

English

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Making Writing Memorable

When we think of memorable writing, many of us feel compelled to let our minds drift to Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Milton—whether we read them much or not. Perhaps that is one of the problems in some writing instruction: it is proffered by English teachers whose minds drift to Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton.

Everyone knows what memorable writing really is. It is the writing people remember, the writing they want to read a second or third time. It is memorable because they remember it—and everyone's list of unforgettable writing is likely different. I remember writers like E. T. Hall or William Zinsser or Lewis Thomas or Eric Hoffer. Regardless of who is on your list, those who inhabit it reach into your daily life in small—sometimes in large—ways to influence the things you do and the ways you do them.

The standards by which student writing is judged are often not much related to memorability. Frequently they are linked to usage and mechanics, and this is understandable and desirable—as long as it does not divert attention from the fundamental purpose for writing: to communicate clearly. Misspellings, erratic punctuation, errors in agreement, faulty pronominal reference—all of these are distractions that can adversely affect communication, so they must, and can, be controlled. However, just fixing these errors does not ensure that the piece of writing in which they occurred will communicate in a way readers will remember.

A recent experiment designed by Michael Graves¹ of the University of Minnesota assesses the effectiveness of writing by testing how well people remember passages they have read. Graves had two textual linguists, two college composition instructors, and

two former *Time-Life* editors all revise the same 400-word passage from a history textbook. He then had 300 11th grade students read the original and the revised versions of the passage and write recall protocols. He found that overall the students could recall 19 percent more information from reading the revisions than they could from reading the original piece. At that point, all the revisers were permitted to see the results, which clearly indicated that the subjects remembered significantly more from the revisions done by the two *Time-Life* people than those done by the academics. Finally,

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the three pairs of revisers edited another piece. This time, the academics, having seen the revision tactics the *Time-Life* pair had used, applied some of them. The result was that overall student comprehension of the revisions jumped to 24 percent more than the students remembered from the original.

This study has two interesting implications: (1) writing *can* be revised to make it more comprehensible, and (2) reasonably intelligent people *can* learn about writing more clearly from professional writers and from each other. Subject matter teachers whose students have trouble understanding their textbooks may profit greatly by having volunteer students, either from their own classes or from others, rewrite parts of the textbook to clarify their meaning for those who have trouble understanding it.

Such an activity achieves two ends: (1) it helps the students who are struggling to understand their textbooks, and (2) it encourages stronger students to give serious thought to what an author has written and to how that information may be conveyed more directly and clearly than it was in the original text. Such an activity is consistent with current reading- and writing-across-the-curriculum emphases and has the added value of involving students in a revising activity with a direct, immediate, and practical outcome. □

¹M.F. Graves, W.H. Slater, D. Roen, T. Redd-Boyd, A.H. Duin, D.W. Furniss, and P. Hazeltine, (October 1988), "Some Characteristics of Memorable Expository Writing: Effects of Revisions by Writers with Different Backgrounds," *Research in the Teaching of English* 22: 242-260.

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