

# *Do universities breed illiteracy?*

by Christine Mowat

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Francis Crick, a British biologist who helped to discover the double-helix shape of DNA, and Janet Emig, one of the most outstanding of writing researchers, both need help with their writing. Crick, famous for his wild but brilliant conceptual leaps, is described on his book cover as "one of the clearest, most imaginative and best writers in the scientific community". Yet in his acknowledgement page, Crick reports how a colleague "managed, in the nicest way, to improve my English and to remove mistakes and ambiguities".

Janet Emig has told a story on herself about how a peer wrote comments on her early notes for her now famous paper "Writing as a Mode of Learning". After the critique, Emig had to rethink and rewrite. The article you're reading has suffered through five drafts, and the help of two friends.

Since 1980, Wordsmith Associates has conducted writing workshops for 10,000 Canadian corporate professionals across Canada. White collar literacy is obviously in demand. We work with geologists, engineers, scientists, lawyers, accountants, computer specialists, medical and government employees, politicians, middle and upper management personnel, and educators.

## **Typical writing problems**

Four examples of business writing illustrate the range that white collar illiteracy entails. The first example is a category most people immediately think of--a sentence with grammatical and punctuation problems:

"I am happy to be able to tell you that a book on the subject of equality and judicial neutrality edited by Professor\_\_\_\_\_and myself, will be in print by October, published by Carswells."

(answer at end of article if you need it)

The source of the letter, a university, provokes an obvious question. How can universities ensure that faculty be excellent writers? Since the English-across-the-curriculum movement began in Britain fifteen years ago, I have seen little public discussion of this issue. I suspect that many academics would express alarm if required to submit to writing tests to qualify for university teaching. Intelligence and mastery of a discipline and research methods do not guarantee good writing skills - whether in academia, business or government.

A second example, from government, presents an easily recognizable bureaucratic face: I utilize, and promote, a "team orientated", participative style of management wherein delegations and concomitant accountability, in a results-orientated environment, are instrumental in attaining Departmental, and Corporate, objectives.

In his writing conference, the writer acknowledged that what he meant was "My team and I work together to achieve company and departmental goals." (Most organizations use participative team models. Attila management models lost their appeal some time ago!) But another question requires

attention here: what causes business people to create their own official dialect, laden with evasiveness, legalese, or bureaucratese?

Over the years, I have noted that business writers pad their writing with over-generalized language much the way students do in essays to fill up the five-page assignment quota. As well, they guess "what the supervisor wants", as we used to guess the values and emphasis a certain professor "wanted". The need to impress others, sound authoritative, and portray one's work as complex and sophisticated results in a third category of white collar illiteracy:

"Our task is to identify opportunities for leveraging the synergies inherent in our interdepartmental interfaces in order to maximize our customer need identification potential."

Such pretentious overwriting is common, not just in corporate writing but in academic writing, too. A more straightforward expression of the above example is : "How can our departments sell more to our customers?"

A fourth example comes from a university department which sent out a letter with the beginning:

Dear Mr. Challenger:

Please be advised that you have been granted an extension for your English 301 course to December, 1990 from the Undergraduate Chairman of the Department of Physics.

Aside from the ritualized and outdated "Please be advised" which comes directly from legal writing, it is possible that the English course is now being taught by a member of the Physics Department. "The Undergraduate Chairman from the Department of Physics has granted you an extension to December, 1990 of your English 301 course" would do nicely.

You may think such examples are exceptions. Just the opposite. Wordsmith has read thousands of such samples.

### **Speculations on why people in business and the professions write poorly:**

1. **Few models of excellence in academic texts or business writing exist.** Some of the worst writing emerges from graduate theses, legal contracts, government reports or legislation itself. Business letters representing government or universities often present embarrassing images of organizations. Few organizations are conscious of inadequate writing. They fail to compile standards manuals, monitor the quality of writing, or hire editors.

2. **Academic writing, the model by which we largely learn to write, is a poor model for business writers.** Its convoluted language, overuse of the passive voice, lack of attention to design features, and abstract and theoretical emphases are the antithesis of forceful business writing.

