



# THE BEACON



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## New Faculty Orientation

September 10, 2008—12:00—1:00 p.m.—Chancellor's Dining Room

Come find out what the department

of Educational Development can do for you.

If you are a new faculty member or if you know someone who could benefit from this session, please make plans to attend.

Lunch will be served.

Please call or email Kathleen Hagen at 2-1235 or khgen@nova.edu

## Confessions of a Journal Editor

**Want to know what an editor is really thinking when he's reading that article you submitted?**

*by Jeffrey J. Williams*

It's good that people can't hear me when I edit their writing. "Blah blah blah." "Is this a garbled translation from the Cyrolean?" "Did you reread your writing? I'm not your mother." "Urrrh." It wouldn't be polite.

I have edited a literary and cultural-studies journal for the past 15 years, and it's hard not to feel some irritation when it seems I pay more attention to other people's words than they do.

Of course some academic writing is as elegant as the drape of Armani, and one can't expect everyone to write as well as Louis Menand. But if you pick up a typical article in an academic journal, what happens? Does it put the ding in plodding?

I don't think it's because people have nothing to say but because they don't manage to corral what they want to say, and they don't get any instruction. I don't mean copy editing, although that's faded from the days when two copy editors would sit in an office and read the text backwards to glean any mistakes.

I mean editing in the style of Max Perkins, editing that engages the text at hand, pares it, kneads it, and makes it better. Nowadays there is very little serious editing in academe. It's a scandal, and I think we should change it.

Editing, like sending thank-you cards, is one of those things that everyone acknowledges is a good idea but that few people do. It takes time and you don't reap much reward, certainly not equivalent to the time. There is probably not enough attention to teaching writing in graduate school, but at least you have plenty of models and plenty of chances to practice.

Models of editing are scarce — that is, unless you work with commercial presses or magazines. There, editors really edit. We think of those venues as shallow slaves to the market, but they often pay more attention to the words and ideas than we do. They never lose sight of their audience, holding the quaint assumption that writing is actually written for people — not for tenure or a CV, both of whom are tone-deaf.

Editing can sometimes be overbearing, or twist what you want to say, but most editing is sympathetic. The best editing is like ventrilo- *Continued on page 3*

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# Research Yields Tips on Crafting Better Syllabi

By PAULA WASLEY

Many professors don't give much thought to what students take away from their syllabi. If that's the case, you may want to borrow a page or two from a few researchers who have formally pondered the question.

## Watch Your Language

How you frame assignments and requirements on your syllabus can make a world of difference in how students perceive you, says John T. Ishiyama, a professor of political science at Truman State University.

In 2000, Mr. Ishiyama and Stephen Hartlaub, an associate professor of political science at Frostburg State University, compared undergraduates' responses to two hypothetical syllabi for a course on American government, and published the results in the journal *PS: Political Science & Politics*.

While the requirements on both were identical, one syllabus phrased them in negative or "punishing" terms, and the other in positive or "rewarding" terms. For instance, one syllabus told students who did not seek advance permission to miss an examination or due date that they would be "graded down 20%." The other syllabus stated that students who did not seek permission would only be "eligible for 80% of the total points."

While students appraised both classes as having a similar level of difficulty, they said they would be significantly less comfortable approaching the author of the "punishing" syllabus.

"We all know perception is a big part of learning," says Mr. Ishiyama. If students peg you as either approachable or intimidating from the start, he says, "usually it's a self-fulfilling prophesy."

## Assert Your Authority

"Probably no other contract we will ever encounter is drafted with so little attention paid to the language," says Diann L. Baecker, an associate pro-

fessor of languages and literature at Virginia State University.

Ms. Baecker examined pronoun use on syllabi for clues to how faculty members navigate issues of power and authority in the classroom, for a 1998 study in the journal *College Teaching*.

Her tallies revealed that "you" was the most commonly used pronoun (accounting for 55 percent to 82 percent of the pronoun usage on the sample syllabi). "I"s were relatively absent, composing only 9 percent to 38 percent of the pronouns.

More interesting, perhaps, was the lengths to which many instructors went to avoid using any pronouns at all in their syllabi. "There's no mention of who's calculating the grade," says Ms. Baecker.

In her own syllabi, Ms. Baecker lays it all out in "You" and "I" sections that enumerate the specific responsibilities of each pronominal party. "I think it gives you a more honest classroom where the responsibilities are clear," she says.

## Don't Forget the Date

It's more important than you think, says Jay Parkes, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of New Mexico. Among the syllabus's primary functions, he notes, is as a permanent record within and across an institution.

