A Letter from the Editors:

We, the editors of this second issue of the University Writing Center Re-Visioner, invite you to consider the concept of change. As we continue learning about ourselves, the world, and our places in it, we realize how rarely anything is stagnant. Moreover, as we utilize the writing process, we become more familiar with the fact that life is a process as well. We write rough drafts of how we would like to live, create plans for the future, many (maybe most) of which never materialize as we have envisioned them. Then we adapt to what happens to us and edit and revise our goals and lives. The more we live, write, and teach, the more we realize there is so much more we do not know—and we change to fit the new.

We have collected essays from students and faculty at Appalachian State University that capture this spirit of change in and through writing. We have revisited writing advice that we have received, advice we have either had to embrace in order to get the grade or cast off in order to express ourselves. And Dennis Bohr the English Whore interviews Grammar Moses about the intricacies of the language we speak and write.

We reflect upon changes we experience as writers and teachers of writing, in regard to the Charles Kettering quote, “If you have always done it that way, it is probably wrong.” Perhaps with this quote in mind we can adapt to our world better, writing and re-writing our scripts so that we do not continually fail. However, failure is a great teacher; it is, in fact, how we learn and why we change.
Things My Teacher Told Me

Many of us have received a plethora of writing counsel, and most of us have been given conflicting tips. We struggle to find our places as writers as we struggle to determine the rules we should follow, the rules we shouldn’t, and how to blur the lines between.

Collected here are some of the tidbits of writing advice ASU students have received from teachers over the past several years. One will quickly notice that the majority of these involve the concepts of totality with the words *always* or *never*, which may lead on to consider the old adage, “Nobody ever always or nevers.” We are often confused by these commands as we encounter writing that conforms to the approved writing rules, and then we come across a great classic that defies them. These comments are not intended to condemn any teacher from Appalachian State University; they were predominantly uttered in the middle and high school years.

1. Never start a sentence with a pronoun, a conjunction, or the word *the*.
2. A thesis statement should always be direct: “In this paper I will argue that….”
3. A thesis statement should never say, “In this paper I will argue that….”
4. Always put a comma before the word *because*.
5. Five paragraph essays = best strategy for good writing
6. Always use big words, even if you don’t know what they mean.
7. Good grammar = good writing
8. There is no *I* in essay: Do not use the first person.
9. Bigger Words + Complex Sentences = Better Writing
10. Don’t bother with giving your paper a title.
11. Use lots of exclamation points!!!
12. The conclusion should be a summary of what you wrote in the body of the paper.

Change does not necessarily assure progress, but progress, implacably requires change.

- Henry Steele Commager

Writing Rules: Two Graduate Students’ Experiences with Writing

by Emily Morgan and Erin Zimmerman

Autumn. It’s a time of big changes. The leaves turn colors, the weather gets colder. As the semester drags on and on, we are swamped with writing assignments of all shapes and sizes. And to our surprise, we find the definitions of writing have changed.

Our high school teachers gave us rigid rules to follow, telling us things like

- The last sentence of the first paragraph should always be a thesis.
- There must be an introduction paragraph, three to four body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- The conclusion should never say anything new; just summarize what has already been said.

And then we came to college…and the rules changed. “Don’t use the pronoun *I*” was the first rule to be tossed out the window. During high school, we became so ingrained in awkwardly wording our papers writing “one would assume” or “one would think,” and now we realize that “one” can’t have an opinion. Who is this “one”? Teachers now want us to write our opinions about the topic at hand, and now we know that we can’t have an opinion without *I*. But as soon as that problem is solved, the next one immediately arises: Do we have an opinion? And how do we get one? Can I buy one at the bookstore? Maybe the Writing Center has them.

As we try to build our opinions we have to acknowledge who we are in our writing. We are two English majors who struggled a lot of the time to learn new rules of writing, to find ourselves as writers, and to stop staring at a blank computer screen. Believe us, just because we enjoy writing doesn’t mean we have always been good at it (or that we always enjoy it). Here are a couple of experiences we have had as we have learned some of these lessons.
Emily’s Experience
Each time I got a paper back, I could only stare at it in astonishment. Each paper was always covered in red that criss-crossed the page, streaming through, around, and over the black lines. My professors always wrote little notes like “AWK,” “Word choice?” and then just crossed stuff out or circled stuff. I read everything they wrote but had no idea what it meant.

I remember one class that was very difficult for me. I liked what we were reading and loved the lectures because the professor was very entertaining. But he always handed my papers back bleeding. At some point during the semester, I realized that all he wanted was for our papers to repeat what he told us in the lecture. I started writing my papers that way, including the little tidbits that he told us, making a big point about whatever he had emphasized. And my grades improved.

