



## Writing that Serves: Three Principles of Writing Success

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Now that I have your attention, can I ask a favor?

Please tell your students they did not graduate high school. They graduated from high school. Please remind them they will not graduate college. They will graduate from college.

Such sloppiness grates. The verb “graduate” transforms into a transitive verb here. As speakers drop the word “from” after the word “graduate,” they transfer the meaning of graduate to a lonely object of a sentence—“high school,” in this case. Such structure implies that your students took some poor high school and graduated it off to some higher level of existence. Good for them, but no one provides a diploma for graduating a high school.

The high school must graduate you.

I often trot out quotations from Abigail Adams, the wife of our nation’s first vice president, in my beginning writing classes. Her quotations sparkle.

“Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could.

“Learning is not attained by chance; it must be sought for with ardor and diligence.

“I am more and more convinced that man is a dangerous creature and that power, whether vested in many or a few, is ever grasping, and like the grave, cries, ‘Give, give.’”

My students and I agree that her prose comprises a national treasure. Then, I drift to the kicker.

Abigail Adams finished one year of school, while my students have endured at least 12. My point: college students attain 12 times as much formal schooling as she did, yet she writes with more skill than many of them.

Harsh, I know. But the point seems solid. Do you worry about how well our students are writing when they graduate from college?

I stumble upon anecdotal evidence in student papers that clear writing remains a problem, and I hear concern among colleagues in their whispered conversations.

Indeed, Scott Bergstrom, BYU-Idaho’s managing director of Institutional Research, tells me that as many as 20 percent of our graduates admit as they graduate that they are no more than satisfactorily confident in their ability to “communicate in writing” (and that is a self-assessment. What a detailed evaluation of the writing of our graduates might show is another matter).

Nationally, many authors suggest that if America doesn’t have a writing crisis, it is at least clear that many struggle.

Scholar Peg Tyre said: “Research has shown that 70 to 75 percent of students in grades four through 12 write poorly. Over the past 30 years, as knowledge-based work has come to dominate the economy, American high schools have raised achievement rates in mathematics by providing more-extensive and higher-level instruction. But high schools are still graduating large numbers of students whose writing skills better equip them to work on farms or in factories than in offices; for decades, achievement rates in writing have remained low.”

That would be problem enough, but the need to teach students to write remains among the most important things college can do for them. CNBC said that “in survey after survey, employers are complaining about job candidates’ inability to speak and write clearly.”

I write here to faculty who struggle with how to approach writing but recognize the need to add more writing in their courses and wish to improve writing



among our graduates. In short, I write to those who want to become part of the writing conversation but who either lack confidence or skill. I suggest a few ideas:

First, we should consider writing part of all of our jobs at BYU-Idaho, not just the job of our gifted colleagues in the Department of English. We can all apply whatever gifts we have to this effort. In evaluation, a temptation might exist to grade based only on participation, on content mastery, or on original thought rather than a thoroughgoing assessment of grammar, style, and punctuation. If this temptation became widely adopted, some students might reinforce bad habits by writing discussion posts as though they were text messages.

No assessment that includes a writing component should lack some evaluation of the quality of that writing. This includes even the smallest assignments, such as discussion posts.

I sometimes hear colleagues say they distrust their own writing skills. The invitation here: play to your strengths. If you understand one comma rule well, describe it to your students and evaluate for it. If you understand where a sentence meanders to tepid turgidity, help them cut the dead wood. Even sampling can help. Say you require a

thought paper of 400 words in a large class, and your time will not allow a heavy, thoughtful, line-by-line assessment of its punctuation. Tell your students you will pick one portion at random, and if it has even one spelling, grammar, style, or punctuation error, you will dock five to 10 percent from their grades.

The point is that even if you can't do everything, do something new in your evaluations to help reinforce good writing.

Second, we should make learning and reading about writing part of our professional development. (A suggestion to the administration: send every faculty member a book or two on writing for our personal libraries.)

Many great resources exist. I might suggest these: *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White; *On Writing Well* by Zinsser; *When Words Collide* by Kessler and McDonald; *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* by Truss; and pretty much anything by Roy Peter Clark. His *Writing Tools* represents a solid beginner's text because he gives you bite-size advice in more than 50 short essays.

