921. Kathy McMillan. Flickr. Web. 5 June 2014.

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