

A TRIBUTE TO JOSEPH WILLIAMS ON THE OCCASION OF HIS BEING PRESENTED WITH THE GOLDEN PEN AWARD BY THE LEGAL WRITING INSTITUTE

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Back in 1980, several people told me that I had to meet Joe Williams. We'd get along, they said. We thought alike. So at that year's Conference on College Composition and Communication, I looked him up and tracked him down. That day changed my life. Everything I know about the teaching of writing that I learned from another person, I learned from Joe. No one else understood the language as well or knew so well what to do with that knowledge.

Composition teachers and dermatologists are very much alike: In both cases, their patients never die, but neither are they ever completely healed. Therefore, they have to keep coming back for more help. In both cases, there seems continually to be a nagging sense of at least partial futility, of the impossibility of progress.

Why, for 200 years before the 1980s, had there been no real progress made in this country in the teaching of writing? Because most of the people involved in that effort were teachers of Freshman Composition. What are the professional results for these teachers at the end of the term? If they teach it poorly, what is the punishment? They have to teach it again next term. If they teach it well, what is their reward? They get to teach it again next term. There is no accountability. But if they were writing consultants for a world-class law firm, they would have to come up with something that works, that works fast, and that makes a permanent difference, or they would not be invited back. It makes sense that the first great breakthrough in the teaching of writing came, therefore, from a world-class writing consultant. And before Joe Williams, there were no world-class writing consultants.

By 1980, Joe had conceived of a methodology of rare and powerful promise, something that actually had a chance to make a dif-

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ference, quickly and permanently. He invited two of his colleagues at the University of Chicago, Gregory Colomb and Frank Kinahan, and myself to go on the road to see if we could make something of it. The firm was named Clearlines. The three of them also developed it on the undergraduate level at the University under its charming and now famous name, the Little Red Schoolhouse.

The accomplishing of this major challenge called for confidence and courage, knowledge and know-how, focus and ferocity. These are the primary characteristics of Joe Williams—along with his piercing intelligence, his scholarly thoroughness, and his capacious eye for patterns and the big picture.

You have to be a fearless person to walk into the legal departments of IBM and Bank of America with a new theory, as yet unexposed to the harsh light of the professional marketplace. You also have to be resourceful and imaginative. I am reminded of a cold winter day in the early 1980s when Joe showed up at a Chicago law firm to give an eight-hour lecture, only to find that no one knew where the box of handouts had gone. He tap-danced adroitly and engagingly for forty-five minutes—until someone discovered the missing box, hidden in the rear of the room under someone's carelessly discarded overcoat.

At first, these extremely sharp lawyers beat up on us on a regular basis: They punched holes in the theories; they challenged the assumptions; they argued the examples. We dragged ourselves back to Chicago, month after month, patching and repatching the holes until the original theories, honed through our experience and practice, withstood and finally pre-empted lawyerly attacks. By the late 1980s, we knew we were really onto something. Firms were no longer hiring Joe and his friends just because it seemed the moral and logical thing to do—to make some kind of effort to “help” their lawyers better handle the language. They hired us because we gave them something that actually worked. And it worked not primarily to make an individual legal document better, but rather to make better writers of the lawyers, permanently.

The good effect spread even by osmosis. One international firm was inviting us twice a year into its home office in Chicago to teach a new batch of twenty lawyers for four days. By the third or fourth year of this association, we were noticing that our new students, who as yet knew nothing of our approach, were already writing better than their predecessors, just because they were surrounded by others who were already writing more effective prose.

Joe has been the consultant to the stars. I don't know how many clients he has had by now, but here are just a few of them that we of Clearlines handled in the 1980s:

the law firms of

Jenner & Block
Fulbright & Jaworski
Vinson & Elkins
Dewey Ballantine
Skadden Arps
Morgan, Lewis & Bockius
Pepper Hamilton

and the legal departments of

IBM
Bank of America
Eli Lilly
Pfizer, Inc.
Union Carbide.

I offer this list not only to reflect Joe's ability and his professional standing but also to give some sense of what ripple effects his teaching has had. After a quarter century of teaching our approach to the language, I never go three weeks without someone stopping me on the street or in a grocery store or in an airport to tell me that since they took my writing workshop, they have never had a publication refused or a grant application turned down. Joe has taught thousands of lawyers in person, but through my teaching, and Greg Colomb's teaching, and especially through Joe's powerful and elegant book, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, now in its eighth edition and widely acclaimed as the best book ever written on writing, scores of thousands have come to understand new and effective ways to control the English language. And they can actually *use* this information, with stunning effects.

In Ezra Pound's 1938 book, *Culture* (popularized later as *Guide to Kulchur*), he tells us that Confucius was asked, "If the

Prince of Mei appointed you head of the government, to what [would] you first set your mind?"¹ Confucius answered,

To call people and things by their names, that is by the correct denominations, to see that the terminology was exact If the terminology be not exact, if it fit not the thing, the governmental instructions will not be explicit, if the instructions aren't clear and the names don't fit, you can not conduct business properly.

