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<center>Writing for Understanding</center>

Introduction

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 someone 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.

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. Hart explains this concept through the use of Venn Diagrams that overlap where people have shared experiences. When people come from similar backgrounds there is a lot of overlap, and thus greater understanding than with those who come from different backgrounds (111). The probability of shared experiences is even less when it comes to writing for the mass population. 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.

Gain Knowledge of the 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 students' reading accounts of slaves who lived in the South and then discussing how they might have felt living in those conditions. Students could then pen a journal expressing their feelings based on the knowledge they received through the pre-writing learning experiences (TeachTCI). Thus, gaining an understanding of the reader and a knowledge of the subject matter are essential to the writer who wishes to be understood.

The Importance of Clarity

After becoming familiar with the reader and the subject, a writer must clearly express his or her ideas. When questioned about using clarity in writing, Patricia Daniels, professional writer and editor for *National Wildlife* and Time-Life Books, responded, "[Clarity] is the single most important element of nonfiction writing." Hart agrees. He says you should "never have to read a well-written sentence twice—unless it's for the sheer pleasure of the experience" (xi). Not all people do agree though.

Ian Barnard thinks that too much emphasis is placed on clarity, especially when it comes to critical theory. He makes the point that no one really defines clarity. It might mean something to one person and something completely different to another. We shouldn't just assume that the meaning is obvious (436). This goes along with the idea that a piece of art can mean different things to different people. Just because a piece of writing has an obscure meaning, does that mean it is bad writing? For example, take Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." Is there obscure meaning there? Interpretations have been given about the meaning of this story, but Hemingway has not

stated it clearly and simply in the piece. Yet Hemingway himself said, "My aim is to put down on paper what I see and what I feel in the best and simplest way" (qtd. in "Writing").

Most good literature could be interpreted in many different ways. Richard Lanham, who champions clarity as "the dominant prose virtue," concedes that the "'C-B-S' (clarity-brevity-sincerity) theory of communication 'doesn't always work'" (qtd. in Barnard 437). So when we speak of clarity, are we really speaking of controlling meaning? Barnard seems to think so—especially when it comes to critical theory (442). It may be that clarity is not as important to the writer of fiction as it is to the writer of nonfiction. If a writer's purpose is to stimulate thought, or invoke emotion in the reader, then the writer has found success even when his or her ideas are stated obliquely, but if writers want their readers to interpret what they say in a specific way, they need to state their points clearly.

This is probably most important in nonfiction writing such as news articles or technical writing. Daniels explained that to her, clarity "means conveying information to the reader so that she not only understands it completely, but also understands how that information leads to a central point or conclusion in your article or book." If writers want to express ideas in a way that can be understood, then they need to organize their thoughts so that they lead to the points they want to make.

Organize Ideas

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"—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). Organizing thoughts logically is part of the editing process as described by Hemingway.

De-Clutter

De-cluttering is another important part of the editing process. William Zinsser stated, "Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills, and meaningless jargon" (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. 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.

Use Appropriate Language

A writer must keep his or her audience in mind when choosing words. Words like, "shareware, nagware, and crippleware only confuse those not familiar with computer jargon ("Writing"). Also, writers need to watch out for technical words such as "assignor" and "assignee" which can confuse readers (Stein 100). Again, it comes back to knowing the audience. Calvin Sun, who writes about technology for TechRepublic, says it is important to talk to people on their own level by neither talking down to them nor over their heads.

Mechanics

Mechanics are another thing that can clutter writing and inhibit meaning. Readers have problems understanding prose that is cluttered with faulty punctuation that results in ambiguous meaning. Other usage problems, such as incorrect relative pronouns, incorrect tenses, and words that sound the same yet have different meanings also confuse the reader and inhibit understanding (Zinsser 8-9).

There are several techniques besides grammar and punctuation that help writers clarify meaning:

- Using active, not passive voice

- Being positive

- Avoiding the double negative

- Using "s" to show possession instead of prepositional phrases such as "of the"

- Being specific—avoiding generalities

- Using common words

- Avoiding flowery adjectives (Weiss 14).

Joshua Stein says to use "strong verbs" that show action (98). Also, avoid turning verbs into nouns; for example say, "'she achieved' instead of 'her achievements were . . .'" (100).

The Value of Humor

All of these techniques help not only to clarify, but to maintain the interest of the reader. After all, readers who are put to sleep by boring material do not get much out of what they are reading. This can be the case particularly in technical writing. How technical do instruction manuals have to be, and how can writers add interest and promote understanding in that venue?

Nicholas Petterssen, writer of the Swift 3D V5 User Guide for Electric Rain, Inc., found a way to keep readers engaged while reading the guide he penned by using humor. He turns a potentially boring guide into an easy-to-read, even entertaining, instruction manual that someone with little or no knowledge of this software program would be able

to understand. He begins by defining terms as basic as what "clicking a mouse" is. He says, "*Click* means press the mouse button once and release it." He continues, "*Select* means choose or highlight an item by clicking on it." Each step of his instructions is built upon the previous step, adding more knowledge to the step before, until the reader understands how to use this 3-D software. Petterssen uses every day, conversational language, as shown in this quotation about additional resources:

> In addition to the basic content of this User 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)

It seems doubtful that readers of this guide would need additional resources because the guide has been written so clearly.

Stories and Analogies

Stories and analogies are another 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.

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. David Orr, makes this point in his article, "Verbicide," when he notes that it does little good to make reference to many classic works—even the Bible, because so many people are no longer familiar with those stories (ctd. in Barnard). So it goes back to empathy and understanding the reader.

Conclusion

In short, "Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident" (Zinsser 12). Even though it is hard work, it is worth the effort for a writer to learn to express ideas effectively in a way that creates understanding and meaning. Respect your audience. Be candid and personal. Erma Bombeck was a successful columnist because she wrote candidly about everyday life experiences to which we can relate. Anyone who has children can relate to her sagacity as she writes, "Somewhere it is written that parents who are critical of other people's children and publicly admit they can do better are asking for it." We laugh because we understand. Being yourself, organizing your thoughts, simplifying ideas, using good writing techniques, and knowing your audience and relating to them, all bring about understanding—and after all, isn't that the point of writing.

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