

How to Say Nothing in 500 Words: An Appreciation

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Abstract: *English learners need to learn many things as they develop their writing skills. Beyond the basics of language, such as vocabulary, grammar, and cohesion, it is just as important, if not more important, to think about the message being sent to readers. A classic essay by American writing teacher Paul Roberts in the 1950s offers useful insights about considering readers that are still useful today, both for teachers and for students of writing.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Much has changed since writing teacher and English linguist Paul McHenry Roberts wrote a helpful essay to writing students whose main point, how to write a winning essay that impresses a teacher, stands in direct contradiction to its playful title. Roberts, who taught at San Jose State College and Cornell University for more than 20 years, wrote several books on language and linguistics, including *Understanding Grammar*(1964b), *English Syntax*(1964a), *English Sentences*(1962), and the more wide ranging *Understanding English*(1958), in which the essay this paper focuses on was first published.

In “How to Say Nothing in 500 Words,” Roberts provides a vivid demonstration of a typical paper of his day with an example, filled with puffery, hot air, and empty words. While Roberts is critical of his fictional student-writers’ failings, it is done in an amusing way, since we all have been there:

It's Friday afternoon, and you have almost survived another week of classes. You are just looking forward dreamily to the weekend when the English instructor says: “For Monday you will turn in a five hundred-word composition on college football.” (Roberts, 1958, p. 404)

It is not so different for developing writers today, though a few of the essay’s examples may need some explanation. The ins and outs of college football as seen through the eyes of an American college student of the 1950s may take a bit of cultural translation with ESOL students. Still, the message stands strong and tall, with the main point being one that frequently shared with writing students: *Interesting counts*. By *interesting* we mean interesting to readers, whether that reader is a paying buyer or subscriber, a classmate, or just the teacher with a pile of essays to score and a red marking pen.

Other composition theorists have noted that the term *audience* can have a number of meanings, ranging from adjusting a text to fit reader expectation to an imagined audience that is an ideal, unreal conception. Some of these, but may only add to the confusion that is part of creating a written work (Park, 1982). While there can be little doubt that audience is an important element for a skilled writer to consider, an overemphasis on audience and its multiple meanings that leads an inexperienced writer to strive to make a text comprehensible to an audience might make it even more difficult to understand (Kroll, 1984). The message Roberts sends seems much simpler: try to avoid boring your readers with information they have already read a few dozen times.

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2. UNCONSCIOUS WRITING

The beginning writer has a problem, according to veteran writer and teacher John R. Trimble (2011): he is writing on an empty sheet of paper, or a blank screen. There is no one talking back to him as he writes, and without any response, it is easy to forget that a reader will eventually be trying to decipher the message being created.

The result? *His natural tendency as a writer is to think primarily of himself – hence to write primarily for himself.* Here, in a nutshell, lies the ultimate reason for most bad writing.... Actually, he's not writing at all; he's merely communing privately with himself – that is, he's simply putting his thoughts down on paper. (Trimble, 2011, p. 3)

Trimble refers to this kind of writing as “unconscious writing” and says the writer goes beyond this stage when he or she understands that writing is communicating with an audience – sending a message to readers. Our development as writers grows as we begin write with our readers in mind and make an effort to be clearly understood, rather than just fill a page or a screen with words. Trimble writes about “schooling yourself to be other-oriented. ... (T)ry to understand your readers ... actively think of them, empathize with them, ... try to intuit their needs” (2011, p. 8).

Trimble adds that a key difference between the novice and skilled writer is that, even though both may write in isolation, the skilled writer is aware of that unseen audience, and “actively imagines” a reader, or many readers, who will be attending to the words that are being written on the page.

