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*(Four articles from the U. of Portland weekly **The Beacon***

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Sept. 26, 2013 article for *The Beacon*

Question-able Writing

Admit it: you write every day. Texts, emails, status-updates, and Post-It lists count, among the more formal papers, reports, and presentations. Surprisingly, the most useful tool for your writerly labors is not the ability to come up with answers, but the genius of forming questions.

Huh?

The problem is, too many messages-to-the-world haven't yet figured out what question they're responding to. You've read them before: emails choked with indiscriminate facts ("why are you telling me this?"), peer essays that pull themselves apart in competing directions ("what's your point?"), PowerPoint displays that don't add anything to the talk ("why bother?").

Such messages only give an audience a bad case of reader's block.

With our culture's characteristic velocity, we leap to our conclusions. Our networked world of talk-shows and discussion-boards habituates us to make immediate responses (sometimes not having listened to the question asked). We deem it easier to add to the internet-age's flood of data than to slow down and determine which questions might be worth answering in the first place. As the Nobel-winning Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz noted (surely speaking for all of humanity), "You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions."

The problem with answers is they keep changing. We are a restless species, and paradigm shifts in technology, culture, and outlook will forever foster the churn of revision.

Consider the two most important questions: what is life? Why are we here? Over the span of history, our answers have changed radically. But the unchanged questions still stand as a vital challenge to the seven billion of us alive in the present. Perhaps this is why UP's Core Courses are built not around a set of dogmatic answers, but around a dozen of the most vital questions humanity ever bothered to ask. What the world needs most are those sharp enough to know what to ask of their world and why.

Questions are a tool invented by humans to focus the mind, open up possibilities, and choose a course of action. (Google is only the latest version of this ancient technology.)

My favorite question is "What do I know?" – a query Renaissance essayist Montaigne took as his personal motto. It is at once a shrug of humility ("eh, what do *I* know?"), and a trenchant call to inquiry ("what *do* I know?"). Education comes through these twin engines of humility and curiosity. Former Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, insisted that "All education is a continuous dialogue – questions and answers that pursue every problem to the horizon." Another Supreme Court Justice – Clarence Thomas – last week told our campus that most court cases he

sees pivot upon a single question: “*Who* decides?” The force of questions drives our movement to the horizons of understanding.

One must, of course, steer clear of fake questions (“I know, right?”). These are questions designed to elicit a specific, premeditated answer. We professors are sometimes guilty in class of asking catechistic, guess-what’s-on-my-mind questions. And *Jeopardy*’s answers-as-questions will hardly take us to educational horizons.

Favor instead the open-ended. Many in Philosophy 150 will find that Plato’s dialogues are driven by questions that lead readers on a grand journey of topics. In our own time, author Mark Kurlansky is famous for writing macro-histories of micro-topics (books on cod, salt, Basques, etc.). But his latest book *What?* is composed entirely of questions. Containing over one-thousand question marks, even the book’s table of contents, captions, and chapter titles are questions. It is provocative reading indeed.

Still: don’t do that.

After all, the best final drafts of college-level writing are unified around a *single* answer to a single question. Too many questions interfere with your purpose.

Where the unbounded Kurlansky-like questioning *should* happen is at the early stage of the writing process, where you brainstorm the possibilities through inquiry, where you question your own questions, and where you shape the most promising ones into an exploratory draft. Revision then involves re-shaping the paper around a central question – one that not only best meets the goal of the writing assignment, but also is worded in a way that shows its urgency.

An appointment at our campus Writing Center will help you work with this tool of questioning, whether you’re at the pre-paper brainstorming stage, or revising a draft to form a unified answer to a single, significant question. You’ll find our 25 assistants are trained not to bombard you with the edicts of Strunk & White, but with open-ended questions that will help unlock what you’re really trying to communicate. (Save Strunk & White for the final draft.)

Quo vadis? Where are you going? Let the mobility of questioning, this engine for living intellectually, enable you to write with fertile curiosity and – eventually – with purpose.

Sept. 20, 2012 article for *The Beacon*

The Long View of Writing

Writing is weird. Our minds aren’t structured in the mode of most writing we’re asked to do. The mind wants to long and loaf, to connect and digress, to zag and zig in a fury of over-caffeinated neuro-pyrotechnics, followed by a nap. But most genres of writing (at least, those you’ll encounter at college) insist on the orderly march of ideas, outfitted in the uniform of standard citation and grammar.

Moreover, few of us – if any – are confident writers. I take solace in the German novelist Thomas Mann’s insistence that “A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.” Perhaps that unifying lack of confidence – that recognition that *writing is hard* – shows at least we know the high stakes involved.

Stephen King once compared writing to telepathy – writing as a kind of paranormal ability to

telegraph complex ideas to other minds. Of course, there's nothing magic about it, for it's just a tool our ancestors built, of creating and decoding a system of arbitrary squiggles.

But O how long it takes each of us to work well within that system! Humans have been writing for at least 6,400 years, yet it still takes the first two decades of our lives to learn to control our messages (and to read with precision those of others).

