

Prof Issues ‘Trigger Warning’ to His Editing Class

Take any stack of student essays these day, and you’ll most likely get a “basket of deplorables.”

As we at Intellectual Takeout have pointed out [on several occasions](#), only about 25% of America’s high school seniors are proficient in writing. We don’t really place most of the blame for this on the students. Chances are that the majority of them have teachers who don’t really write well themselves and don’t know how to teach good writing habits.

Apparently, venerable editing professor John McIntyre of Loyola University in Maryland agrees with us.

In [a humorous video](#) for the *Baltimore Sun* that has been viewed over one million times, Professor McIntyre repeats his “trigger warning” that he gives to students the first day of the editing class he has taught for the past 21 years. As any writer knows, editing is an indispensable part of good writing.

Here are some selections from the video:

“This is going to be a difficult class. Writing, as you already know, is difficult. Editing is even more difficult. You can write by ear, you can write by instinct. But you have to edit analytically. And it is a skill and a craft that is not easily acquired. It takes time, it takes diligence, it takes attention. And part of what is going to be difficult in this class is that if you are like the 700 or so students who have preceded you here, you are wobbly in English grammar and usage.

Now this is not your fault. In all probability, you have been

the victim of bad teaching. That is, you have either not been taught proper grammar or usage at all, or you have been taught rubbish.

[...]

Now, one student wrote in an evaluation: 'He just did the same thing over and over, day after day.'

And that is exactly it. Editing is done word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, and it is done that way every time. And we will go over texts of appalling dullness, and you will be charged with taking what is defective, and rendering it merely mediocre. Because that is pretty much the most that editing can ever accomplish.

Now, part of the dullness comes to this, and I want to tell you what one of your predecessors wrote at ratemyprofessors.com: He is a horrible teacher. DO NOT TAKE HIM. The course is interesting, but this guy's a stiff who thinks he knows it all. You will leave this class so confused and end up with a grade that definitely deserves to be better than what you actually get. Don't get me wrong, he's a funny guy, but not worth it.'

Well, I can show you how it's done. I can explain the basics of grammar and usage so that you can pick up on the most common errors. I can identify for you the spots where you are shaky. I can show you where the language is shifting and where you will have to make judgments. I will show you how to identify the problems, the errors, the flaws in a text so that you can pick it up out of the gutter, brush it off, wipe it down, clean it up, shave it, make it respectable. You will

have here the opportunity to learn the craftsman's satisfaction of picking up a piece of inexpert prose, and knowing when it has been through your hands, it is more accurate, it is clearer, it is more effective. This is what editors do. And if you take the time and work with me, by the end of this semester, you will be a better writer, because you will be a better editor of your own prose. And you will be miles ahead, you will be parsecs ahead of your fellow students who do not take this course."

I can attest from personal experience that one good writing teacher can make up for all the wrongs of one's previous teachers.

I wish more students today could take Professor McIntyre's class.