If business is not properly run, the rites and music will not be honoured, if the rites and music be not honoured, penalties and punishments will not achieve their intended effects, if penalties and punishments do not produce equity and justice, the people won't know where to put their feet or what to lay hold of or to whom they [should] stretch out their hands.

That is why an intelligent man cares for his terminology and gives instructions that fit. When his orders are clear and explicit they can be put into effect. An intelligent man is neither inconsiderate of others nor futile in his commanding.²

Brilliant. But Confucius did not understand language the way Joe Williams does. The great breakthrough of the Clearlines or Little Red Schoolhouse approach, birthed by this Golden Pen honoree and developed with him by those fortunate few of us who have had the honor and pleasure of working with him, produces this central insight: Readers of English take the great majority of their clues for how to make sense of a text *not* from word choice nor from word recognition but from structural location. To put it more simply, *where* a word appears in a sentence tells a reader *what* to do with it. Get the *placement* right and the *word* wrong, and more people will understand what you mean than if you get the *word* right and the *placement* wrong.

For those unfamiliar with this approach, let me offer a single, simple example. Take the phrase "since 1981." You might think, at first glance, that you "know" what that phrase "means." If I were to argue that it means different things when placed in different contexts, you might well be willing to agree without much of a struggle. But the *new* news, the news Joe Williams has brought to us so strikingly, is that "since 1981" will "mean" different things

¹ Ezra Pound, *Culture* 16 (New Directions 1938).

² *Id.* at 16–17.

depending on *where* in the sentence it appears—at its beginning, middle, or end. Put it at the beginning:

Since 1981, blah blah blah has happened.

What do most readers of English think will come next? A chronology:

Since 1981, blah blah blah has happened. In 1983, . . . and then in 1987, . . . and then in 1992

Put it at the end of the sentence:

Blah blah blah has happened since 1981.

Now most readers of English will expect not a chronology but rather information as to why 1981 was such a watershed moment:

Blah blah blah has happened since 1981. In March of that year

Put it in the middle of the sentence:

Blah blah blah, since 1981, blah blah blah

Now it makes no promise whatsoever where we might go from here. Its structural location tells us to treat it as helpful but incidental, non-controlling information.

There are five crucial questions that every reader of English must have answered correctly by the end of reading every sentence in order to make of that sentence the sense the writer intended:

- (1) What is going on here?
- (2) Whose story is this?
- (3) How does this sentence link backward to the one I've just finished reading?
- (4) How does this sentence lean forward to where I may be going from here?
- (5) What is the most important piece of information in this sentence that I should be emphasizing the most?

All five of these crucial questions are answered primarily by *structural location*. We look in certain *places* in a sentence to learn certain *things*. And *that* is what Joe Williams has taught us. When

I finish two days of lecture in a law firm, at least one person stops me on my way out the door to ask, with some exasperation, “Why didn’t anyone ever tell me this *before*?”³

Why was Joe the person who was able to accomplish what no one in more than 200 years of language instruction in this country had previously been able to accomplish? I’ll give you my read on it. (He thinks this particular insight goes over the top or off the deep end, but he’s wrong on this one, and I’m right.) On the one hand, composition teachers traditionally have spent most of their energy trying to help students find things to say to fill up pages that otherwise need not have been filled. Their focus is on their students and how they can make their way successfully through the course. Linguists, on the other hand, care primarily about how the language functions and how it is put together. Their focus is on the language itself and *not* on its use in the world. When I brought a linguist friend into my composition classroom in 1978 to be of help, he told the class he had no help to offer them. Joe is the first person to bridge this gap successfully—to take linguistic knowledge and apply it in the real world of professional communication.

He is a renowned linguist, author of one of the best books ever written on the history of the language. But then he took what he knew, and especially what the Prague School of Linguistics had taught him, and channeled all that knowledge with his prodigious energy into the task of figuring out how real people in the real world could better make their language represent their thoughts so readers could actually understand what they were trying to say. He did this by figuring out how readers go about the act of reading. We all know about this process unconsciously in our role as readers; Joe’s work has helped us learn about it consciously in our role as writers. And then the great bonus: We discovered for real—although we had always presumed it in theory—that writing better makes you think better, which makes you write better, which makes you think better, and so forth. Usually we think of this kind of revolving door as a vicious cycle. Joe Williams has changed all that into a virtuous cycle. And for doing that, he is justly the recipient of this year’s Golden Pen Award. He is a great man.

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³ For those who wish to understand in a great deal of detail how this approach functions, see my book that explains it all for would-be teachers of the approach: *Expectations: Teaching Writing from the Reader’s Perspective* (Pearson/Longman 2004).