No doubt you've heard the common adult complaint that young people are losing their ability to write. Take solace in the fact that it's an unoriginal claim. On one of the oldest pieces of writing – an ancient Sumerian clay tablet – we find a complaint about the poor quality of the latest generation of scribes. Likely, when you become supervisors and parents and senior citizens, you too will join this intergenerational chorus with its tired refrain about the abysmal writing of the young. But youth is not the main reason for poor communication.

A shift in technology is sometimes fingered as the problem. Apocalyptic warnings about the end of good writing erupted at such moments as when the Romans hooked us on the codex (bound book) 2,000 years ago, or when that hotshot Gutenberg sold us on movable type. Steve Jobs, inventor of the apple from which so many of us have chomped, is only the latest in the line of innovators of scribe platforms. But while these technologies (and genres and demands) shift over the centuries, forceful constructions of words resist the rub of time.

One other fact to consider is that your generation writes more than any other human generation that has come before. Much of this output is informal correspondence (emailing, texting, posting), but it still involves the brainwork of composition on a daily basis, at a scale that far outweighs past generations of scribblers.

All writing, regardless of the mode, is a way of participating in humanity's Great Conversation. And while the internet era has made it easier to participate than ever, the one essential way to be an effective participant is to nurture an awareness of audience. Attention to your readers' needs is a sure way of making your work stand out.

When I ask students in class what a text needs in order to hold their attention as readers in this distractable era, their answers show they're demanding: what they read has to be magnetic, informative, clear, authoritative. We need only recruit this kind of readerly discernment as a guide to our own writing.

So, to arrest a reader's attention, good writing is choosing *one* thing to say rather than a lot of little things. It's cultivating our common delight in surprise. It's finding something that takes us beyond the common sense we all already possess, and foregrounding that significance prominently. It's taking the time to be clear (as grammarian Patricia O'Conner puts it, "Turning out flashy, dense, complicated prose is a breeze; putting things down in simple terms that anyone can understand takes brainwork"). And it's making the time for revision – that act of generosity to ensure we're not just writing for ourselves but for our true reason-for-being: our reader.

An ideal place to start a conversation about your writing is in your professor's office hours. But let that conversation continue by visiting the trained assistants in the Writing Center (see the website for our schedule). Remember as well the single reference book that unifies our university, *The Pocket Wadsworth Handbook*, which should answer most of your technical questions.

Writing is weird, but as you know from daily composition, it's an inexpensive way of participating in the world. It gives us a chance to air our ideas clearly, to make up for where our mouth fails, and to make us momentarily feel, as one UP Writing Assistant says "that you've got the

world figured out.”

Steve Jobs left us with a challenge: “We are here to make a dent in the universe.” Audience-centered writing is one way you can hit it with your best shot.

The Beacon September 29, 2011

Effective Writing is Dialectical

“The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” -F. Scott Fitzgerald

Is there a good way to turn a B paper into an A? To write more honestly? To nudge your essays closer to being truthful and even deathless?

A year’s experience running our University’s Writing Center has given me the opportunity to step outside my disciplinary field of literary studies and explore commonalities and differences in cross-campus styles of writing, from business to nursing to biology. The most striking quality I have found common to almost all writing is this: effective writing is dialectical.

That’s a fancy word for having the courage to wrestle with the contradictions in what we think, know and write. The dialectical method has been used at least since Ancient Greek times (think of Socrates’ relentless questioning). But it took someone with a name as imposing as G. W. F. Hegel to codify the process and apply it on an epic scale. Hegelian dialectics employed a formulation that became popularized in the equation: thesis + antithesis = synthesis. That is, an argument, set in explicit conflict with its opposite, will resolve itself into a harmonious and precise synthesis.

In the honest interiority of our minds, we are dialectical machines, our thoughts churning hourly between confidence and insecurity, between optimism and pessimism, between selfishness and selflessness, ever seeking some kind of workable synthesis for the day. But in the public presentation of ourselves (in person or in writing), we suppress that process in a defensive effort to perform stability.

We neglect the fermentation of dialectical thinking at our peril. Our defensive minds are inclined to cling to our visceral beliefs, giving rise to many a tweet and rant – raw opinion rather than wisdom. Americans are supremely trained in being skeptical of such things as audience-praising media, optimistic politicians, our parents ... so it’s curious that we do not train that skeptical eye upon ourselves in our writing. If we don’t confront potential antitheses to our claims, then it’s likely we’re just blowing smoke up our assessments.

In contrast, the dialectical method’s insistence on inhabiting the other camp enables us to get to know our arguments more intimately. (Says John Stuart Mill, “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that”). The method affords us the chance to empathize with those who think otherwise, and this awareness equips us with new strategies of qualifying our points and convincing our audience. Thomas Paine seized upon such awareness in “Common Sense,” the best-seller that moved colonial America toward independence. He took his idealistic and illegal vision of a new kind of nation and grounded it dialectically with the realistic logic of the sensibility indicated in his title.