The next semester I had a professor who helped me learn a process of writing. She coached me through a thesis for the first paper, and I eventually realized that she wanted me to have my own ideas and opinions. It took some time before I could think that my ideas were valid. I was astonished to learn that I could write what I thought for an assigned paper because I had been taught just to regurgitate information. When she returned the first paper, there were very few marks across the page and at the end she had written a long paragraph telling me what was good and what wasn’t. Her responses were so much more helpful than the swirling red marks.

I would respond. “Should I cite sources?” “If you need to cite sources.” “How many of the texts we’ve read should I incorporate into my paper?” “As many as you need depending on where the paper takes you.” “Do I need a thesis statement?” “It depends on how the paper develops itself.”

How, after years of having teachers tell me to follow directions, can she possibly leave this assignment so wide open? What does she mean by telling me that I have to use the paper to create my own guidelines? I’m supposed to create my paper around the guidelines she gives me. She’s the professor; she’s supposed to tell me what she wants and doesn’t want so that I can figure out how to write a paper that will give me an A. This professor wasn’t even going to give me a grade!

Erin’s Experience
I took a course on composition and pedagogical theories. Surprisingly, a lot of what I had previously thought about writing was wrong and my professor was blowing all my preconceived notions out of the water. Throughout all my years of schooling, I had always been told what to write: here’s your topic, have a strong thesis, beware grammar, and it can be no less than three pages. The hardest part for me was suddenly having free rein with my writing. For someone who always followed directions and never colored outside the lines, I had no idea what to do.

“How long should my paper be?” I would ask.
“However long it needs to be,” she would respond.

And after all our battles with changing rules and struggling to find our place, we find the biggest change is in us. We have learned not to let teachers’ rules dictate our own writing. We include our voice and opinions, we write for all different assignments and audiences, and we take our own ideas and confidently communicate them. We write for school or work, and sometimes (if there’s ever time left over) we write for fun.
THE ENGLISH WHORE: I’m Dennis Bohr the English Whore. I gave myself that job title because I teach English anywhere/ anywhen—for money. I’ll correct your grammar or diagram your sentences for a small fee. My guest today in this every-once-in-a-while Re-Visioner is Grammar Moses, author of Diagramming Sentences for Fun and Profit. Ms. Moses, according to your book, the English language was established in similar fashion as most civilized endeavors: theft.

GRAMMAR MOSES: Yes, we steal words from other languages, especially when it comes to food. Thus we have escargot, omelettes, French fries, Danish pastrу, Irish whiskey, and Belgian waffles.

EW: There’s been a lot of talk about teachers using phonics in the classroom, but isn’t phonics an illegal substance one can get hooked on?

GM: Yes, but it is also the way words sound. To spell words correctly, one must (a) memorize the dictionary; (b) flip a coin for every instance where words with the “-ence” sound are used; or (c) buy a computer equipped with spell check. The last method is the most expensive, discounting the psychological trauma associated with memorization.

EW: What’s the difference between “affect” and “effect”?

GM: “Affect” has an a and “effect” an e.

EW: Aren’t they used interchangeably?

GM: Usually, yes, but then so are “as” and “like.”

EW: What’s the difference?

GM: Like has four letters whereas as only two—and they share no letters.

EW: Back to phonics—which could be phonetically spelled “phonix.”

GM: A phonetic spelling of “Dennis” could be Degheghennighes—especially if you wanted to sound (or look) like you were from Wales. The gh is silent as in light, and so is the e as in many words, like like.

EW: What about “lie” and “lay”?

GM: You can lie down for a nap while laying the foundation for an ontological diatribe, and you can lie to get laid, but you cannot lay down for a nap without incurring the wrath of Conan the Grammarian (a.k.a. Wonderful Bob).

EW: When should one use “who” and “whom”?

GM: When you want to sound intelligent, use “whom,” just as people use “I.” “Whom is the dastard that stapled the fish to the foreheads of Mabel and I?” Both are incorrect, so Grammarians and English Whores will chortle to themselves while you attempt to sound educated and fail miserably.

EW: What’s the difference between a semicolon and a colon?

GM: A semicolon is a condition of the colon that drivers of tractor-trailer rigs suffer from.

EW: You just ended a sentence with a preposition—a definite grammatical faux pas according to all of the Nuns of the Above who taught me.

GM: Yes, I did, and you just used a fancy word stolen from the French to convey a major “f**k up.”

EW: Where did these rules come from?

GM: George Noun and Tommy Verb were monks who had just finished their X-rated version of Beowulf—later censored by the Pope—in which Grendel and Beowulf do it in a bog. They were concerned about their futures and found a way to ensure themselves...
steady, reliable employment: correct, standard grammar.

EW: Like lawyers creating their own language so that a lay person (not a lie person) could not access their verbiage without huge dictionaries, encyclopediae, appendices, or pancreases.

GM: Exactly. George and Tommy proposed that educated people had to know grammar rules in order to get into the best restaurants. The Pope was all for it and decreed (infallibly and ex-catheter) that only educated people could become priests and dispense the sacraments, and only fat, white men could enter the University of Noun-Verb, and the Patriarchal Ship of State was launched while they lunched.

