

# Our Words Matter: Writing in the Age of Communication

*In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more. It was cold in the fall in Milan and the dark came very early. Then the electric lights came on, and it was pleasant along the streets looking in the windows. There was much game hanging outside the shops, and the snow powdered in the fur of the foxes and the wind blew their tails. The deer hung stiff and heavy and empty, and small birds blew in the wind and the wind turned their feathers. It was a cold fall and the wind came down from the mountains.*

To me that opening from Ernest Hemingway's short story *In Another Country* is one of the most beautiful paragraphs in the English language. The short words, the way each sentence folds back upon its predecessor, and the precise use of language and punctuation rouse my admiration every time I read it.

The opening lines of [\*The Great Gatsby\*](#) have also long glittered like diamonds for me:

*In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.*

*'Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,' he told me, 'just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.'*

Many other writers, not all of them novelists, take our native tongue and dress it in beauty. In books like [\*South of Broad\*](#) and [\*The Prince of Tides\*](#), Pat Conroy describes South Carolina's Lowcountry so exquisitely that readers can taste the tang of the salt air above the marshes. William

Manchester's account of John F. Kennedy's death and his biography of Winston Churchill brought me dreams in Technicolor while I was sleeping. Several poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay, especially "Dirge Without Music" and "Love Is Not All," still surprise me with their lovely language, though the final lines of both poems still mystify me.

We may lack the talent to match these commanders of language, but most of us, once taught, are capable of handling words with care in order to put together sentences and paragraphs that might aid us in every written endeavor from love letters to office memos.

Of course, those two requirements may explain why many so often mangle the meaning of emails to a family members or botch texts to friends and end up hurting feelings. In the business world, this sloppy usage costs our economy hundreds of [billions of dollars](#) a year.

Practically anyone can learn to write clear, concise English, but they must be taught. Here is where so many of our schools and teachers fail our young people. We long ago abandoned grammar and the art of composition in our classrooms, instead encouraging students to write essays as if they were free-verse poets or adherents of James Joyce's stream of consciousness style.

In my 2018 article "[Why Are Americans Such Lousy Writers?](#)" I looked at this situation in our schools and suggested corrections. There I mentioned these reasons for this failure:

*Far too many of our students receive little instruction or practice in composition. Here I place the blame squarely on our educational system. In many schools, grammar is neglected after fifth or sixth grade. Unlike math, which follows a natural progression, writing is all too often taught piecemeal or not at all, with little coordination of purpose or sense of advancement from grade to grade. Moreover, I*

*suspect many teachers are averse to the work required to develop competent writers. When I was teaching, I graded an average of 60 essays or journals every week. The work was grueling, the writing rarely inspired, yet that is how writers are made.*

Our careless use of language can also play havoc with communication. The articles I read online every day, for example, often contain errors of grammar, misspellings, and omissions. I suspect that in most cases this is because the writers are performing under a deadline—My own work is also guilty of these oversights, as I find myself frequently corrected by my editors.

To prevent such mistakes and confusion, we must place a higher value on language and our use of it. We should review that text we write to our boss before hitting send, we should double-check that order of supplies for our restaurant before emailing it out, and we should edit that message to a loved one to avoid causing confusion or giving offense.

Our electronic devices have given us this great age of communication. When we make writers of our young people and editors of ourselves, we can take full advantage of these wonderful gifts.

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