According to many experts who make a very good living from the written word, the most important thing is to try to keep the reader's interest in the text so he or she wants to read it. Direct-response advertising writer Joseph Sugarman put it this way: “All the elements in an advertisement are primarily designed to do one thing and one thing only: get you to read the first sentence of the copy” (Sugarman, 2007, p. 29). Sugarman's statement was important enough for him to frame as an axiom in his *Adweek Copywriting Handbook*. The same point should be strongly emphasized with any piece of writing. What could possibly be the purpose of writing, even in the early stages of a writer's development, if not to be as readable and interesting as possible? A student writing a paper aimed at getting a grade from a teacher – someone who is paid to read what the student writes whether it interest them or not, following a preset, pre-scripted format of acceptable writing styles for each assignment – is a very different task from trying to write something that interests, entertains, persuades, and possibly convinces their reader(s) to take action based on what they create. But there would seem to be little harm in suggesting to students that interesting counts.

Unlike the above-mentioned areas of native English writing theory and practice, not much attention is paid to audience in in ESOL writing, either in textbooks or theoretical publications. In this area, it seems that the reason for learning to write is exclusively based on classroom practices, both in the learning process and as a goal for eventual achievement after the class is over. Students are being prepared to succeed in future classes, without much emphasis being placed on using writing as communication tool that can serve them well in the world outside.

3. AUDIENCE AWARENESS

A few of the advanced writing texts used in our classes include at least reference to audience and strategies for attracting reader interest such as making the first sentence a “hook” to draw readers in (Mlynarczyk, 2005; Withrow, 2004). But when they come into our classes, few if any students have gone beyond that stage that Trimble referred to above as the “unconscious writer,” one who is unaware, or inattentive, to a communication process through the words he or she is writing on the page. Skimming the pages of the majority of EFL textbooks, one can see instructions to the student to write to the teacher or to the writer's classmates for peer review, but rarely if ever, and only in advanced level texts, are the ideas of tailoring messages to fit audience expectations or adapt to reader(s) interest mentioned (Colonna & Gilbert, 2006; Davis & Liss, 2006; Oshima, Hogue, & Ravitch, 2014; Withrow, 2004; Zemach & Ghulldu, 2003).

The focus in these texts is largely, if not entirely, placed on the student writer, the mechanics of writing, such as lexis, grammatical accuracy, coherence and cohesion, and on the topic. Though passing mention may be made of audience in theory texts, it is often in the most general terms (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2004). For these reasons, the issue of audience expectation is something that may be unfamiliar to ESOL learners dealing with written English. It cannot be denied that it makes sense to

focus on form and technique in the earliest stages of learning to write. But once a learner gets beyond the basic level of being able to manipulate words into sentences, and certainly by the time they have learned the discourse-level, logical building blocks of paragraphs, writers would be better served by working to create useful messages in addition to simply creating classroom simulations. This study sought to discover, on a small scale, what Korean EFL writing students and teachers think about the importance of audience as they write for classes, what kinds of audience-awareness activities they practice, and what kind of value there was in thinking about, and actually practicing, the composition of written messages to an audience beyond the classroom.

4. MAIN POINTS: HOW TO SAY NOTHING IN 500 WORDS

In his teaching essay Roberts provides humorous, examples and explanation that offers teachers and students a new way of looking at the dreaded writing assignment. Roberts offers nine tips for effective writing. The following paragraphs are selections of their main ideas. They are self-explanatory and well-written. There is no need to add anything beyond a few concluding comments:

Avoid the obvious content. Say the assignment is college football. Say that you've decided to be against it. Begin by putting down the arguments that come to your mind.... Now when you write your paper, make sure that you don't use any of the material on this list. If these are the points that leap to your mind, they will leap to everyone else's too... Be against college football for some reason or reasons of your own. If they are keen and perceptive ones, that's splendid. But even if they are trivial or foolish or indefensible, you are still ahead so long as they are not everybody else's reasons too....

Take the less usual side. One rather simple way of getting into your paper is to take the side of the argument that most of the citizens will want to avoid.... They are intellectual exercises, and it is legitimate to argue now one way and now another, as debaters do in similar circumstances. Always take the side that looks to you hardest, least defensible. It will almost always turn out to be easier to write interestingly on that side....

