

1 Why Writing is Such a Pain in the Backside

I like to ask students questions. It's fun to see their responses, and it helps remind me to shut up once in a while and listen. (If you haven't figured this out yet, you must know: teachers love the sound of their own voices.)

One of the questions I ask the first day of class is this: do you like writing college essays?

As you can imagine, very few students raise their hands in response. Once in a while one student will, and I always keep an eye on this student throughout the term, because it's quite likely this is the person about whom, years later, neighbors will say, "But he was such a quiet guy..."

Because NOBODY likes to write college essays. They're boring and difficult, and students always get nailed for stupid things like comma splices and apostrophes. It's much more fun to send tweets and emails and texts, where the entire conversation could be this: LOL TMI GG TTYL.

If you don't know what those acronyms mean, welcome to my world.

But writing college essays involves thesis statements and audience analysis and credible sources and citations and... exhausting, isn't it?

That's bad enough, but it's made worse because of two additional challenges:

Challenge 1: The World's Craziest Language

The English language is, in a word, psychotic. First, let's just consider the sheer size of the language.

French, for example, has about 75,000 total words in its vocabulary. English, on the other hand, has somewhere between 500,000 and 1 million words. That is a HUGE vocabulary to master.

The French like to keep their language pure, while we English speakers will latch onto and use any ridiculous word that comes along. Case in point: bling.

And these 1 million words do not have one common origin, either. They are a combination of Old English, French, Latin, Greek, Danish, and several other languages.

Way back when, we just had Old English, or Anglo Saxon English. It was spoken by a relatively small group of farmers and fishermen on a relatively small island off the coast of Europe. Many of their words were basic, and are words we still use today like "tall" and "short," "food and water," and farming words like "sheep" and "ox" and "earth" and "field." But there were two unique things about this group of people:

1. They tended to get invaded a lot
2. They got even with their invaders by stealing their language.

For example, when the Vikings invaded, the English got even with them for burning their thatch roofed houses by stealing all the Viking sk- words (sky, skirt, ski, skill, skin).

The same happened after the French invasion of 1066. The English immediately began stealing French words, and oftentimes creating English versions of them, until the

French finally got tired of it and went home. For example, while the English ate cow, the French ate boeuf, which the English quickly changed to beef. The English ate deer, but the French ate venison, which the English also stole. (The word, not the venison. Although they may have stolen the venison, too.)

As Christianity came to the island, words like litany, martyr, and shrine entered the language, and the Renaissance brought upwards of 12,000 new words to the language. Now English included words like atmosphere, pneumonia, skeleton, and gravity. Even today, many new inventions get names that have Latin or Greek origins, such as television and cyberspace.

When the English came to North America and found Native Americans here, they added their words to the language: tomahawk, wigwam, papoose, and others.

The point is, every time English speaking people have come into contact with another culture, whether they were the invaders or being invaded, the English stole their language. Apparently that's just how we English speakers roll. That is why we have upwards of 1 million words.

The same is true today. First, there are several English speaking countries, and all have developed unique terms. The British talk about being "paralytic" or "legless" when somebody is falling down drunk. Both the British and the Australians use the term "chemist" for pharmacist. In the U.S., we're constantly inventing and using new words.

Consider words like "bling" and "dub" and "beatboxer."

There is a good side to this. With more words, we have more ability to express what is in our head (more about this in the next section). For example, if someone cuts me off in traffic, and I later tell a friend about it, I can use any of these words to describe my feelings:

Angry
Ticked off
Seething
Irate
Irritated
Furious
Enraged
Annoyed

And there are even more options than just these. What's nice is, you can pick just the right word to match your emotion. Are you more than angry but not quite furious? Would seething work? Take your pick!

If you just had one option, but it didn't quite fit your emotional state, you would be out of luck. But because we have so many, you can choose just the right word.

The bad news is, this is why our language is so psychotic.

Because these words came from different root languages, they often come with different rules. For example:

If you have one young man, you would call him a BOY, right?
And if you have two, you would call them... BOYS, correct?

Now, let's say that you have one germ; we'll call it a bacteria.
What do you have if you have two germs? Now what do you call them?

I'll wait while you think.

Figured it out yet? It's a trick question. "Bacteria" is already plural.
The singular of bacteria is "bacterium."

Doesn't quite follow the basic rules of English, does it?

This is why you've probably heard the term, "mass media" or "mainstream media."

Note how the word, "media" has the same ending as "bacteria": --ia. It's because they are both of Greek origin and they are both plural.

A newspaper is a MEDIUM of communication. So is a TV or radio station. Each is a MEDIUM of communication. Again, note the ending of that word: --IUM. Just like bacterium, when you have just ONE of something.

So "media" is the plural of "medium."

And "media" is plural. So to say, "The media is biased" is grammatically **incorrect**.
The correct form would be this: The media **are** biased.