EW: Can you give us an example of their work?

GM: Sure. The word “like” can be used as each part of speech except the pronoun (but if you give a Noun enough cash, it will go pro):

George Bush has his likes [noun] and dislikes [noun], but he especially likes [verb] bombastic oratory, and it seems likely [adverb] that he will be the likely [adjective] candidate for Boondoggerel of the Millennium since he rants like [preposition] a politician and acts like [conjunction] he has toast for brains, and I was, like [interjection], wow, man, like [interjection], I don’t know if I can, like [interjection], vote for him, man.

Writing Is Change
By Becky Woodard

Twice in the last few months, I have been asked by teachers to write a “Literacy Narrative.” I had no idea what a literacy narrative was or any idea what it should look like. It was explained to me as “a piece of writing that considers your own literacy, how you became literate, when you noticed or became aware of your literacy,” and other such ambiguous, suggestive questions as these. I suppose this is a pretty good assignment, particularly for an English graduate student, to help in understanding where future students may be coming from and also to acknowledge my own literacy development.

However, I had never once thought before about my literacy. I didn’t notice when I became literate (I hardly know what that means—literate in general or a specific level of literacy?), and I barely remember becoming literate (a foggy memory of learning letters as characters which depict a certain sound comes floating into my mind). So I struggled to remember a moment I could capture and display in a fabulously brilliant text. The night before both of these assignments were due I still had nothing written and resorted to my old writing strategy—relying upon the ever present in ever mass quantities—bull shit. Now, however, I might have something to say about my own literacy and perhaps that of others who laboriously wrestle with this writing prompt.

I’ve realized the difficulty of this assignment lay in the fact that, like so many things in life, my literacy has constantly been a process of change. How was I to choose a moment to base a literacy narrative upon, when everyday I learn something new about myself as a writer and a reader? When I was really young, before I encountered any of the letters as character books, I drew lines and shapes on paper and believed I had written my mom a note. Sometimes I was telling her I loved her. Other times I tried to mimic

The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn.
-Gloria Steinem
Writing is Change (continued)

important notes left around the house like phone messages. In elementary school, I began writing plays for my siblings and me to perform—they were often very simple and probably lacked important elements of drama, such as plot. Then I went through a phase where I wrote short stories. I have a collection of these boxed up somewhere in my parents’ home, all ending with the same sentence, “And then I woke up.” I usually tired of my stories and found this a good way to close them. In middle school and high school, I considered myself a poet, writing my best stuff on the programs I was handed at my church, when I just couldn’t seem to keep my mind on the sermons.

My reading material changed along with my writing styles. I looked at picture books, I read *Amelia Bedelia*, then *The Baby-Sitters' Club*, then Avi, and on to newspapers, *Les Misérables*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Crime and Punishment*. Now I read pedagogy books, critical analyses, and theory (though at times I do still pick up *Amelia*).

In college, I began writing more research papers than I was ever asked to do in high school. This was an interesting and difficult transition—now I had to gather research, understand the argument, develop my own opinions, express them while giving credit to the work already done, and not libelously cut down the opposing views. I couldn’t simply write off on a tangent how I particularly “felt” about any given topic anymore. Luckily I got at least one chance in each class to practice the research paper as a form of writing.

With all of this experience, however varied it may be, you’d think I would have learned the “writing process.” Perhaps it was mentioned in a few classes, but it never stuck. I rarely used a pre-writing exercise to develop my thoughts, and revision was strictly a quick editorial run through, checking for spelling and punctuation mistakes before hurriedly printing out my paper, frantically searching for a stapler, and, panic ridden, sprinting for class. I often wonder why, with the countless papers I have written, I still get anxious while writing. But I still struggle with every sentence and paragraph I write. “Does this express what I am trying to say? Does it sound okay? Will a reader understand this?” These are all questions, and there are many more, with which I torment myself as I compose.

As a graduate student here at Appalachian, I have now been exposed to the writing process from the point of view of a future teacher of writing and as a writing center consultant. As I consult with clients in the writing center, I encourage them to utilize the writing process. It’s only fair that I do the same thing, so I’m trying to use the process myself and am finding the steps to be quite beneficial. I have learned that writing is change—changing words, changing topics, changing perspectives. The process allows me to notice my ideas and, at times, to change my opinions. And if nothing else, I can change grammar mistakes.

I’m becoming a proponent of the process and fully intend to invite my future students to use the process and discover how their writing and they change.

But I find it odd that people want me to record my literacy narrative. Just like the writing process, my literacy is captured in stages of development, stages in which I still find myself engaged. I’m still a student, anxiously writing papers for which I receive grades. But I wonder how my writing will change, and of more consequence, how I will change, in coming months and years.

The heresy of one age becomes the orthodoxy of the next.
-Helen Keller

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