Slip out of abstraction. Look at the work of any professional writer and notice how constantly he is moving from the generality, the abstract statement, to the concrete example, the facts and figures, the illustrations.... For most the soundest advice is to be seeking always for the picture, to be always turning general remarks into seeable examples. Don't say, "Sororities teach girls the social graces." Say, "Sorority life teaches a girl how to carry on a conversation while pouring tea, without sloshing the tea into the saucer....

Get rid of obvious padding. Instead of stuffing your sentences with straw, you must try steadily to get rid of the padding, to make your sentences lean and tough.... You dig up more real content. Instead of taking a couple of obvious points off the surface of the topic and then circling warily around them for six paragraphs, you work in and explore, figure out the details. You illustrate.

Call a fool a fool. If he was a fool, call him a fool. Hedging the thing about with "in-my-opinion's" and "it-seems-to-me's" and "as-I-see-it's" and "at-least-from-my-point-of-view's" gains you nothing. Delete these phrases whenever they creep into your paper.... Decide what you want to say and say it as vigorously as possible, without apology and in plain words.... Writing in the modern world, you cannot altogether avoid modern jargon. But you can do much if you will mount guard against those roundabout phrases, those echoing polysyllables that tend to slip into your writing to rob it of its crispness and force.

Beware of Pat Expressions. Other things being equal, avoid phrases like "other things being equal." Those sentences that come to you whole, or in two or three doughy lumps, are sure to be bad sentences. They are no creation of yours but pieces of common thought floating in the community soup.... No writer avoids them altogether, but good writers avoid them more often than poor writers.

Colorful Words. Some words are what we call "colorful." By this we mean that they are calculated to produce a picture or induce an emotion. They are dressy instead of plain, specific instead of general, loud instead of soft. Thus, in place of "Her heart beat," we may write, "her heart pounded, throbbed, fluttered, danced." Instead of "He sat in his chair," we may say, "he lounged, sprawled, coiled."...

Colored Words. When we hear a word, we hear with it an echo of all the situations in which we have heard it before.... The word mother, for example, has, for most people, agreeable associations. When you hear mother you probably think of home, safety, love, food, and various other pleasant things....The question of whether to use loaded words or not depends on what is being written.

Colorless Words. A pet example is nice, a word we would find it hard to dispense with in casual conversation but which is no longer capable of adding much to a description. Colorless words are those of such general meaning that in a particular sentence they mean nothing...Slang adjectives like cool ("That's real cool") tend to explode all over the language. They are applied to everything, lose their original force, and quickly die....(Roberts, 1958, pp. 404–421)

5. CLOSING THOUGHTS

To paraphrase and review some of the nuggets that can be shared with writing students

After just a brief step into the gold mine Roberts first dug for us decades ago, we can sum things up by suggesting that they:

- Be different—write something fresh and new.
- Don't start with the first idea that everyone expects.
- Focus on writing specific details rather than abstract ideas.
- Lose the hot air; avoid the urge to fill space.
- Be direct in making points. Do not try to play it safe and hedge too much.
- Learn the most annoying clichés in English and avoid them.
- Use fresh, simple language. Do not write from a dictionary.
- Avoid using empty adjectives that do not say much, such as “beautiful,” “nice,” “delicious,” and others. Readers have no idea what color hair a beautiful girl has, just as they do not know what it means to be nice in every situation. As for delicious food, readers have no clue whether it tastes delicious like steak and eggs or kimchi stew. Both may be delicious in their own way.

The points Roberts makes, and the points developing writers very much need to learn, have to do with the importance of stepping outside of a narrow world where the teacher, the writing assignment, and the writing tools are all that exist in the world of the writer as he or she learns to create good prose. Creating writing that can be read by others – that others *want* to read is the goal. While the rules of writing, such as correct grammar, vocabulary, spelling and are indeed important considerations, focusing on that most important goal – readability – requires that students think about who may want to read what they are writing.

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