Confusing, right?

Welcome to the wonderful world of the psychotic language we call English.

Okay, one final story before we move on to the second reason college essay writing is so difficult.

In Iran, they speak Persian. The Persian word for king is "shah." Those who were alive in 1979 might remember how the Shah of Iran caused problems for the hostages taken in the U.S. embassy in Tehran, Iran.

The Persian word for dead is "mat." If you put these two together, you have "shah mat," which translated would be "the king is dead."

If you change it slightly to sound a bit more English, you have "checkmate," which of course means, "the king is dead."

We English speakers are a bunch of language thieves! (No wonder the Iranians hate us.)

Challenge 2: The Struggles of Communication

And this is to say nothing of the basic struggles of communication. Human beings are social creatures, and yet we're fairly lousy at communicating.

Let's look at two people speaking to each other:

Person 1 has an idea in his head. Let's say it's his house. He wants to get it into person 2's head, so Person 2 can see what Person 1's house looks like. This is why we communicate—to share ideas between people. The problem is, there is no direct way to do this. If we lived in a *Matrix* world, we could just stick a phone jack into each of their heads and be done with it.

But we have no such luck. Because we have no direct link to each other's minds, we have to find another way to get an idea from Person 1's head into Person 2's head. So we use words.

Understand that words are nothing more than **verbal copies of reality**.

We have other copies of reality that we use on a regular basis. If I want you to know what my house looks like, I could take a picture of it. When looking at the photo, we're not looking at the real house; just what we might call a **photographic copy of reality**. A videotape of your house would be a **videographic copy of reality**. We could draw a picture, and create an **artistic copy of reality**. Again, in each case, what you are looking at is not the thing itself, but just a copy of the thing.

Words are the same thing. Again, they are a **verbal copy of reality**. They are words that attempt to paint a picture of a real thing.

So when Person 1 has an image of his house in his head, and he wants to get that image into Person 2's head, he has to translate that idea from a picture into words.

And that translation process is messy.

The problem with words is, they tend to be inexact. It's like we're looking at a picture through different lenses.

For example, if you tell me that your house is "big," what if my definition of "big" is two stories, 4 bedrooms, and 3 baths, but your definition of "big" is Buckingham Palace?

If you tell me your house is "blue," does that mean "navy blue" or "baby blue"?

If you tell me that you live in a "ranch house," does that mean a one-story house with a basement, or does it mean a house located on a ranch?

On top of this, we all see the world through certain filters, and we carry baggage from our past. For example, I lived in Virginia for several years. My first few days in Virginia, every woman I met at the grocery store, the fast food restaurant, etc., called me, "Honey." I thought I was just totally irresistible. I thought every woman in town was hitting on me. As it turns out, Southern women call everybody "Honey." Imagine my surprise—and disappointment!

As Person 1 translates the picture of his house in his head into words, he might use words that are interpreted in a slightly different way by Person 2. Because of this, when the description is done, Person 2 might have a very different picture in her head.

As for baggage, let me explain that in a story.

My best friend from high school lived in Italy for two years back in the 1980s (yes, I'm THAT old). While there, he learned to cook Italian food very well. He is an excellent cook.

He married a woman who grew up in a family that was very traditional in its views of the roles of men and women. However, his wife never fit into this family. Instead of cooking and sewing and such things, she preferred reading the Wall Street Journal and taking classes in business and economics. Her mother and sisters teased her constantly about her lack of "wifely" skills.

Even when she became a highly successful business woman, she felt inadequate in several ways. When she married my friend, she felt even more inadequate, as she was now a wife and had few of the skills she had been taught a wife should possess. However, she decided that she was going to be a traditional wife, and be good at it.

So one day she was cooking Italian food to prove what a good wife she was, and my friend (remember, my friend is an amazing Italian cook) came home from work, looked at the items bubbling away on the stovetop, and asked, "So what's all this then?"

His wife burst into tears and ran out of the house, leaving my friend standing in the kitchen with no idea of what had just happened.

Do YOU see what happened?

My friend's poor wife had been told her entire life that she had no "wifely" skills, such as cooking. My friend was a wonderful cook. When he innocently asked, "So what's all this then?" he simply wondered what was for dinner.

But his wife heard, "This looks like garbage, and your mother and sisters were right about you."

THAT is baggage.

We all carry terms or phrases with us that might have been hurtful from our past. If another person uses one of these, even innocently, suddenly the picture in our head becomes nothing like the picture in the speaker's head. In fact, we might very well be tempted to knock the picture right out of the other person's head!

My point is this: of course writing is difficult. Not only do we have to deal with a highly complicated language that was built from several other languages, all with their own rules of spelling and grammar, but we also have to deal with the fact that we are humans, and humans are, inherently, a difficult bunch to communicate with!

