Dr. Dave's Guide to Writing the College Paper

David R. Williams, Ph.D.

SIN BOLDLY!

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APPRECIATION

This book originated out of my desire to avoid wasting too much time teaching grammar and writing in my literature classes at George Mason University. Eager to spend more time with Jonathan Edwards and Ken Kesey and less with punctuation, I began to place short jeremiads on reserve in the library. When I discovered that students were xeroxing (yes, "xeroxing," so sue me) these papers at a dime a page, I decided to print my own copies of the entire collection and sell them in the campus bookstore to make a buck. That booklet, *Making It or Faking It*, (now a collector's item) became a word-of-mouth success, used even in composition courses, and I was persuaded to expand the text and to try for a larger market.

What followed was a self-published version then titled *Sin Boldly!*, priced at a provocative $6.66, a personal triumph but a marketing disaster. Bookstore chains will not even look at self-published books, nor will the media review them. Luckily, Perseus Publishing, with access to the corridors of capitalism, had the wisdom to pick up the copyright and publish the edition you now hold in your hands.

I therefore owe my students at George Mason the most. Their horrendous mistakes were my inspiration. Several friends and colleagues also helped to get me organized and to keep me working. Suzanne Melancon was the first professional writer to take my project seriously. Kathy Mitchell was the second. Roger Lathbury and Joyce Greening also contributed significant

advice, as did my son Nathan. Kudos also to my agent, David Miller, *sine qua non*, without whom nothing. The moral encouragement provided by a host of others can best be exemplified by the words of Dr. Bruce Levy who wrote me from Texas saying, "Let's face it: writing courses suck. They know it; we know it. The only way to win them over is to admit to the truth right off the bat."

I may be bats, but here's the truth, at least as I see it.

Bullitt

When I walk down the street
and see you fellas
wearing your ankle boots and

very

angry

belts,

That's when I know,
That is when I understand,

that Steve McQueen
will never
go out of style.

And these beautiful boys
ask me,

"Man, are you just one of those
stoned writers,

writing one of those
stoned things?"

And I say,

"baby-

my man-

my child-

your mag wheels
are perfection."

—Perri Pagonis, 1999

INTRODUCTION

What It's All About

Tired of correcting the same mistakes—even in senior papers—year after year, hoarse and in danger of developing throat cancer from endless repetition of the same rules, tired even of my own lame jokes and pathetic attempts to humorize grammar and the writing process, at long last frustrated by the inability of far too many obtuse students to grasp the words of wisdom I have shouted at them through the apparently impenetrable air, I am here casting off all pretense and committing to paper the real rules and regulations that have guided me for years as I grade student papers. Note that many of these rules apply equally well to the writing of exams or any other project. In any case, they should certainly help you in your quest for the dearly desired grade you think you deserve.

Many of you, with some justification, are convinced that the rules of composition and grammar are a crock, that they are petty and irrelevant beyond belief, and that the only reason English professors insist upon them is to exercise one brief and feeble moment of power in their otherwise bleak and powerless lives. There is some truth to that. There is even a school of thought within the English-teaching profession that views grammar as a tool of imperialism, a way for white male culture to impose its values upon others and make them conform to a value system that keeps white males in command. There may be something to that too. And of course there are those who arrogantly reject learning such writing rules, knowing for sure that

they will waltz into the executive suite of daddy's firm or will so quickly rise from salesperson to CEO that they will always have a secretary to correct their mistakes for them.

Assuming all this is at least in some part true, doesn't that make it all the more important for you to wield the tools of power rather than be at the mercy of someone else's knowledge? There will always be power and there will always be symbols of it. Knowledge of correct grammar and the ability to write are symbols of this power. I can think of no better symbol of power than literacy. Would you prefer the sword? The aristocratic title? An ugly gold medallion on eight gold chains? A Lincoln Continental? An AK–47? Yourname.com? Since we live in a competitive society in which the struggle for survival is primary, power exists, and power will have its symbols. Literacy is a far better tool and symbol of empowerment than any other, even money.

Historically, the teaching of grammar arose as a deliberate effort to provide arbitrary rules to which all people who aspired to middle class gentility could conform. It was thus a means of taking one of the weapons of power away from a hereditary feudal elite and making it available to all the people. It was part of the eighteenth-century revolt against aristocratic privilege, against a world in which a member of the gentry merely by being a member of the gentry set the norm for what was right and proper simply by whatever he did. King Louis XV, they say, rarely bathed and stank to high heaven, but as king he set the standard and was not subservient to it. However much you may hate grammar, think how much better a system ours is in which even the lowest peasant can achieve literary equality by learning rules of writing, spelling, grammar, and diction that are available equally to all and that apply equally to all. Andrew Jackson, in the early nineteenth century when Noah Webster was trying to stamp equality upon us, resisted this trend, proclaiming he had no respect for the intelligence of a man who couldn't think of more than one way to spell a word. The elite had a glorious freedom in those days, but Harrison Bergeron is dead, shot down by handicapper general Diana Moon Glampers. *Égalité* has assumed a higher value than *liberté*. We must all become the same; we must all be equal. To achieve that goal, we must all submit to

the same rules. The ability to write forcefully, convincingly, grammatically is thus less a tool of privilege than one of the strongest weapons against it. It is the tool that you must have if you are to compete successfully against the spawn of Yale and Harvard.

