Schools Myths and Good Business and Technical Writing

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Participants in Shipley writing workshops often say, "That's not what my English teacher said!"

These participants are usually recalling accurately that a high school English teacher, or perhaps even one in grade school, laid down some do's and don'ts about writing. This teacher's rules took on the role of law. And, of course, these writing commandments had to be correct because the teacher did get them directly from Moses!

These do's and don'ts were correct back then, but they are wrong when today's professional adults begin to write. But these school "rules" have turned into myths about what good writing is or isn't. And as myths, they should be checked against what should be good business and technical writing today.

Myths about writing and language fall into three categories:

1. **General notions about what is good writing**

2. **Ways to organize and emphasize key information**

3. **Specific words and phrases to avoid**

1. General notions about what is good writing

Shipley participants often comment that a technical report or an environmental document is not interesting or entertaining. Who said these documents should be interesting? Most business and technical documents should be clear and factual. If they are also interesting, that's an added, but unnecessary benefit.

Where did this myth about all good writing being interesting come from? Usually, a teacher was describing a writer's need to entice a reader (maybe even the teacher?) into reading the whole composition or essay. Notice the teacher's assumption is that a reader won't read a document that is not interesting. Also, notice that this sort of school writing is often creative, perhaps a narrative or a potentially entertaining essay.

Business and technical documents are not intended, at least primarily, to be interesting or entertaining. They are supposed to be 100 percent clear and useful. Readers have to read them, not from choice, but to locate necessary facts and conclusions. Readers of business and technical documents also do not usually read them from beginning to end. For these readers, reading is a skip and scan process, as they search for facts and major conclusions.

So, the teacher's rule about being interesting was perhaps justified if applied to some types of school writing. But the rule does not apply to most business and technical documents.

A company's web page is a good illustration of a business document that must be clear and informative, but not necessarily interesting and surely not entertaining. Yes, it may also be interesting, at least to some readers, but most folks who look up a company's web page are interested in finding key information, not in being entertained.

2. Ways to organize and emphasize key information

Participants in Shipley workshops often want to lead up to major conclusions. They argue that readers need to know certain background details. They also want to capture for readers the thought process behind conclusions. They often spend the opening paragraph, even the opening page, leading up to major conclusions.

The school myth here is that readers require a lot of background and history. Instead, in current business and technical writing, major points should be **up and left**. Up and left places major points (key conclusions and recommendations) at the beginning of sections, in the first lines of paragraphs, and as the opening words in sentences. Up and left allows readers to scan easily for major points.

Good writing in the schools often deliberately led up to a major conclusion or key recommendation. Teachers would urge students to open a theme by setting up an interesting problem or asking an entertaining question and then to continue with discussion and examples. Students would end the theme by stating a conclusion or making a recommendation.

Leading up to a major conclusion is perhaps a survival of oral language. Great speeches in the past deliberately saved the clincher example for the end,

just before the major conclusion or the point of the speech, as captured in the last sentence or two.

Placing the high point at the end of a speech meant that listeners would more likely remember the high point. This organization was especially important when speeches like political ones in the nineteenth century lasted two, three, or more hours.

A variation of this myth about where to place key information concerns common sentence patterns. For example, a favorite type of classroom sentence in earlier decades was the periodic sentence. It was called periodic because the major point of the sentence deliberately appeared just before the period. Here is a classic periodic sentence from the opening lines of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*:

> "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."

Periodic sentences have ceased to be useful, and most of today's writers have never even heard of periodic sentences.

Paragraphs reflect a similar myth. The traditional classroom paragraph was never supposed to be only a single sentence. Why not? Probably because a single sentence does not allow a reader to provide the background and history leading up to a major conclusion.

Thus the myth was born that a single sentence paragraph was not correct, maybe even illegal. So a good school paragraph had to be at least 200 or 300 words long.

In today's nonfiction writing, a single sentence paragraph is an excellent emphasis technique. A single sentence paragraph stands out on a page that contains several traditional paragraphs. This emphasis technique has been used in nonfiction writing for decades.

