Getting it Down on Paper

by Ken Yellis

Museum education seems to be a field which is populated by and attractive to people who either cannot write, are reluctant to write, do not like to write, fail to understand the importance of writing, do not see the relationship between writing and professionalism, do not see any relationship between writing and what they really like to do, have mental or emotional hangups about writing—or, perhaps, all of the above. Moreover, many of our colleagues around the country who do write may be doing highly innovative and even exciting work, but fail to communicate that, somehow, in their prose. Many, too, have little familiarity with the existing museum education literature, apparently, since many of the methodological breakthroughs they announce were known to Charles Willson Peale.

Indeed, writing is the main method by which professionals secure advances in their disciplines, disseminate knowledge of superior techniques, and mark change over time. But museum educators seem rather unconscious of time, perhaps because so few of us remain long in the field or come to it from a systematic training program. However that may be, I do not write to decry the state of the profession, which actually seems fairly robust just now. My role and that of *The Journal of Museum Education* have been to try to provide both support and leadership to museum educators as they endeavor to communicate better. It is my intention to be supportive of that endeavor here, by offering some concepts that may be helpful in thinking about writing.

It may not be possible to do anything about *all* the reasons museum educators do not write, but we may be able to work with some of the *emotional* and *mechanical* ones. It is liberating, I have found, for those of us who have problems with writing to confront these problems and to work with our negative feelings directly. The hangups that prevent us from writing well or, indeed at all are often quite explicitly voiced, and here are some of them:

- Writing is a talent or gift;
- Writing is self-expression;
- Writing is an art form;
- Writing is highly technical;
- Writing is hard.

I argue that none of these statements is entirely true and most are totally false, at least for ordinary purposes. I propose to take these obstacles, in order, and attempt to substitute a positive attitude for each.

Fallacy: Writing is a Talent or Gift

Some writers have what might be called a talent or gift, but most do perfectly well without it, getting by on industry and discipline. Just as most musicians do not have perfect pitch, most writers do not have an inborn ear for language. As with good musicianship, a good ear is helpful, certainly, but, the ear can be tuned. Mozarts are quite as rare among writers as among composers. Writing is like the rest of life: it *can* be and, in fact, *has* to be *learned*; one gets better at it the more of it one does; it gets easier the more of it one does; practice is necessary to keep it sharp and, unfortunately, late twentieth-century Americans have had the luxury of being very lazy about it. It is no accident that we now speak of things being "authored" rather than "written"; words these days are manufactured, processed, not written.

Part of the reason for this fallacy being so widespread is the confusion between *writing* and *style*: good prose can be serviceable and still fall well short of elegance. The master craftspersons of language are certainly few and far between; more importantly, for most of the uses of writing they are not needed. Most of the purposes of writing are occasional and ephemeral, but many of us who experience writer's block do so because of our awe at writing for the ages, as if the ages cared. And, too often, because we don't write enough, we don't have the good habits whose momentum can carry us through those patches where our sails catch no wind.

Writing, in fact, is itself a discipline and it can be mastered with discipline. This is most easily done by linking it to as many other activities as possible. When you are to give a talk, however brief or however familiar a topic, write it first. If you give the same talk again, *re*write it, even if you were happy with how it went the first time. Write out your tours, even if you would never contemplate reading a tour; my minister writes out each of his sermons, even though he talks from notes. Write out your phone calls; write up things after they happen; write letters to your mother, your mentor, or me.

For most people and for most situations, writing is not a natural quality that one does or does not have. It is, rather, a skill one can do more or less well, and which one can work to strengthen. The best writers have to work at it all the time, experience writer's block, often have difficulty finding the right word or phrase, make glaring errors of commission or omission, commit howlers, lapse into cliches and the passive voice, and have all the other problems mere mortals have. Shall I not write because I am not Dostoevski or because I become blocked on one article? You don't stop breathing because your nose is stuffed; writing should be breath to us.

Second Fallacy: Writing is Self-Expression

Good writing is often so very far from self-expression, it

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seems the polar opposite of it. It is transportation pure and simple, *i.e.*, a way of conveying an idea, or a datum, or an insight from one place to another, from here to there, from my head to yours. This is not to say that writing is not a creative act; obviously it can and should be a creative *process*, and part of the overall process of *communication*. Writing certainly is the means by which we express our ideas, feelings, experiences, plans, knowledge, and concerns, but it is usually not an end in itself. When it becomes an end in itself, usually something has gone wrong, often a malfunction in the writer's priority system. Writing, for most of us, is a means to an end, a vehicle of communication, transportation, not some mystical or mysterious act which has a life of its own, deeply rooted in our unconscious. The end, communication, counts, not the means.

