Professional Articles

Teaching Second Year Student Foresters The Write Stuff

by

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I called the course Technical Writing. They called it English, only they pronounced it *Ing gul lish* and let the syllables drip from their tongue as though they were naming a plague. Every time I entered their classroom I felt as welcome as Typhoid Mary at a health spa.

No matter how much I protested to the contrary, they were convinced I was going to teach them to parse sentences, conjugate verbs, syllabicate words and hold spelling bees. Sooner or later they expected me to appear in the classroom with a grammar book in one hand and a pointer in the other, ready to marshal them to the chalkboard. After all, what else could they expect? I was the only female in an all-male faculty and I had come to forestry via the humanities. It was clear they wished I would trudge back across the campus to where I more fittingly belonged.

During the first few weeks they skipped classes as often as they deemed prudent and they gave my office a wide berth, often sliding assignments underneath my door when they were sure I was out for lunch. Those who did come to see me, did so furtively, darting glances out into the corridor to ensure they weren't being observed by their classmates. *Real* foresters didn't need the help of an English teacher.

Four years have passed since that inauspicious beginning. Yesterday the year end grades for my department were posted and I had a steady flow and students entering and leaving my office. They had come to discuss their grades, to scrutinize their exam to determine areas of strengths and weaknesses and to ask whether I would be available for consultation during the summer regarding a report they were doing for the coming fall semester. Three came as a team and inquired whether I could set up a correspondence course — non-credit — over the summer so they could improve their writing skill.

After the traffic cleared, I took time out to analyze what had contributed to the changed attitude of these students regarding the technical writing course. I concluded that there were three main reasons: (1) the manner in which I interpreted the course to them, (2) the interest in, and concern for, quality student writing that was displayed by the content faculty members, and (3) the increased emphasis the marketplace was putting on the need for graduates with good writing skills.

When I undertook the course, I considered that my first priority was to elevate the program to a level suitable to professionals-in-the-making, and to convince the students that writing is a skill that is capable of on-going growth and that there is considerably more to it than grammar, punctuation

and spelling. To this end, I called the course *Technical Writing* and I made certain that, as far as was possible, my teaching materials and my assignments revolved around the forestry profession. I exacted professional standards for presentation of manuscripts and adhered to strict deadlines for both accepting and returning assignments.

My second priority was to take the fear out of writing and to convince the students that not only *could* foresters write as well as English majors, they *should* write as well. I told them not to be afraid of bending, stapling, folding or spindling the language to suit their communication purpose, but before they could mutilate the language successfully, they had to be aware that mutilation was, indeed, taking place. In other words, they would have to know standard English before they could dabble successfully with non-standard English and unless they could discern a complete sentence from a sentence fragment, it was unlikely that their use of fragments would make for successful communication.

I told them about Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Harold.

"Harold who?" they inquired. "We never heard of him."

"I'm not surprised," I answered. "Unlike the other four, poor Harold couldn't write so he never received a high profile in the history books."

I stressed the necessity of accuracy, precision and clarity, the importance of making oneself understood and the consequences of being misunderstood. From my own reservoir of "bloopers and blunders" I gave humorous examples of unclear, ambiguous and illogical writing, and I encouraged them to be on the lookout in the media and in the writing of their peers for their own collection of misadventures with language. A few of the many contributions I received are listed below:

He caught the fish for his aunt with worms.

If owners don't lease their dogs, they will be shot on sight.

Table 2 shows the field camp crew broken down by sex.

If his equipment is in good condition, a single man can fertilize several hundred trees in one day.

For her contribution as a community volunteer, Mrs. _____ received a *plague* from the city.

In between and around and before and after this light-hearted chatter, the students wrote and wrote and wrote. Every line they penned was evaluated. Sometimes the evaluation was reflected in comments only; other times a percentage grade or a letter grade was given. Still other times, the notation "Highly Satisfactory," "Satisfactory," or "Unsatisfactory. Please re-do" was placed on the paper.

An evaluation sheet detailing the criteria upon which evaluation would be made accompanied each major assignment. In this way, the students knew how to "aim for the mark" and

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when their papers were returned, they could see where they had failed "to hit the mark." An example of an evaluation sheet for a proposal assignment is presented at the end of this paper.

But all of my teaching efforts would have been in vain had not the students perceived that both the content faculty and the marketplace considered good writing to be a valuable asset to the forester. The faculty impressed upon the students that an important role of the 80's and 90's forester was that of manager of a precious resource and successful managers need highly developed communication skills. As well, the faculty took an active involvement in bringing about quality writing by helping to evaluate two major writing assignments. Two reports which were assigned by the writing instructor (one for third year and one for fourth year) were evaluated for writing by me and for evidence of soundly organized material by the faculty member whose area of expertise was in accord with a particular report's topic.

About the same time as the material faculty members and I were trying to improve student writing, word began to filter in from the marketplace that the graduate forester who was a highly skilled professional and, as well, an able communicator was the person who would be considered a welcome addition to any business, industry or government. Advertisements began to appear in journals and newspapers for jobs stating that a major requirement for the positions was the ability to write sound reports.

Another positive reinforcement for the value of good writing concerned resumés. Whether by luck or design, those few students who had taken my advice on how to write a professional-looking job application were the ones who had either gotten the jobs or gotten an interview for the jobs. As the job market shrank, requests for help with resumés increased.

It is difficult to determine to what extent, either singly or collectively, the teaching method, the emphasis on the faculty on good writing, or the stated need of the marketplace for graduates with highly developed communication skills were responsible for the changed attitude of the students regarding the technical writing course. Perhaps their own growing awareness that increased technology demands more, not less, writing expertise may also have played a part. It suffices me, however, just to know that the attitude has changed so that now I can immediately move to teaching principles of good writing instead of spending precious time trying to convince students that clear, concise, correct, complete and current writing is essential for today and tomorrow's forestry graduates.

Evaluation Sheet — Proposal

1. Does the SUMMARY provide an overview of what will be done? Does it state why it will be done, how it will be done, who will do it, how long it will take and how much it will cost?
GRADE F D C B A
(plus or minus)
2. Is the INTRODUCTION clearly stated? (Problem, Solution to Problem, Purpose of Communication)
GRADE F D C B A
(plus or minus)
3. Does the IMPLEMENTATION section (a) cite current research (b) provide a clear and specific plan of action (methods used, material and personnel needed) (c) provide a completion date?
GRADE F D C B A
(plus or minus)

4. WRITING. Is the writing organized under suitable headings and subheadings? Is the writing clear, concise, correct?
GRADE F D C B A
(plus or minus)
5. BUDGET. Is the budget complete and correct? Have all the costs been clearly itemized?
GRADE F D C B A
(plus or minus)
6. Do the APPENDIXES include the relevant supporting material? Is there a Task Schedule, a Responsibility Chart, a Description of Qualification?
GRADE F D C B A
(plus or minus)
7. LAYOUT. Is the appearance of the proposal attractive? Does it have a Letter of Transmittal, a Cover, a Title Page, a Summary, Clean Typing, Proper Margins and Consistent Spacing between paragraphs and sections?
GRADE F D C B A
(plus or minus)

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Applicants should note that, in accordance with current government regulations, only those persons eligible for employment in Canada, may apply at this time.

Applications, including a curriculum vitae and names of three referees should be submitted to:

Dr. G.L. Baskerville
Dean, Faculty of Forestry
University of New Brunswick
Bag Service #44555
Fredericton, NB
Canada E3B 6C2