

Learning Writing: A New Way

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of writing is widely known and recognized but it had a skill had a tumultuous history. It was not a smooth ride for writing to be recognized as a proper subject which can be taught to the students in the academic institutions. The bygone era saw the prevalence of oral communication. English was still at the nascent stage when Greek and Latin dominated the scene. In communicative phraseology, oral communication dominated the scene. In academia only lectures dominated the scene. The students were of course required to write but "their composition was designed on orations"(Scholes 5). The vital aspect of writing like spelling was complacently ignored. Partial attention was paid to grammar only because it served to draw the attention of the audience. Literature existed only in the form of a shadow. It sustained itself only in the service of verbal "decorum, morality or taste"(17). This was the reason why there were no professors of English; there were only professors of belles' letters and oratory. Because of the lack of practices in writing, the writing skills of the students were depressingly blunt. In Walter Bronson's words their writings were quite "beggarly". A good oration was thus a blend of the rhetorical power of persuasion and aesthetic power of literature. "Writing was not initially seen as an intellectual source of power but rather a functional skill that served, at best, as a facilitator of the oral tradition of education."(Murphy, James J. *A Short History of Writing Instruction*, 15). This neglect of writing continued till the 19th century where writing was regarded nothing more than an aid to memory. The fag end of the 19th century saw the rise of writing as an independent discipline. There was thus a radical shift from the tradition of oration and rhetorical device to the discipline of writing to "meet the needs of burgeoning industries for specialists in science, engineering, agriculture and commerce" said David Russell. Writing supplanted the tradition of oration in the academic sphere because of the various flaws that inflicted it. Oration was developed basically to make the students masters of rhetorics. In the tradition of oration data or information was always in the danger of being forgotten. Though orality was believed to be vibrant, authentic and interactive, great scholars like "Plato valued memory and believed that writing would limit and devalue the important role that memory has in internalizing knowledge (Murphy 29). The face to face conversation has more of a receptive value than the mere printed words on a sheet of paper.

The British scenario was not much different from the American. The shift from the spoken to the written was obvious. Though the students in the different universities in Britain were engaged in numerous written exercises "to develop their stylistic virtuosity and had often composed themes, but these had been scripts for oral delivery or preparatory training for writing

speeches” (178). The dominance of oratory ceased gradually as writing became the medium of communication and record. Another reason for the decline of the centrality of oration is the rapid increase of reading public which created a flock of writers who catered to the intellectually hungry crowd. Though literary texts were always there as models for good oratory and rhetorical skills, they were not exactly followed for enhancing the writing skills of the students. Instead of writing, literature started dominating the academic scenario.

The increase in the number of engineering colleges of late has fanned the decline of the use of literature. The teaching and learning of literature is somewhat restricted to the English departments of various universities. These engineering colleges, with an aim to make the students competent in speaking and writing, have devised and propagated what is popularly known as Communicative English or Business Communication in English. As Himansu S. Mohapatra mentions in his book *Pitching for the Middle*:

The communicative turn started some ten years back in the technical sector of higher education, in the colleges of engineering, management and software where a workforce for the globalized market was being readied. It has by now proceeded to engulf the educational sphere. The liberal arts literacy is made to look like an anachronism. It is now being believed that one studies English for acquiring not literary competence but for English proficiency. (68)

The course of Communicative English is structured in a manner to suit the requirements of the corporate world. Though it has managed to touch upon all the aspects of reading, writing, speaking and listening, it somehow seems inadequate to address English as an academic discipline. This is precisely the point where writing comes into the picture. Writing can go a long way in bridging the gap between the traditional schools of literature or in other words the English Departments and the current trend of business communication. This breach between literature and writing which has increased manifold in the present day has led to the abolition of the day to day usage of literature and the over-emphasis on communicative English.

THE TOOLS OF WRITING

Writing is one of the most neglected skills in the technical scenario as students hardly accept writing as a skill resulting in poor writing. The general perception is that writing is a boon bestowed on a few people hence there is no use in trying to learn the skill. The fact is that writing is a skill and a craft that can be learnt with proper planning and practice. The umpteen writing schools and the innumerable books on writing prove the point. Writing is not a natural, but an acquired skill. Practice, therefore, is the name of the game. But we must learn about the tools of writing before we can start to practice it. A good writing module can help us in honing the writing skills. But before we move on to the writing module let us discuss about the writing tools that one needs to have.