Nor is writing a form of therapy, although it can be a highly therapeutic process. Mostly, it is a transaction, the exchange of thought between me and you, a way for us to connect. Communication consists of two parts: your *understanding* me and my understanding *that you have understood me*. Without that interaction, that exchange of understanding, we have no real communication; instead, we have performance, self-expression. Self-indulgence is one of the most painful kinds of bad writing, and requires constant vigilance on the part of the writer to avoid it.

Indeed, the main difference between writing and speaking is that in writing there is no immediate feedback—applause, laughter, looks of befuddlement, um hms, boos and hisses—to tell you how you are doing and whether you need to adjust. Time passes between the writing and the reading; the reader either understands or does not. More time must pass before the writer learns how well he has been understood, or misunderstood. The instant, and constant, adjustments that speakers make to maintain contact are not possible in writing. You are long gone by the time I discover I need to win you back, and I may never get a second chance.

What difference does this make? It means that the first question is the most important: what is my *objective* in writing? It means that in writing I must be as conscious of *how I will be read* as of *what I mean to say*. Who am I writing for? What will these words mean to them? Will this sequence of thoughts be as comprehensible and logical to them as it is to me? What have I left out that I know that they may not be aware of? What have I assumed which may be contradicted by the reader's beliefs? What have I included that may disguise or detract from my message or distract attention from it? What technical, obscure, colloquial, regional, archaic, foreign, or otherwise strange, unclear, or ambiguous words have I used? Have I manipulated language or stipulated definitions that defy common sense or common usage? What have I said that may anger, put off, bore, or puzzle the reader? What evidence have I produced for my arguments? Will the reader be persuaded by it? Have I been guilty of either overkill or understatement? Is there a secondary or tertiary audience who must be kept in mind, as well as the primary one? Is there an intermediate audience?

The key word in all this is *discipline*, especially *self*-discipline. So far is writing from self-expression that the less one thinks of oneself when he writes, the better off he is. It is the *reader* of whom we should think at all times—what he knows, what he believes, what he understands, what he wants, what he has time for, what interests him. We must write not so much *from* where *we* are as *to* where the *other* is. It is all too easy to be misunderstood even so.

Third Fallacy: Writing is an Art

To assert that writing is communication is to argue that ordinarily it does not exist for its own sake but to serve some other, more important purpose. In other words, writing is a craft, rather than an art which needs no other justification. Of course, like other crafts, writing can be and often is artful in the right hands; one may cause pleasure with one's prose, and surely most of us find great satisfaction in the beautiful or well-crafted language of others. But if writing is an art, it is primarily a useful one, and our emphasis should be on its utility and appropriateness.

To paint my ceiling does not require Michelangelo's gifts, nor the time commitment necessitated by the Sistine chapel. To take more time than the situation calls for, to labor excessively over the physical product is a form of self-indulgence. It is also an unconscionable waste, diverting energies better spent on other activities, other thought, or other writing. Think about the different kinds of tasks a museum educator performs: giving tours, designing programs, making up budgets, conducting workshops, preparing materials for classroom use, as well as writing printed programs for special events, publicity, and grant proposals, to name a few. Note that writing is the most basic tool of the trade, like the bicycle for the messenger. But like the messenger's bicycle it is not the end product; durability, moreover, not beauty, is the main virtue in both cases. Indeed, the most artful characteristic of most good writing is its selectivity, its self-effacement, its scrupulous omission of anything extraneous, superfluous, and supererogatory.

Fallacy Number Four: Writing is Technical

Of the crafts which come to mind, writing seems to me the *least* dependent for its successful execution on an understanding of its principles. Learning to write well has as much to do with knowledge of rules, grammar, or linguistics, as learning to walk has to do with an understanding of the biomechanics of the foot. Good writing is organization, pure and simple. It is the expression of information and ideas as written words and their arrangement in a sensible, comprehensible, and logical sequence toward a specific purpose, nothing more. Some purposes present more difficulties or complexities in structuring than others, of course, just as some data and concepts are

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harder to verbalize, but the challenge remains organizational.

If one can perform *any* managerial task, one can teach oneself to write. To do that does *not* mean mounting an assault on the grammar, syntax, and diction of English, memorizing the rules of good communication and good prose, and killing to acquire an extensive vocabulary. All are good to have at your disposal, but none is so important as common sense.