Accreditation boards often review syllabi to verify that programs meet standard requirements; colleges consult them to determine the number of credits acquired when a student transfers from one institution to another.

When a faculty member leaves or stops teaching a class, his syllabus is often the only document his successor inherits. And, the syllabus — the kind with dates — serves as a record

of personal and pedagogical development.

"I teach the same courses all the time, but they change," says Mr. Parkes. "If my syllabi aren't dated, I can't track the progress let alone anyone else who needs to."

Yet, when Mr. Parkes, Tracy K. Fix, a doctoral student at the University of New Mexico, and Mary B. Harris, an emerita professor of educational psychology at the University of New Mexico, conducted a survey of 200 syllabi for a 2003 study in the *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, they noticed that 42 percent did not mention when the class was held, and 81 percent neglected to mention how many credit hours students would receive.

## Know Your Audience

You may think students don't read, or even keep, your syllabi. You'd be only half right, according to Angela H. Becker and Sharon K. Calhoun, associate professors of psychology at Indiana University at Kokomo.

In a 1999 study, published in *Teaching of Psychology*, Ms. Becker and Ms. Calhoun looked at how students actually use the syllabus. They found that students attended most to items like grading policies and the dates of tests and quizzes on syllabi, and paid relatively little attention to academic dishonesty policies, textbook information, and basic course information like the course number, date, and credit hours. (Sorry, Mr. Parkes.)

As the semester progressed, students took greater note of assignments, the readings covered in tests, and the schedule of topics, but showed even less interest in the syllabus's policies on academic dishonesty and course drop dates — "all the things they should be paying attention to at the end of the semester," points out Ms. Becker.

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Fostering students' ability to retain facts and concepts is a major goal for educators. For many years now, educational specialists have argued that getting students more actively involved in the learning process will achieve that goal. Yet, the implementation of that method seems difficult because most professors have not been taught this way. Their prior experience makes them uncomfortable with shifting away from the traditional role of the teacher to become more of a facilitator.

In a traditional role for professors, the teacher selects the text book, does the follow-up research, searches for answers, and seeks clarification of concepts. And the teacher has a great learning experience. When a professor becomes a facilitator, he or she gives up some of the control over content choices and students become partners in learning. They might have a say in book selection, help lead content review sessions, provide session summaries, or research difficult content questions. When students are involved in these processes they will learn more not only about the content they are studying but as an added bonus, they will begin to develop the lifetime learning skills that will serve them long after they graduate.

Some may argue that this is an inefficient teaching model, that less material can be covered. The question of "Will students



# Stan's Soap Box

## INCREASING STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN CLASS

get the foundation of knowledge necessary to pass teacher-made traditional tests and national boards?" is often raised. There are mixed research findings about this issue. When we test for the application of knowledge rather than recall of facts, results tend to favor the new learning environment.

Learning-centered teaching puts more control in the hands of the students, but it is crucial that we teach students how to function effectively. For instance, placing students into smaller groups without structure can result in chaos with students sharing ignorance and producing little learning. Instead, an effective facilitator needs to be present in the groups; needs to help structure groups to develop goals and deadlines, and needs to share with the groups his or her expectations. This is a sharing model, not abandonment! Otherwise, the process

will fail and we will soon revert back to the traditional role.

Not all of your students will be ready to become self-directed learners or be at the same level of self-directedness. The non-directive teacher has to assess the learner's stage of development in moving toward self-direction. These skills do not develop overnight. As teachers, we need to flex our style to the developmental level of our students. The process is similar to our early childhood development when we first creep, crawl, fall, walk, run, and fly. The support provided by the parent changes with each stage depending on the child's needs and capabilities. So too must we adapt our expectations and support for our developing students. It takes time, but it's worth it. Students learn more when this process is done well, and they learn less when we ignore their developmental levels.

### Confessions *Continued from page 1*

quism. It makes the edited text sound exactly like you, but better. Shorter, sharper, more orderly. It's like getting a transcript of a dinner party and cleaning up the things you said, keeping your words but only the good ones. How many times do you wish that you hadn't uttered some line, or had thought of a better one? With editing you can.

Editing can only occur pen in hand, while reading a particular piece of writing. But I've observed several tendencies in academic writing that, like trans fats, everyone should avoid.

**"Glossomania," or excessive citation.** Yes, we know you've been to the library, or at least Google, but sometimes it's too much of a boring thing. Or more likely masking insecurity in a fog of citation. Or simply being lazy.

Rarely do well-known scholars cite a lot. I was cured of that by a philosophy professor who commented at the end of a paper explicating Aristotle, "You have Aristotle almost letter perfect, although I don't know if I should give the grade to you or to Aristotle."