The first tool, of course, is the mind. But do try to see the mind as a muscle which needs to be worked out regularly to keep it in good working order. It will get rusted otherwise. One who is writing fairly regularly will get better and better at it than someone who is putting pen to paper once in a blue moon. As a famous novelist Stephen King says we have to continue writing even if you do not feel like doing it. So to write effectively one needs to read voraciously. “Reading is the creative centre of a writer’s life” (167). Without extensive reading it is impossible to be a good writer. Reading newspapers, novels, short stories, novella, articles and editorials can greatly help in widening the spectrum of knowledge thus providing the writers enough fodder for thoughts.

The next tool is language. A writer is a wielder of words. So, how must he wield them? Pruning and cutting are of course involved. But then comes honing and chiseling. Good writing is articulate, a matter of hinges and joints. So you have to hone and chisel words until they fit the contours of thoughts and ideas exactly. Vocabulary is regarded as ‘the bread of writing’. It is important to have a good stock of words to express oneself appropriately. Thus acquire words through reading. Also one should get into the habit of using dictionaries. Apart from books and other reading materials, one can also increase the word stock by subscribing to ‘Dictionary.com’. But there is a caveat. We should not get too much carried away by pompous words and expressions. We should try to use simple words and expressions and try to avoid unnecessary adjectives. Avoid frills and oblique expressions. Avoid clichés and trite expressions. Always have an ear for fresh imagery and we should remember that “clichés are the enemy of taste.”

An important tactic to learn the art of writing is imitation. In his seminal book *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser writes, Never hesitate to imitate another writer. Imitation is part of the creative process of anyone learning an art or craft. Even Stephen King mentions in his book *On Writing* that he learnt to write by emulating the lines from the comic books. Slowly he made changes to the copied write ups and eventually in the course of time he found his own voice style. So novice writers need not worry about losing their originality, they will certainly find their own voice and style.

The next important tool is the knowledge of grammar. Grammar is defined as the structure and system of a language. In short, the set of rules of a language is known as grammar. A good grasp of the grammatical structures and the components of grammar are imperative, if one wants to be a good writer. Apart from these tools there are tips for writing well. They are as follows:

- Collect writing guides. They help in enlightening many dark paths.
- Write differently. It is sometimes helpful to get a new slant on your usual writing by trying something completely different. For example, try some experimental creative writing like simple ‘word-picture’ poems. Or keep a diary to challenge yourself to explain and describe each day.

- Have someone to edit your work. Be prepared to accept constructive criticism.
- Now let us move on to the Process of Writing. Most writing books and writing instructors give a five-part breakdown of the process of writing. They are:
- Preparation and Planning: Identify your own topic. Then read and do research; find examples; brainstorm or consult with others to generate ideas. After the idea map, consider ways to organize your materials and then rough out an outline.
- Drafting: Write a first draft. Let those cluster of ideas flow to your paper. Remember that the main thing is to start writing. This is only crude stage of the writing.
- Incubating: Take time out and let your ideas percolate in your subconscious for a while and then revisit your writing.
- Revising: Read your draft carefully, consider changes, get feedback and rewrite, perhaps more than once.
- Editing and proof reading: Edit for style, word choice, and grammar. Proofread and run a spell checker to catch typos.

THE WRITING MODULE

A proper “Writing Module” can play an important role in teaching writing to the students. Here the emphasis is more on the technical students or the students of the engineering colleges. It tackles the concept of writing not a gift but as a skill. Writing, like any skill demands attention and physical participation. A proper writing module believes that ‘the only way to learn writing is to write’. There is no excuse to that. But of course, a little knowledge about the writing tools will do no harm. The writing tools like vocabulary, grammar can be re-introduced in this module. This will help the students to revisit the grammatical concepts which they might have lost touch with. Grammar and vocabulary are the nuts and bolts of writing without which it is impossible to start the journey of writing. The writing module should seek to break the monotony of the academic syllabus structure by introducing some of the different writing genres. Almost all the students might have a good hang of the different writing genres like writing a paragraph or writing a story for that matter, but very few might have experimented with memoir writing, travelogue writing or the Thematic Apperception Test. These new genres of writing would help in generating interest among the students in the skill. Once interest is generated, they would love to hone their skills by writing more and more. The technical world has always correlated the learning of English language to its practical and pragmatic use. The module would try to involve the diverse use of English through the introduction of these different genres of writing. Each genre will bring out a different use of the English language thus letting the students have a glimpse of the vast world of the English language.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully a well-developed writing module as discussed above will help our future techies to refine their writing skills. It should always be kept in mind that no one is a born writer nor does one become a writer overnight. Writing is a skill that needs a lot of hard work and being well versed with the techniques of writing. But the most important thing that should be kept in mind is that, to learn writing, one has to write. Don't quit, just write!

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