Common sense is the very essence of the communication process, getting this datum from you to me in more or less the same shape it was in when you still had it. There is no mystery or alchemy in any of this. In graduate school I was instructed to: tell'em what you're gonna say, say what you have to say, tell'em what you said. Another way to say that is: don't be subtle, be clear. The point simply is that none of this has any more to do with the *technical* part of language than taking apart a watch has to do with telling time. They are entirely different enterprises.

Final Fallacy: Writing is Hard

To say one fails to write because writing is "hard" is to miss the point; it is also a cop-out. To say writing is hard does not excuse us from doing it; it actually underscores the importance of trying. The labor of bringing it forth may constitute the real contribution. In any case, *organization* may be hard, *planning* may be hard, *self-discipline*, rigorous, sequential *thinking* may be hard, *finding time* to document and to follow through to the finished product may all be very, very hard. But writing itself is a mere physical task, not in itself very difficult.

I am not trying to be cute or flip. These distinctions can help us figure out what exactly it is about writing that is hard, and where the barrier really is. By breaking writing up into its component parts, we render it less formidable, more straightforward and nonthreatening. To be sure, a large or difficult writing assignment can be daunting, but surely the simple transcription of words from the orderly mind to the clean piece of paper or blank screen cannot be what makes it so for most of us. It must be something else in the process which hangs us up, and it is this something else we must identify and wrestle with. I cannot tell what that is for you, but I don't have to, do I? You already know.

Preventing Bad Writing

To this point, we have really been addressing matters of the spirit, the state of mind that subverts the readiness to write. I now offer some, I hope, simple rules, caveats, bits of advice, and helpful hints toward the prevention of bad writing. Everyone is occasionally guilty of bad writing, often in the same piece with excellent writing. Bad writing is not a crime; it is more often a mistake. Indeed, if what I have said is true, good writing is largely a negative condition, that is, the absence of anything which detracts from the ability of prose to communicate; in a word, good writing is writing which is not bad.

Eschew Cliches: Cliches are intellectual shortcuts. Like the highway bypasses which enable you to drive through a city without stopping, cliches speed you past ideas without requiring you to think. Thoughtless writing invariably, inevitably, and by definition means bad writing. Of course, cliches *appear* to have the advantage of universal acceptance and understanding, but often that appearance is quite deceptive. Universal use either renders them completely meaningless—in the best case—or ambiguous, *i.e.*, understood differently by user and listener, which is much worse. "I could care less" ought to mean an idea exactly contrary to "I couldn't care less." Similarly, "up tight" now means opposite of what it meant when I first heard it, I think.

While half-dead cliches are the most dangerous, fully-dead cliches are preferable to obscure phrases or new coinages, unless these are extremely vivid or carefully explained in context. Otherwise, only your very close friends will know what you mean. We are obliged to bring our readers along with us; few things in life are truly self-explanatory.

Avoid Mixed Metaphors: As *The New Yorker* readers know, mixed metaphors are a sure sign that the author or speaker is not paying attention. Far from having more on his mind than his words can express, the metaphor mixer usually has rather less. Unless one's images are clear, as well as vivid, it might be best to avoid them altogether. The best writing, like the best pool, is limpid: you can see right through the water to the bottom—you can see right through the words to the ideas. Similarly, be as explicit as you can manage without treating the reader as if he were newly arrived from Mars, or as if you were; what do we gain from being cryptic or elliptical?

Avoid Jargon, Buzz Words, Euphemisms, Foreign Figures of Speech, and Greek and Latin Cognates where plain English Will Do: Readers of George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" will find this advice familiar. Jargon, like cliches, can be a two-edged sword. It is usually defended on the ground of precision and, indeed, it *can* be useful when it is confined to its technical meaning. Jargon serves as a verbal shorthand among initiates, a timesaving and explanation-saving device. But jargon has a way of leaking into common parlance where it quickly loses its precision; it is often used vaguely, inappropriately, deceitfully, pretentiously, or dangerously.

An example from our own field is the phrase "inquiry method," which has been so diluted that it now refers to any exchange in which questions are asked and answers given. This depreciation of verbal coinage is probably inevitable, but that should make us even more wary of *how* we use pseudotechnical terms, and *why*. The pervasivenesss of buzz words in museum education is perhaps no worse than in other fields, but it is certainly no better; think of "hands-on." Our native caution should be activated when we see them in our own prose, or in anyone else's.