My professional development has included crafting a free website that has thoughts on writing. See it at [writing](#).

commbyui.org. One tab, “writing to serve,” covers writing well. Other tabs review grammar, usage and spelling.

Third, we should encourage our students to read. Invite students to use the available free subscription to The Wall Street Journal. To me, this publication’s best benefit is its stellar clarity and style. Its writing may be the best in the country, a credible former teacher who also happened

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to be the metro editor of the Washington Post during Watergate, told me. (By the way, if you have never read a Wall Street Journal “A-Hed” story, you don’t know what you are missing.)

Furthermore, find a way to get students into well-written books beyond their normal class texts, maybe as extra credit. Share books you have read. Provide interesting articles you stumbled upon. Comment on why you think the writing in those passages remains clear and excellent.

Finally, we should teach students to use action verbs.

As I worked on my short book about writing for a recent leave, I posited three prominent writing principles that, if followed, will help all students make their prose more concise and clear.

I focus on one here – the need for crisp action verbs. Please teach students to omit the gray “helping” verbs, such as is, and replace them with punchy action verbs, such as walked or struck. We should invite students to cut most adverbs, too, and to pick better verbs instead.

The last two principles in my book are the need for tighter specifics and the need for better parallelism. May I suggest you glance at those at another time at writing. commbyui.org.

Something about action verbs forces students to extract themselves from their writing and, then, pick a verb that improves clarity.

Consider this simple sentence:

This is a good paper.

This sentence may seem fine, but watch what happens with an action verb:

This paper moved me.

This paper eliminated confusion.

The changes illuminate intent. When you pick action verbs, you become more clear. Action verbs push meaning and evoke feelings.

Please look at these examples:

Jonathan was a terrible singer.

There were 47 singers in the storm.

He is the son of a sharecropper.

Rewrite them this way:

Jonathan sang off-key.

Forty-seven singers waited for the storm to stop.

His father started his life as a sharecropper.

See how that helps?

You might try this exercise with classes: gather papers and exchange them. Ask students to mark each helping verb they see in a fellow student’s paper (am, is, are, was, were, be, being and been comprise those helping verbs. I am not saying writers should avoid ALL helping verbs, but learning to look for them pays dividends). Then ask the author to rewrite without using those helping verbs.

Consider the passage that follows. The first has helping verbs, marked in bold:

All of the public is invited to attend a wonderful recital of the renowned pianist Artemis Aledezdian. The performance will be Tuesday night at 7 p.m. in the Quarkum Auditorium.

“We are excited to announce this important visit,” is the word from University Relations Director Trajan Jones. “Artemis Aledezdian is a representative of all that is best in art today. You probably don’t want to miss this event.”

Rachmaninoff’s 2nd Piano Sonata will be a highlight of the evening. The concert is also an opportunity to hear a showcase of the talents of new American composer Trina

McPherson. Her new work, “Drifting Snowfall,” will be highlighted in the first half of the program. This work is a continuation of her “Seasons” cycle of piano sonatas.

The tickets for the concert can be purchased for \$10 at the ticket office. Those who attend are encouraged to dress in concert clothing, meaning a shirt and tie for men and a skirt or dress for women.

Now, watch how clarity improves when the writer places action verbs into sentences:

The University invites residents to a recital of renowned pianist Artemis Aledezdian Tuesday at 7 p.m. in the Quarkum Auditorium.

“This visit excites us,” University Relations Director Trajan Jones said. “Artemis Aledezdian represents the best in art today. You should attend this event.”

Rachmaninoff’s 2nd Piano Sonata will highlight the evening. The first half of the program will showcase the talents of American composer Trina McPherson. Aledezdian will perform her new work, “Drifting Snowfall,” which continues McPherson’s “Seasons” cycle of piano sonatas.

Tickets cost \$10 at the ticket office. University officials encourage guests to wear concert attire: a shirt and tie for men and a skirt or dress for women.

Please make writing a larger part of your assignment and project assessments, play to your strengths, study writing, encourage reading, and invite the use of action verbs. Our combined efforts will help our students when they graduate college.

Strike that.

It will help them when they graduate from college. ❖

#### References

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