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FEATURE

Writing with Integrity

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Abstract: *Writing is not merely a form of sharing what we have learned; the writing process actually helps us learn. It also helps us better understand what we know. Writing is really about thinking, not about production. Language skills support good thinking as well as good writing, as it is difficult to think deeply if you have no words with which to express thoughts. This is why advancing in learning is inevitably accompanied by an advance in vocabulary. Weak language skills provide a weak foundation for thinking, and tend to produce learning that is overly dependent on facts or limited sources. Small grammatical errors do not make writing weak; writing that lacks original thought, organization, and critical reasoning is weak, and it may be accompanied by grammatical errors, or not. Professors of all disciplines need to require wide reading, and careful thinking and writing of their students; if not, they are suggesting that these skills are not important. Suggestions are given for helping students learn to write with integrity, as well as a means of detecting work that is not original to the student.*

The ability to write academic prose is a mark of an educated individual. In today's world, it is reasonable to expect that someone who has a graduate degree from an English-speaking school (and even those who graduate from non-English institutions) will demonstrate adequate ability in academic writing in English. This is not because English is inherently better than any other language, but simply because so much information is available only in English.

One cannot think philosophically without adequate command of language, since words are the traditional vehicle for the expression of thought. While it is true that some may express their thoughts in song or dance, paint or clay, most people choose words to communicate the deepest workings of their mind.

If the goal of graduate study is to increase the ability to think about the ideas and problems in a field of study, and to increase the understanding of what has been said and done in the past, then words become all-important, for they

are the way we express ideas. As one's ability to work with ideas expands, one's vocabulary must do likewise; for new ideas inevitably require new words with which to explain them. Fine differences between two ideas, when studied, become more important; therefore, using the right word is something which becomes increasingly important as we learn to think more clearly.

Simple words can express simple ideas well. You can build a simple tower with large blocks, but if you want to add details, you need smaller bricks. In the same way, as we seek to add detail to our own thinking, we require new and more complex vocabulary with which to talk about new concepts. This vocabulary development is a normal part of graduate school, even for native speakers of a language.

In the abstract world, words are absolutely necessary. A limited vocabulary tends to make students rely more on factual, objective information than on thinking, creating, and philosophizing, for these latter activities require more complex language to achieve. Pictures can be extremely helpful, to explain ideas, but it is not always possible to put an idea into picture form.

In the same way as vocabulary is important, good writing is inextricably tied to a credible education. Since education is about thinking and good writing is about thinking, it stands to reason that good writing should be an expected part of a good education. Academic research, which is the hallmark of a graduate program, is the creation of something new--something not already addressed by the academic community in the past. One cannot respond adequately to academic thought without the ability to express one's ideas in writing. When we fail to require careful writing, we fail to require careful thinking and analysis. This tends to reduce graduate education to piling up additional facts, rather than the thinking ability which has traditionally been associated with advanced degrees.

If students come to graduate work without adequate experience in writing, they need to learn it in graduate school. Fortunately, writing is a skill that can be learned. Some students enjoy playing with words more than others. Reading and writing well, however, are not reserved only for those with literary genius. Since they are the stuff of academia, all of us must strive to master the art of using words well if we want to communicate the ideas we have in our head, or if we want to develop new ones. Beautiful words are not required to record great ideas, but if the words are inadequate, the idea may never evolve at all. Since graduate work is about having new ideas that need to be shared, it is crucial that graduate students develop the skills necessary to think, to create, and to share their ideas. This is far superior to simply learning what others think.

Once the words are on paper, it is possible to continue to work with them until they say exactly what is meant. As the ideas are arranged, the writer's thoughts get clearer until he/she actually develops new thoughts about the topic.

At this level, writing is truly a way of learning, not so much a forum for showing what the writer already knows.

Recently, educators have struggled with student writing. Professors frequently complain that college and graduate students lack writing skills (see for example Bartlett, 2003; Enders, 2001). They blame television, computers, a lack of reading—many things—but the concern persists. Plagiarism is also reportedly on the rise (e.g., Moore, 2002), a phenomenon frequently blamed on eroding moral standards, as well as increased electronic opportunity. These concerns are very real in the Asian context, which has escaped none of the writing difficulties common in the rest of the world.