3. **The dominant form of writing in educational institutions is the essay,** a format whose use largely disappears when students emerge into the workaday world. (This "essai" is an exception.) Few new graduates have ever written a business letter or memo, a proposal or report, a set of business minutes, a procedures or policy manual, a business analysis or a set of

specifications. In such writing, the thesis statement fades into irrelevancy. It is even arguable that the effect of the academically orthodox thesis statement/body/conclusion structure of essays may be a stultifying guide for many university papers.

**4. Many government and business managers or supervisors have little knowledge of modern business format options and style changes.** They continue to insist on "my style", an overly formalized and stilted written language, and consistently change the writing of those they supervise. Orwell's politics-and-the-English-language theme is alive and well. Gobbledegook and office-ese proliferate with the arrival of each new employee told to "look in the files" for models.

**5. A high percentage of Canadian teachers of English have no formal training in English.** A 1987 Canadian Council of Teachers of English survey showed that across the range of levels and provinces, about 40% of those teaching English had no English teaching training.

**6. The bulk of undergraduate essay marking is assigned to graduate students, many of whom are inadequate writers themselves.** As well, there is little unanimity within the academic community about writing standards or how to improve the quality of student writing.

**7. Composition teaching continues to play the handmaid role** (yes, in Atwood's sense, too) **to the supposedly higher status of literature teaching in colleges and universities.** Such teaching duties often fall to sessional faculty.

**8. Writing instructors may be unfamiliar with writing research.** Of the many rich research themes over the past quarter of a century, perhaps the most pervasive is that writing is the sharpest tool we have to develop thinking and explore meaning. Descriptive and empirical research into the composing, revising and editing processes provides writing instructors with helpful new directions.

**9. The influence of legal writing on business writing has both an honorable history and insidious consequences.** Our workshop "Improving Legal Writing", with its focus on the Plain Language policies and legislation emerging in Canada (20 years after the first Plain Language legislation in the United States), is testament to the growing democratization of legal language. The Canadian Bar Association's Canadian Legal Information Council in Toronto now houses about 800 items on Plain Language, most of which are unknown to lawyers. As well, much confusion remains about definitions and implementation of Plain Language.

**10. It takes years to become a good writer** - years of writing, reading, discussing, living, and working. Like it or not, writing mirrors a writer's persona, integrity, and clarity of thought.

### **Unexpected Contexts for Teaching Business Writing**

As writing consultants, Wordsmith instructors are enjoying a range of challenges in helping professional and business people improve their writing skills.

The lack of agreement by language experts on Standard English issues means some language issues remain genuinely baffling. In our seminars, we steer a course between the uselessly simple and the overly picky. That perspective satisfies most people's need to know what is "right".

Research into business writing is beginning to take place, and in our field, we are learning about the effect of reporting procedures and work context on the confidence and ability of an employee to write well.

Globalization and multi-culturalism have resulted in requests for help with second-language writers. Our first international steps, consulting to the Thai government, occurred last year.

With the tumbling of East Europe's political walls, English is even more accessible to the international business community. Fascinating studies on the genres of English have been published including South Asian English, Franglish, B.B.C. English, American English, and Indian English (both North American aboriginal and from the subcontinent of India). The latest studies are on Chinglish. Need for help in written English is endless.

Do universities breed illiteracy? Of course. But they also generate literacy of the highest order. Queen's Principal David Smith's comments in his recent Annual Report (1989-1990) provide a helpful perspective on the university's role. Though he argues that the requirements for university teaching skills are more stringent than in the past, he advocates refocussing on the learning processes of both students and instructors. (*Queen's Learning Environment*, p.5.)

The white collar illiterate writing voice can be disorganized, imprecise, tentative, colourless, lacklustre and insensitive to readers. Our goals as writing consultants are to help professionals develop their own writing voices, voices which are clear and correct, persuasive, genuine and engaging.

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*Here are the errors in the first example for those who didn't catch them:*

"Professor\_and myself" "Myself" is non-standard usage here.

You can use "me" but a more graceful rewrite of the sentence is:

"I am happy to be able to tell you that Professor X and I have edited . . . "

Comma before "will be in print"

Delete comma separates the subject and verb.