

From the Guidance Office

Dear Drs. Fidditch and Foilitch::

I have a serious professional problem. I teach English composition to eleventh- and twelfth-graders in a suburban high school. They are anxious about their writing. Their parents and counselors tell them they must have the basic skills if they hope to be accepted at the colleges of their choice.

Specifically, my students wish to know how to punctuate well. They say, "Ms. Punctilio, please teach us how to punctuate well."

Every time I try to teach them a lesson on the virtue of the comma, the expressive power of the colon, the exhilaration of the dash, they slump, sigh, squirm, sleep, and, as if that were not enough, snore.

Doctors Fidditch and Foilitch, can you help me?

Sincerely,
(Ms.) Inez M. Punctilio

Dear Ms. Punctilio:

Your students' direct way of saying things is gratifying; your appeal to us in their behalf is moving.

You didn't mention the shelves of dusty handbooks that offer hundreds of drills and exercises in the very skills that your anxious students covet. You have found, I suppose, that the best of those drills and exercises fail to help any but the rarest of students.

Let me relay to you the simple yet exciting practice of a teacher in North Farmington (who will identify herself, I hope, so that we can give you her name in a later forum), who told me what she does for students like yours. I'll describe her method in steps:

Step One: She finds some prose (expository or narrative--any kind that figures to be interesting to her students).

Step Two: She takes fifteen minutes of class time to dictate a paragraph or longer segment to her students--first at ordinary speed, for them to enjoy the prose, then slowly, so that students can copy her dictation and punctuate as they copy.

Step Three: She initiates a discussion of how the students punctuated what they wrote--allowing, of course, for differences among their choices; allowing as well for a student's improvement on the punctuation of the published writer (whose editor is only human, after all).

The crucial factor, as always: That North Farmington woman seems herself a witty and interested teacher, able to identify prose that kids enjoy listening to and obviously eager that they should learn in their own good time.

Sincerely,
Bertrand M. Fidditch

Dearest I.M.:

Your students' anxiety (and that of their "parents and counselors") puts me in mind of a middle-aged drunkard:

There was this drunkard, of middle age, whose youth had been wasted in the single-minded getting of money and status and power--along with the spouse and children that had accrued somehow. For this drunkard there had never been time to pause for higher things--for contemplation, for conversation, for golf.

Trucking one morning down the turnpike en route to a Board of Directors' meeting in a company pickup, the drunkard caught, in the corner of one red eye, some golfers contemplating and conversing about the unrepaired divot on the thirteenth tee.

Seized of a sudden by a blend of remorse, envy, and resolution, the

drunkard directed the company chauffeur to take the very next exit and, by-passing several bars, to drive directly to the country-club pro shop, where the pro was holding office hours.

To the pro the drunkard explained: "I have never taken time for higher things--have never held a golf club in my hands. Yet know, in my middle age, I covet the contemplation and conversation of my peers--and their handicaps. My liver is shot, it's true; my limbs are shaky. It would give me migraines, moreover, to practice at keeping my eye always on the ball. Nor do I have time to work now on a backswing and on pitching and putting and all that.

"But I am rich. Name your price and teach me simply the basics; teach me how to play eighteen little old golf holes below, say, eighty. I will pay."

"Be gone," said George Guru (golf pro, called GG by his pupils). "Abandon spouse and children and the getting and spending of money. Take cold showers and long walks. On those walks, carry a stick. With it, hit stones and contemplate where they roll. Forty-five dollars."

The drunkard bellied up for a double at the country-club bar--extra dry, to steady the nerves--and complained to the bartender: "That Guru guy in the pro shop, he flatly refused to teach me the basic skills."

The bartender's dacquiri smile (frozen) melted into a sympathetic frown. Then, to be in time for the Board of Directors' meeting, the drunkard sped away--a sadder but not much wiser woman.

Fondly,

Ignatius Foilitch, B.S., Ph.D.

Pro (cont. from p. 14)

The prewriting approach is just that: an approach. It does not, and could not, attempt to solve all problems related to the teaching of writing; it can help to create a comfort zone for student confidence within which student and teacher can work together. Criticism is easier to take when it is given constructively by a teacher-reader in an atmosphere where the student has learned that although he may not be the best, he can write; he can improve.

After Lucas taught at Cambridge for forty years, he observed: "To write really well is a gift inborn; those who have it teach themselves; one can only try to help and hasten the process." The prewriting approach can be a way "to help and hasten the process."

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