The school myth in the preceding examples is that readers need a lot of background and history. Instead, in current business and technical writing, major points should be **up and left**. Necessary background and history follow major points, and in many documents, the background and history properly appear only as appendices.

3. Specific words and phrases to avoid

Test yourself with the following sentences, each of which illustrates a common school myth about a word or phrasing to avoid:

1. His business plan is something that few employees will willingly put up with.

2. Morris Johnson encouraged employees to quickly develop written job descriptions.

3. Because of the high prime rate, financing a new assembly plant was now out of the question.

4. And up and left is a practical rule, especially if writers want a quick way to improve their business and technical documents.

Sentence 1 illustrates the myth that a proper English sentence should not end with a preposition ("with" in the example). This supposed rule was never really true.

Consider a rewrite that moves the offending preposition: "His business plan is something up with which few employees will put." Winston Churchill is reputed to have objected to this supposed myth about the final preposition and delighted in showing, as above, that rephrasing produces a sentence that doesn't even sound like English.

Sentence 2 contains an example of the forbidden split infinitive in "to quickly develop." The myth is that splitting an infinitive is an error, but for centuries English sentences have used adverbs like "quickly" between "to develop" (the usual two-word form of the English infinitive). This rule came from a feature of Latin (the premier language of scholars for nearly 2000 years), which recognized that Latin infinitives were a single word, so they couldn't be split by another word. Thus the Latin infinitive *amare*, meaning "to love," cannot be split, so it must be wrong to split the English infinitive.

In sentence 2, rephrasing is easy: "Morris Johnson encouraged all employees quickly to develop written job descriptions." In this rephrasing "quickly" still seems to describe "to develop," but some readers might mistakenly suspect that Morris was quickly encouraging the employees. So the clearer and more natural version is the one with the dreaded split infinitive.

Sentence 3 illustrates the myth no English sentence should start with "because." But as in this illustrative

sentence, the wording of the sentence is clear and correct.

Where did the supposed rule about "because" come from? Probably a teacher down in the grades was working to train students not to write sentence fragments. Notice that in sentence three, the initial six words would not be a grammatically complete sentence even if a period followed "rate." So teachers down in the grades provided students with an oversimplification, and this oversimplification is what the students retain years later.

Perfectly good and correct English sentences can begin with "because" if the sentence at some point includes a fully independent statement (clause). In sentence 3 the words following the comma are this independent statement.

Sentence 4 illustrates the myth that an English sentence should not begin with "and." As in sentence 4, the initial "and" shows that another sentence came before the illustrative sentence. Strict grammarians might argue that the two sentence should really be one sentence, connected by a comma or semicolon, plus the "and."

Another concern, however, is the length of the two sentences. If the preceding one is lengthy, then combining the two would produce a sentence of perhaps 50 or more words. This length is too long, especially if a writer is trying to keep the average sentence length under 20 (a reasonable goal for most business and technical writing).

So once again, the myth about "and" not opening a sentence does not hold for actual examples of current business and technical writing.

A Final School Myth

Teachers have always been responsible for teaching students about words, especially all sorts of synonyms. This responsibility often leads teachers to tell students that a good student paper is one that uses a wide range of words. The students are warned not to be repetitious.

Students writing about their summer vacation, for example, have to search for different adjectives. In the students' papers the vacation becomes exciting, interesting, splendid, great, fun, great fun, a ball, a hoot, spectacular, memorable, and so on.

This final myth is that elegant variation in wording is a writing virtue and that repetition is writing sin.

In contrast, in business and technical writing writers should choose a single word or a descriptive phrase and stay with it. Thus in an environmental context, if the impacts of an action are minimal, then they are not in the same document called low, minor, piddling, negligible, insignificant, sparse, and limited. A federal judge analyzing an environmental report expects the same carefully defined term every time these same impacts are described.

Deliberate repetition is a sign of good, legally defensible environmental writing. And deliberate repetition is also present in any well written and carefully edited business or technical document.

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