For those business majors and majorettes out there still not persuaded, let me reveal a secret of one of America's leading business tycoons, a secret that should freeze your souls. In *Minding the Store*, his rags-to-riches story of how he made it to the top of his daddy's business with the help of his daddy's millions, Stanley Marcus, former emperor of the Nieman Marcus merchandising empire, lets slip the revelation that he has what he calls "a personal antipathy." What is this shameful prejudice? Dislike of blacks? Fear of Arabs? Hatred for anything in green polka dots? No, his personal antipathy is for the misuse of the personal pronoun after a preposition. He once broke off an engagement to a beautiful and hopeful young lady who almost landed her millionaire until she said in a moment of unguarded passion that there was such great love "between you and I." Off with her head! And then there was the up-and-coming junior executive who responded to a generous Christmas gift by thanking Marcus for the lovely vase he had sent "to Helen and I." According to Marcus, he never rose any further in the organization and did not last long, and he never even knew why.

If you do not know what wrong these two sinners had committed to justify their being cast out of the garden into the darkness where there is wailing and the gnashing of teeth, then you need the lessons in this little book. Perhaps you are right that the rules of grammar are stupid and arbitrary and that the people who wield them are arrogant and petty. But many of those same stupid, arrogant, petty people are out there wielding power. Someday, one of them may be your boss. One of them may be grading your papers this semester. In the interest of survival, if nothing else, you need to be prepared to meet the challenges of this power. As Jimmy Carter once said, "Life is not fair." Victory goes to those who are prepared to deal with life on its own terms, not in terms of some imagined fairness.

Let us get on with it.

CONTENTS

1 Some Really Crude Basics

What Is a College Paper?

Let's admit from the start that by "college paper" we mean a paper for a course in the humanities. The sciences, bless them, have their own peculiar ways of using language that many of us in the humanities find bizarre. Of course, the way some humanists write papers is also beyond belief. One need only pick up any work by one of the adherents of the modern "deconstructionist" school of literary analysis to see how bad academic writing can get. Forget all that academic jargon. Any college paper you write reflects your opinion and should be in whatever style or voice is most comfortable for you. And whether the paper is for the English Department, History Department, Psychology Department, Religious Studies, or any of the many subsets of the social sciences, the rules here outlined generally apply. Even such pseudosciences as economics and business require papers that are written in English and follow the same general rules and procedures as an essay on Emerson.

That said, it is undoubtedly true that you can get away with more colorful and creative—if not downright peculiar—experiments in a paper for a literature class than in one for an economics class. But even this is not guaranteed. Some English professors imagine themselves as supersophisticated, scientifically based apostles of some wacko school of literary analysis and therefore insist on rigidly exact performances, whereas some economists are as loose as the proverbial goose. And some of the

best scientists write not in science-ese but in clear human language. Reading Freudians is an exercise in despair and confusion; reading Sigmund Freud himself is a delight. There is a reason for this.

The historian Barbara Tuchman has said that the ability to write well implies the ability to think well. Great minds think and write clearly; secondary minds get confused; inferior minds tie themselves in knots pretending they understand what they clearly can't even grasp. People who understand what they are talking about write in clear simple language intended to communicate ideas from one mind to another. This is because they have ideas and want to communicate them. People who do not have a clear idea of what they are talking about try to hide their confusion behind an ink cloud of obscure verbiage. And some superior snots write not to communicate but to impress people with how smart they want us to think they are.

Do not, therefore, be afraid to say what you think in plain, simple English. To the truly literate, the use of excessively pompous and complex language indicates cowardice and ignorance, not intelligence. If you cannot understand your textbook, do not despair; the fault may well be the writer's, not yours. In contrast to European intellectuals with their aristocratic heritage, the best American writers from the very beginning gloried in what we call "the plain style." Our greatest American books offer not clouds of baroque rhetoric but simple American speech. Think of the dialect in *Huckleberry Finn*, the direct sentences of Ernest Hemingway, the penetrating boldness of James Baldwin, and be not afraid. As Emerson so wonderfully said in that most American of essays "Self-Reliance," "Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense."

The college paper is assigned to determine how well you have mastered the course material, how well you have understood the significance for good or ill of that material, and how well you can write about it. Whether for history, English, or whatever, the requirements of good arguments, good evidence, and good communication are essentially the same. These are the requirements on which this book is focused.