English language learners have a particularly hard time coping with academic reading and writing skills. Higher Education in Asia operates in an environment where English is the mother tongue of almost no one, but is the language of instruction. Because of the difficulty this causes in writing, and because of the difficulty of access to quality source materials, the ubiquitous problems with plagiarism and poor writing quality are particularly difficult to overcome.

Some have suggested that better language and writing skills are optional, given that Asian graduates frequently teach in their native language, or at least in an environment where non-native English is acceptable. Teachers are encouraged to read students' work for "what they meant, not what they said." Unfortunately, the consequences of this approach are related to quality of learning, not just language skills. They include:

- Obscured meaning in written assignments.
- Increased emphasis on facts, rather than analysis because of the difficulty of reading more complex documents.
- Lack of philosophical or deeper analytical reasoning due to lack of language skills strong enough to support abstract thinking.
- A heavier burden on teachers, who are unable to provide sufficient feedback because of the multitude of errors in written work.
- Overlooking of weightier academic matters in written work because of distraction with editorial issues.
- Graduates who lack adequate academic writing and thinking skills.

The good news is that writing skills transfer from one language to another. A person who writes in an organized and clear manner in his/her mother tongue will do the same in a second language. Skills learned about writing in English will also transfer back to the student's first language. Improving writing does not simply mean correcting grammar, but it includes learning to organize, analyze, and prioritize. It also includes the art of being specific, concise, and explaining clearly and deeply, as well as learning to cite carefully and correctly.

Being clear, direct, and organized are skills that may be learned in graduate classes in English, but these thinking skills work in *any* language, not only the one being used for instruction. These are also skills that transfer to other areas of life as well; they are not only useful for academic writing, but for everyday living.

The question is, what can be done? How can we help students in Asian institutions of higher education increase their ability to think and write, and avoid plagiarism? "How can we communicate to students the importance of honoring truth and truthfulness, values that are at the heart of the academy?" (Moore, 2002, p. 25).

Professors frequently ask themselves why students do the things they do. Here are some of the answers they have given:

> There are probably dozens of reasons why some students plagiarize. They're lazy. They're afraid. They perceive plagiarism to be standard practice. They believe that any means to a good grade is legitimate. (Malesic, 2006, para. 9)

> I do not think that most of the students in my groups tried to get away with things for the sheer sport of it. Instead, they seemed to take this path more or less reluctantly when they felt that, given the circumstances, the alternative was too difficult. (Moore, 2002, p. 27)

So, what to do? As a professor and a writing teacher, my answer has to include education. If many students a) do not know how to write well, b) struggle with English, and c) tend to plagiarize particularly when they are afraid and can't find another solution, then helping students learn how to write well may reduce the problem (see Schroeder, 2006). Certainly we can not hope for improvement in writing without instruction, practice, and feedback (see Enders, 2001). What follows is my personal message to both students and professors about how, even in today's environment, it is possible for students, including Asians, to write with integrity (see also Figure 1 which contains tips for professors who want to help students avoid plagiarism). If every college or graduate course were to teach students some of these things, perhaps we could reduce the writing problems we are facing.

Required Components of Writing with Integrity

1. **Have something original to say.** Simply reporting what everyone else says does not constitute graduate quality writing. Combine ideas that haven't been combined before. Look under rocks that have not been overturned before. Pursue the same ideas, but with a new approach. If you have absolutely nothing to add to what has been said, don't waste your professor's time reading your paper. This is the first rule of writing with integrity.