On campus, a student enthusiastic about rising rates of education, web resources and educational technology might write a paper arguing how no generation has ever found it easier to

learn than the present one. No matter how much evidence and enthusiasm the student brings, the argument will inevitably fail with a portion of its audience unless it confronts evidence from the other side (contemporary learning compromised by internet misinformation, grade inflation, the distractions of technology). The essay will be more successful if it finds a way to confront and wrestle with such counter-evidence, making such moves as conceding its validity and working this into the argument, or demonstrating how the counterevidence is ultimately insubstantial.

Of course, if I'm trying here to argue for the use of dialectical writing, I'm going to have to devote at least a paragraph to the opposite side: why wouldn't you want to consider the opposite side of your argument? For one thing, it's time-consuming (it's hard enough thinking of reasons to champion an idea). It's dispiriting (our energies were invested in promoting something – not deflating it; doing both leads to confusion). It enables your reader to see all the weaknesses in your argument (we'd hoped they wouldn't notice).

These are valid points. But I find that they ultimately validate my argument for counter-arguing. For good writing should be time-consuming (it's something earned). If the task is dispiriting, reaching truth demands it, for without energy put into both sides, your essay is little more than advertising puffery. And your audience needs to be exposed to your argument's vulnerabilities, for if truth is your goal (rather than self-promotion), your audience needs access to all the facts. By addressing the counterarguments and working with them, you arrive where your most skeptical readers will inevitably go, and head them off.

It's a paradox that the best way to inhabit your argument is to spend time outside of it, countering it, undermining its validity. But centuries of first-rate minds have shown how the honesty and comprehensiveness of the dialectical process make it so. By playing devil's advocate, our writing is touched by the better angels of our nature.

Sept. 9, 2010 article for *The Beacon*

Writing Your Voice at the Center

And so, another season of paper-writing begins on the Bluff. Lab reports, historical assessments, textual analyses, hermeneutical obfuscations – the full spectrum. Yet it's hard to find the reflection necessary for such tasks when the musical babel of “Ra-ra-Ah-ah-aaaah -Ro-ma-Roma-ma-Ga-ga-Ooh-la-laaah...” comes thumping down your dorm hall. It'll surely be necessary to look elsewhere for help.

There are advantages to attending a school like UP, where you're required to take not one writing course but *three*. Your trinity of writing-intensive English 112, Philosophy 150, and Theology 205, reinforces habits of composition that can inform years of future classes, decades of emails, and a career-long set of inevitable writing within your chosen profession. The trio builds your confidence in a skill so many American adults admit they lack. And it can help unfold a new part of your identity. For writing, with its entirely different set of physics than speech, helps you find a voice you never thought you had.

As the new director of our university's Writing Center, I invite you to discover how we can help you develop this writerly voice. Located in the Learning Resource Center – Franz 120 (which also offers assistance in Math, Speech, and International Languages), the Writing Center aims to improve the skillfulness of not just a student's paper but the writer as well. Thanks in large part to the organizing efforts of my predecessors, Professors Geneviève Brassard and John McDonald, the Center has become a dynamic, tightly-run, web-accessible resource.

Our student assistants have a semester's worth of training in professional tutoring and campus writing, and years of experience writing in UP's various disciplines. Their main role is to listen – to hear about where you're blocked, be a sounding board for your ideas, to help you locate what you really want to write. But they can also remind you of things you learned before but perhaps forgot over time: that when it comes to crafting an argument, less is more; that good writing involves a series of stages; that writing is as much an art of what you leave out as one of what you put in (bring both a pen *and* a chisel).

You might think a Writing Center and an English professor like me would be primarily spelling-obsessed grammar police. Don't get me wrong: in my five years of teaching at UP, I've been upset by plenty of papers that were clearly anti-semantic. But in the long process that the revision stage of your writing should be – and the triage that Writing Assistants perform – the most important elements of any kind of writing are its strategies of purpose, structure, and clarity. We call these writing's Higher-Order concerns, in contrast to its Lower-Order concerns of mechanics, because of their urgency. Sure, misspelling is tacky. But overlooking the focus of the assignment is fatal.

As the Assistants can remind you, the early stages of writing are a process of “achieving” uncertainty – of resisting jumping to conclusions, so that your paper can be built around a clearly significant *question*, rather than offering an answer that no one will want to know. Most likely, the answer – or argument – you discover will come to you in the later stages of the process of brainstorming or drafting. No matter the discipline, big words and convoluted arguments are not required. Instead, prize succinctness – without sacrificing sufficient development. Prioritize clarity – without sacrificing precision. Focus on meeting the assignment – without sacrificing your unique contributions and individual voice

Writing Assistants can't help with everything – given the vast landscape of a paper, a half-hour appointment usually can only cover a handful of Higher-Order concerns. But ideally, addressing *those* aspects of the paper will help you address them on your own in future papers.

Most appointments are made online through the Writing Center website (www.up.edu/lrc/writing/), though walk-ins are welcome. Following the appointment, the Assistant will type up a summary of what you covered in the session, sending it both to you and your professor. The Center also offers a writing hotline for brief questions (writing@up.edu). Our advice is also portable, for you can pluck from the walls of the Center a sheaf of photocopied guides to writing in specific disciplines.

Life thus far has learned you to write good. Let UP's writing-intensive classes and resources challenge you to write better.