**Indirection.** Some journal articles suffer from being excessively roundabout, taking longer to get to the point than Henry James. A common habit in literary articles is to start with a quotation or a description of a literary scene. Sometimes, as in Stephen Greenblatt's essays, that can be a brilliant device, but it is sorely overused and often a false start, the real point being on page 5. Or the main points are buried, in the middle of a paragraph on page 12.

A reader shouldn't have to be a de-

tective to find the point. I don't always like his arguments, but I appreciate the mode of someone like Stanley Fish: You know what track the train is on, which way it's going, and where it stops, and it gets to the final station on time. Many academic arguments are more like a Kafka train, only without the irony.

**False difficulty.** A common expression in the humanities is that an author "complicates" a topic. That is another academic habit of overcompensation, much like excessive citation. Shouldn't our goal be explanation rather than complication?

Of course not everything can be simple, and difficulty might go with the territory. But the reverse does not follow: A torturous explanation does not indicate difficult thought; it usually only indicates bad writing, its faux difficulty presuming its faux profun-

## Crafting Better Syllabi

More recently, for a study published in January in the *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, the pair surveyed students in a 15-week general-psychology class about when and how frequently they used their syllabus. They started with the common faculty assumption that students would lose the syllabus, but in fact, they found that the majority held on to their copies through the second half of the semester.

Early in the semester, students reported that they looked at the syllabus just a few hours before class. After the six-week mark, however, there was more evidence of syllabus-assisted advance planning, with most students checking their syllabus a day before class.

"After midterm, they realized two hours before class is not a good time to find out if there is a quiz or what to read for class," says Ms. Becker.

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## Ideas for our next issue

If you have a great teaching technique, let us know and we'll share it with your colleagues. Caught in the act? Tell us good things you've seen faculty do!

## Confessions

dity. Think of Wittgenstein: He presents us with nubs that gnaw at us, but his sentences run clear.

**Self-indulgence.** Sometimes academic essays string together minor corrections or comments on small points, producing what Foucault once described as "*une petite pedagogie*." Reading such essays is like overhearing high-school gossip, which endlessly dissects events, and the intricacies of who said what to whom.

The problem is not jargon, but the presumption of interest and more than a little self-indulgence. Who, other than one's analyst, should care about a chain of free association? I'm more interested in where writers have gotten, and they should distill it before they tell me. "Reductive" has become a term of dismissal, but history, for instance, would take a long time to tell without reduction; a key to good academic writing is distillation.

**Lazy language.** Cutting clichéd connectors has cost me boxes of blue pens — "in other words," "to put it another way," "in addition," are the lice of academic writing. Use them once and they might have some snap; use them eight times in an essay and they're tics.

Another glitch is announcing or narrating what you are doing, in phrases like "I would like to argue." Such meta-comments might aid in moments of physical intimacy but are usually unnecessary during an essay. Just argue it!

And then there are a slew of phrases that should henceforth be banned. "Always already" was once striking, but that was in 1972 and it's now a cliché. "Cutting edge" is a phrase that is anything but cutting edge. "Problematic" is just clunky, and actually what people probably mean is "troublesome" or "contradictory." It would be asking too much to stave the tide of Latinates, as George Orwell advises in "Politics and the Eng-

lish Language," but a little more zip would be nice, and if not zip, then simple is always in style.

Lest I seem a tad crotchety, let me add that editing does carry its share of gratifications. As most editors will tell you, probably the best reward is publishing the first essay of a young scholar and working with him to refine it. We are teachers, after all, and it's always good when you see tangible proof that the lesson took, even better if it goes beyond anything you might have advised.

It's also gratifying to work with a more-experienced scholar to whom you suggest a new tack, in keeping with her leanings, that she hadn't thought of. It surprised me when I first started editing that younger scholars were frequently more set in their ways and less open to changes, whereas experienced ones were usually glad if you did some of their work.

Another gratification is having people tell me (I hope without tacking my picture to a dart board) that they imagine my blue pen when they go over what they have written (red is too 9th-grade English teacher, black hard to distinguish, and I just like blue). Although "the editor with the blue pen" doesn't seem quite as elegant as "the reader over your shoulder," I think they realize that I value what they have to say, in fact so much that I pay attention to every word.

*Jeffrey J. Williams is a professor of English and literary and cultural studies at Carnegie Mellon University and editor of the Minnesota Review.*

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## Quotes to Brighten Your Day...

Nothing in education is so astonishing as the amount of ignorance it accumulates in the form of inert facts. *Henry B. Adams*

'Tis education forms the common mind, Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclin'd.

*Alexander Pope*