How professors can help students avoid plagiarism

1. Check students' reference list before they write their paper, and help them judge the sources for depth, quality, and completeness. A poor paper begins with general, listless source material.
2. Have students begin with smaller projects. Design assignments in such a way that it is more difficult to plagiarize (see JISC, 2006).
3. Teach them referencing rules and give feedback on language and referencing along with comments on content. If students don't learn writing skills from their teachers, where will they learn them? This can't happen only in Research Methods class. If proper referencing and writing is ignored by most professors except the research teacher, students get the idea that it isn't really all that important.
4. Teach them about plagiarism and why it should be avoided.
5. Teach them how to avoid it:
    a. Read source, turn it over, summarize
    b. Read source, write down 3-5 major words, and use those as notes to summarize from
    c. Quote exactly
6. Look for plagiarism in student papers. Knowing you will check is a major deterrent.
    a. Read student papers in sufficient depth that they can't easily cheat and get away with it.
    b. Look for missing letters or words rather than grammar errors (these often indicate copied text).
    c. Look for unusual font changes (this often indicates cut and pasted text).
    d. Look for distinct changes in style, particularly between formal, polished text and poorer, student-quality text.
    e. Look for research that goes far beyond the scope of what was assigned or that doesn't really answer the question asked.
    f. Look for hard to access sources that the student was unlikely to have found and read.
    g. Type suspicious-looking phrases enclosed in quote marks into Google, to see if the reference automatically appears.
    h. Use plagiarism detection software.

Figure 1. Tips for Avoiding and Detecting Plagiarism.

2. **Start with a thinking problem** (Dombeck & Herndon, 2004). In research, you are trying to find something out, rarely trying to prove something. If your research does nothing more than report facts, and you are not an expert in the field, you will have very little to say. Unless you are thinking and learning, and sharing original thought, there is no reason to invest time in editing empty text. Research is a fabric you weave from the threads of others—it is not a quilt you make by cutting and pasting. You need to process and write about ideas, not just facts.
3. **Keep language concerns in perspective.** Non-native English does not make one incapable of writing research. But if your language skills are too weak to support original thought, that is a problem. Many teachers complain about "bad English" when they really mean that your paper has no substantive content, no organization, no critical thinking, or you have not actually said anything important. This is not truly an English problem—the real problem is poor thinking and writing skills. When the ideas and structures are there, getting help editing the English is not difficult.
4. **Read much more than you write.** Read deeply, widely, and specifically about your topic. Compare various works on the same topic. Research has repeatedly shown that good writing begins with good reading.
5. **Use citations judiciously.** Carry the argument with your own words. When you cite or quote, explain why you used that idea, and what it has to do with your own idea that you are pursuing in your paper. Often, this means putting 2-3 references after a comment to show where an idea was discussed, but discussing the major issues in your own words.
6. **Write simply and clearly.** Don't be pretentious or wordy, and keep the explanations as simple as the idea will allow for. Define terms that may be unclear, and don't presume equality between similar terms without careful study. Don't repeat yourself.
7. **Use APA style (or whatever reference style you use) properly.** The purpose of a reference style is to provide a place for the references so they do not clog your text. When speaking, it is appropriate to mention titles, authors' first and last names, and other reference tidbits in the sentence, so that listeners may know about the source of your information. In research, all that information is placed systematically so that any interested reader can find it, but it is a mistake to place it too frequently in text. Occasionally, it can be done, but most beginning writers overdo this technique, writing research as if it were an oral presentation.
8. **Start paragraphs and sentences with a real subject.** Don't start paragraphs or sentences with authors' names unless that person is truly the subject of your sentence. This, more than any other fault, interrupts the flow of logic, and makes it difficult for readers to understand your point.

Unless you truly need to comment about the author, put his/her name in parentheses, where it is equally visible to the reader. This leaves the subject position open to talk about the real topic of your sentence.

9. **When you introduce a quote, make your comments count.** *Smith (2004) says "people are usually in favor of…"* contains no more information than *"People are usually in favor of…" (Smith, 2004).* If that is the extent of your commentary, don't bother to make it. Use the space around a quote to talk about the relationship of the quoted information to your topic. *Smith suggests a change from the status quo when he says that…* or *Smith supports this idea with his suggestion that…* or *Smith differs from Hargreaves' (1999) approach to the situation*—all three of these give some clear information beyond the reference.

