

Writing and Pain

1. **INTRO** We all suffer in writing, one way or another. We have trouble writing or we get writer's block. But there are ways to go at it that are less painful.
 - a. Divide and conquer the rules of writing. Taking them one at a time will make learning the rules earlier.
 - i. We'll keep nagging you on your writing. Take the time to go over the comments we write on your papers
2. **PAY ATTENTION** Most crucial thing is to pay attention to what you're doing. We're all guilty of not paying attention. It causes you to make mistakes you'd never make normally.
 - a. We would never say or write things like: *They is going* or *I are going*, but by the end of a sentence our verb may not agree with our subject in number
 - b. *When I was living in Cleveland I am very happy* - When you're writing papers you may not notice that you changed from past tense to present tense, but if you take the time to read your paper over, you'll catch these errors.
3. **HOW TO PAY ATTENTION TO ONE'S OWN WORDS** This is difficult. There are all sorts of blocks that keep us from hearing what we've actually written. There are some devices you can use:
 - a. Academics come back to their papers after a few days so that they have a fresh perspective on the paper.
 - b. You can also have a friend or colleague read your paper. It is NOT OK to write your paper with someone, but you can certainly have someone else read it over for you.
 - c. Another option for you is to read the paper out loud. It will cause all the mistakes to jump out at you.
4. **UNLEARNING BAD HABITS** A large part of the problem is unlearning what you've been taught. Un-learn your bad habits.

- a. Either you've been taught to be overly complicated and formal, or you assume that's what you should do. Strive for simplicity and clarity.
 - i. One problem comes from "hypercorrection". This happens when people struggle to make their language super-formal and complex. Academics and cops do this a lot. Straining to be hypercorrect actually ends up screwing us up. You can hear this in the language of a police spokes person on TV
 - 1. Cars and trucks are always vehicles
 - 2. The person isn't caught, he is apprehended
 - 3. Not the crook, the perpetrator
 - ii. A lot of this comes down to word choice. Some words you know perfectly, and some you have only a sense of. We're supposed to expand our vocabularies, but using Roget's Thesaurus doesn't always give you an exact replacement for a word, though they may be in the same ballpark.
 - 1. A word like "augment" has a quite specific meaning – not an exact equivalent to increase or add to.
 - 2. When you pick a word like *compile*, *instigate* or *rebut*, make sure you know the exact meaning of the word and are sure it fits with what you're trying to say.
 - iii. Words all have quirks about what prepositions they take, for instance semi-synonyms concerned with knowing and learning:
 - 1. You are a master *of* a subject
 - 2. You have a handle *on* something
 - 3. Acquaintance *with*
 - 4. Realization *that*
 - iv. You also have trouble with how formal the word choice may be.
 - 1. For example, the word "aforesaid" is an accurate translation from the Spanish text the Professor was working one, but in English, the only people who use the word "aforesaid" are lawyers

2. Other problems occur with the style or level of vocabulary for a word:

- a. Henceforth: very formal and old-fashioned
- b. Among versus amongst: The first is American English, the second is Queen's English

5. **GRAMMAR** Grammatical rules are arbitrary but you have to conform. There is no negotiation. Durkhiem said: Language is the perfect example of how society coerces us without laws. There are also areas where the rules are not so strict, but your writing will be much better if you follow them.

- a. Use active verbs. It's simpler and clearer. Passives are often weasely. Active and transitive (meaning it has a direct object) verbs are just punchier.
- b. Also, avoid turning verbs into nouns. Academics love to do this.
 - i. For example: Instead of getting a job you talk about "state of employment"
- c. When you say, "the boy walked down the block" you want to keep it that simple. Don't say, "The boy was the one who walked down the block."
- d. Throwing in lots of prepositions gums up the flow of writing.
- e. Forms of words are important. People often mix up "lay" and "lie". Lay is used in everyday speech but in formal writing, lie is still correct.
 - i. Individuals "lie" down
 - ii. What you do to something is "lay" is down. But in formal writing you have to use "lie"
- f. The use of articles is completely arbitrary in every day language. Even in this class you'll see examples of this with anthropological terms.
 - i. If you talk about *the* Nuer society – we think about a society of people who study the Nuer.
 - ii. But if you say Nuer society, or Nuer culture, we know that you refer to the Nuer people.
- g. With punctuation, especially commas, there are some areas of choice. For example, both of these are correct:

- i. Bell, book, and candle
 - ii. Bell, book and candle
 - h. But in other contexts there is often no choice about whether to use a comma, for example with restrictive and unrestrictive clauses.
6. **METAPHORS** Another area where you really have to watch yourself is with metaphors. We use a lot of them without thinking about what they really mean.
- a. Words like emerging, spawning, forging, seminal, breeding, fertile, engender are all metaphoric concepts so you need to be careful when using them.
 - b. This is an area in which it is crucial to pay attention to and listen to your self. In particular, avoid mixing two clashing metaphors together indiscriminately.
7. **TONE** Some problems come from being too elevated in speech, but there are problems with being too casual.
- a. Don't use slang or contractions.
 - b. Writing papers is more formal than everyday speech. It is more clear, well organized and structured than ordinary speech.
8. **STRUCTURING AND ARGUMENT** The other thing I hope you learn in this class is how to construct an argument. This is harder than the rest of the rules of writing.
- a. You need to take the reader through step by step. It needs to come in a logical order.
 - b. The easiest way to structure an argument is to break it down into its pieces and then write your paragraphs around each piece.
 - c. It's easier to handle the pieces separately than to try and tackle the idea as a whole.
 - d. Putting it back together is a bit difficult, but that's the great thing about word processors; you can shift stuff around easily so that the logic of what's being said comes through.

- e. Keeping control of the structure of a piece is difficult and there are a couple of traps:
 - i. Assuming more than you need to know, and make a sweeping statements such as “people have always done...” or “in every society there is a need for...”
 - ii. Watch for words like every, always, all, never...
 - iii. You need to say as much as you know, without overstepping the bounds of what you are merely assuming. There’s a danger in being overly strong in your statements and a danger in being too weak by not saying enough.

9. WORDS OF WISDOM

- a. Strive for simplicity and use what you know. It will make your paper turn out better.
- b. It should be said that most of these rules should be applied during the revision process. If you try and remember all of these rules while you write, you can paralyze the writing process. Don’t be over-critical on your first draft. After you’re done, then go back and apply the rules.
- c. The basic goal is to make people NOT notice the writing. The reader should think about the ideas. The writing should be a transparent medium for the ideas.

Next lecture we’ll talk about ethnography.