Format and Length

Leave all your plastic binders in Miss Hodgebottom's fourth-grade classroom. They fall apart, scattering pages to the breeze or leaving them to be scrunched up in the bottom of my book bag. The binders feel like slimy death; they are an expensive environmental disaster. Simply staple an 8 1/2 x 11 white title page to the front of your paper.

This title page should have a title in the center about a third of the way down. The title should not be in quotation marks unless it is a quotation. It should not be underlined unless it is also the title of a published work. It should say something. "Paper #2" is not a title. In the lower right-hand corner of this title page should be your name, the date, and the name and number of the class.

Do not repeat the title on the first page. The first page of text should begin at the top as any other page does. Nor should you begin the first page halfway down the paper as if there had to be room for a title that isn't there. We professors know padding when we see it. And for the love of Gaia, do not include blank pieces of paper at either the beginning or the end. Play your tricks of illusion with words. I am constantly amused at the students who try to hide their papers in the middle of the pile when they are turning them in, as if we teachers never read the things. We do. You can't hide from us. And when we get to yours, we will realize with surprising speed that the thick paper handed in was padded by empty sheets on either side. Once so alerted, we will then be on the lookout for padded paragraphs too.

The paper must be typed—or whatever the verb is for word processing. No, we do not accept neat handwriting. An absolute universal requirement is that you double space. We can recognize triple and even two-and-a-half-line spacing, so don't get cute. Double spacing gives us room to write our penetrating critiques of your mistakes between the lines. We need all the room we can get.

Standard margins are an inch and a quarter on the sides, an inch and a half top and bottom. Each page should be numbered.

I prefer the numbers at the top right, out of the way, to leave room for my pithy comments.

The length of the paper, of course, should be part of the assignment. If you are not sure, do not be afraid to ask. If you don't know, chances are very good that others don't know. The rest of the class and the teacher will thank you for clearing up the confusion. An assigned length of two to three pages does not mean one page and a line at the top of the second. It means at least two full pages with the possibility of spillover onto a third. Note that we teachers hate to discourage eager students, but few of us are thrilled to see papers several pages longer than the assignment calls for. Learning to be concise is a major part of learning to write. We are glad you have something to say, but keep it under control please. With perhaps forty four-page papers to grade before tomorrow, we are faced with at least 160 pages to read and edit before dawn. Being able to put yourself in the other guy's or gal's sneakers is a universal requirement for success in any endeavor.

I often do not give page lengths, thereby creating great anxiety, to which I respond by reminding fretting students of the fellow who asked Abraham Lincoln how long a man's legs should be. "Long enough to reach the ground," was his wise response. Your paper too needs to be long enough to carry the body of the text, no more, no less. This refusal to be specific causes problems for me as well, but by giving eight-page assignments to students with four pages worth of knowledge, we professors work against our own instructions. We say, "be brief," "be concise," "don't waste words," and we make fun of bureaucrats who write thirty-page memos on how to buy a doughnut. Then we give out assignments that force many students to learn how to turn four pages of information into eight pages of words. By doing this, we are in fact inadvertently teaching the very excess of verbiage we claim to abhor. Instead, I say, define your topic, establish your argument, present the evidence for this argument, rebut objections, and bring it all to a resounding conclusion. To do all this should take at least four or eight or twenty or whatever the number of pages that may have been assigned. If you think you can do it in fewer than the minimum required, may

Allah be merciful. If you require a bit more, I'll try to understand. Do the best job you can.

Timing Counts!

In graduate school one semester, taking a seminar on William Faulkner from the great Hyatt Waggoner, I had the opportunity to shock a young classmate. She and I and a fellow student were walking along the brick sidewalk outside of class talking about the term papers we had been assigned. Suddenly, she turned and stopped us both in our tracks demanding, "Wait a minute! Are you guys actually saying that you intend to get these papers in on the assigned date?" He and I gave each other puzzled looks and shrugged. She stomped off in a fury saying, "I never heard of such a thing. Why, I've never handed in a paper on time in my life. What are you guys trying to pull?" She didn't return the following semester. He and I are now up to our keisters in sophomore papers.

Deadlines are meant to be taken seriously, not absolutely, but seriously. You are going to have to sit down at some point and do the work, so you might as well determine to do it at the first opportunity instead of the last. There'll be plenty of time for procrastination in the grave. I wish I had the gall of Harvard's late great Alan Heimert. He once assigned us a term paper to be handed in on April 18. After giving us that date, he drummed his fingers on the table, looked up at the chandeliers, then sighed, "Okay, if you develop pneumonia and your dog goes into labor, I suppose I have to let you have an extra week. There, you've got until the twenty-fifth." Then he gritted his teeth, drummed some more, and said, "All right, all right, if the government is overthrown and you have to march on Washington to save the republic, I guess I'll have to give you one more week. There! Do not ask for any more extensions. I've given you an absolute deadline and two extensions. If you can't get it in by May first, forget it!"

Still, some students will insist on making excuses and requesting extensions. One of the problems with this is that we teachers have heard them all. I always tell my sophomores at the begin-