10. **Avoid all forms of plagiarism.** Students often ask me why plagiarism in particular is so distressing to teachers. Why, in the world of academic sins, does it stand as unpardonable? As another teacher, distressed by the same problem, explains:

> I believe in relentlessly exercising my students' critical abilities, but I also believe in punishing plagiarism. A student who plagiarizes refuses to be educated. There shouldn't be room in my classroom for that kind of student. Indeed, that person is not really a student at all. (Malesic, 2006, para. 21)

It is this refusal to learn that disturbs teachers—the idea that pretending to know is an acceptable replacement for actually learning. But what exactly must one do to avoid plagiarism? Avoiding it includes behaviors such as:

a. Putting quote marks whenever you use a direct quote, even for only two or three words.
b. Referencing any ideas that do not originate with you.
c. Paraphrasing properly, without copying the text or the sentence structure.
d. Placing references in the text in such a way that it is clear who had which idea.
e. Dealing ethically with secondary sources:
    i. Finding and reading the original documents whenever possible.
    ii. Citing secondary sources properly, rather than pretending they were primary sources that you actually read. This includes citing abstracts as abstracts, rather than pretending you read the whole document.
    iii. Placing in your reference list *only* sources you personally have held in your hands.

11. **Deliberately seek out multiple and varied sources on a topic so that the data will be rich and complete.** Just as a larger vocabulary is needed for deeper thinking, the same is true for one's library, or sources of information. If sources are not wide and varied, thinking and ideas are not wide and varied. This includes deliberately searching for differing philosophical perspectives, and opinions different from those you hold and including them in your literature review. This shows analytical ability and open-mindedness—the spirit of the academy.
12. **Focus on attaining quality sources.** This includes attention to:
    a. Date of publication
    b. Source of information
    c. Not limiting yourself to the easiest-to-find materials
    d. Limiting the number of secondary sources used
    e. Quality of editing and presentation of sources
    f. Quality of sources referenced within source documents
13. **Pay special attention to web referencing.** The fact that an article was retrieved from the web does not necessarily indicate its quality, and it certainly does not mean that proper referencing is unnecessary. The following precautions apply to web references:
    a. Citing and quoting rules apply every bit as much for electronic text as for text from books. Always put quotes where needed, or cite ideas borrowed from a web site.
    b. Because of the larger variety in quality, careful selection of web references is crucial. Choose academic sites, with preference for refereed Journals.
    c. Academics sometimes frown on using web references in research, but journals which exist online are not subject to the same criticisms as non-academic web pages.
    d. Web citation rules are still fairly new, but they have stabilized and must be followed exactly. When no page number is given, the nearest section heading and a paragraph number should be used in its place (at least for APA).
    e. Reference web sites carefully in the reference list, also. Many sites are put out by corporate authors, which can be complex. Get a publication manual and use it. When there is missing information, which also happens more frequently online—please refer to the APA manual (it's in most school libraries) to see how to format the reference.

14. **Avoid descriptive excess as well as analytic excess.** Don't simply describe a situation and expect to get academic respect for it. On the other hand, don't analyze a small amount of data to death and conclude beyond the logical extension recommended. Of the two, beginners tend to over-describe, rather than over-analyze, but both are to be avoided.
15. **Avoid power words in academic writing.** Power words attempt to convince by force rather than by reason. Remember that academic writing is about exploring and learning, not piecing together a collection of facts to convince others that you are right. Words such as *incredible*, *exciting*, even *excellent*, can be a subconscious attempt by the writer to manipulate the reader into agreeing with the message, rather than calmly exploring the facts and drawing conclusions.
16. **Be sensitive about gender usage.** Contrary to what many people think, the masculine is no longer considered inclusive in English. When you must choose, do not simply write in the masculine. Often you can make the sentence plural, avoiding the issue entirely by using the inclusive *they*. If not, you may occasionally use *he/she* in place of a single pronoun, or alternate use of each gender. As long as you alternate, there is no problem.
17. **Have your writing reviewed by more than one person.** Graduate writing is not about form over substance, but about careful thinking and writing coupled with careful editing and formatting. Every polishing will make it better. Start by editing it yourself, but don't stop with the formatting and grammar issues—look deeper. Then have it edited by others for content, logic, grammar, critical thinking, organization, and APA style.

Writing well is difficult. But it is a skill that can be learned. All of us have room for improvement. What is needed is to continue to pay attention to the details that make writing better, because as we require a higher standard in writing, our thinking will improve proportionately. This sort of academic and philosophical growth needs to be required of students, not only of professors, as it is the essence of education, which cannot be complete without it.

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