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Euphemisms are a slightly different case, but only slightly. The justification is usually the "protection" of the *reader's* sensibilities. In reality, however, most of the time it is the posterior (note the euphemism) of the *writer* which is in jeopardy. My current favorite is "to share," a verb without which museum educators and religious leaders alike would be helpless. And, in fact, to say, "I have something I would like to share with you" *sounds* very friendly, but more often it is an *alert*: "Put on your hard hat; I have something I want to dump on you." Euphemisms are not soft shoes intended to make the walk more pleasant; they are blinders intended to conceal the destination.

Foreign expressions, on the other hand, are indispensable when English is found wanting. *Chutzpah*, for example, is an idea so subtle, complex, and ineffable that even a short story cannot convey it, let alone a phrase. But when your intent in using a foreign formulation is to impress, beware. What, for example, have you gained when you say *mariage de convenance* instead of marriage of convenience? Do you really *want* what you have gained?

Jesse Jackson has reminded us of how evocative and moving the cadences of the King James Version of the *Bible* are. Vernacular English, with its clarity, specificity, and power, is still hard to beat as a medium of expression. Modern usage, heavily dependent on Greek and Latin cognates, is much less evocative, suggestive, rich, and interesting than, say, Elizabethan or Jacobean English, abstract, murky, dull, and vague, rather than concrete, lucid, vivid, and precise. No one should ever use a word he does not himself understand, or a big word where a small one will do, or a fancy one where the plain equivalent is at hand. Do as I say, not as I do.

Choose the Right Word: Writing is a little like love: there is no substitute for variety. It is not just that a fuller vocabulary makes for greater precision, it also makes for more satisfying, refreshing, enriching experience for the reader. A lot of the writing I see suffers from dull, limited vocabulary. Good writing is lively writing, which means that even if the ideas are not new the way they are couched should be. Shades of meaning are much easier to convey when there is a rich and subtle vocabulary at one's disposal; vocabulary is the writer's palette.

You can make your palette more luminous and varied. Write with a dictionary and thesaurus close by, for instance; you lose no points for consulting them, no one need ever know. Most of us already *have* much larger vocabularies than we ordinarily *use*; we really have four vocabularies, two passive (reading and listening), two active (writing and speaking), in order of size. Good reading and alert listening can activate our passive vocabularies; we can expand the number of words at our disposal when needed. We can quite consciously upgrade our spoken or written vocabularies by pausing to search in our memory banks for different, more accurate words before we proceed to speak or write. We can also try to phrase things several different ways, if we cannot decide on a preferred formulation. Reading your written work aloud can also help you flag the wrong words, the not-quite-right words, the fuzzy or off-the-mark phrases.

Avoid the Passive Voice: To change the image, if vocabulary carries the freight, verbs pull the cars. Things written in the passive voice, Academia's preferred form of camouflage, "It is thought that. . . ," may sound dignified, formal, impressive, scholarly, and detached, but as writing it is gutless and flat. The freight never leaves the warehouse. Active verbs provide the engines that carry the ideas to the reader.

Avoid Long Sentences and Watch Out for Repetitive Sentence Structure: Sentence structure, like vocabulary, must be varied to sustain interest. Too many long sentences—particularly ones where the subordinate clauses dominate, where the tail wags the dog—too many short sentences, too many sentences with the same rhythm, can all drain away the reader's interest. A speech delivered in a monotone can lose an audience, however interesting the content; sentence structure is the writer's equivalent of inflection and modulation in speech, changes in emotional intensity, voice level, and so on. Written prose is, in fact, very much like speech: it ought to have rhythms and cadences, natural pauses, turns, curves, and hops. Poor writing feels brittle and stiff, unable to mold itself to the shape of the idea; good writing is serpentine, supple, flexible, and sinuous, following the contours of the terrain it covers. Here again, reading your stuff aloud will reveal to you the repetitive patterns and rigid structures.

Edit Your Writing Mercilessly: Read your prose as if you had never seen it before, or, better yet, as if you had seen it before and loathed it. Every good writer is either an instinctive self-editor or a compulsive one. Everything should be edited as often as time and patience permit; when you budget time for a writing assignment, allocate equal amounts for writing, rewriting, and allowing ideas to jell, perhaps the most important of the three. The reason for this is that one must learn to guard against false euphoria about a piece of writing and for this there is no substitute for psychic distance. The best means of attaining that is time away from the piece. Even an hour can make a big difference in your coolness and detachment.

Time can also help resolve difficult technical problems. There is no denying that some ideas are more reluctant to be expressed than others, some information harder to shape. Often sentences will seem not to respond to ministration, but in reality they are quite malleable. Usually a balky sentence will move right along if you turn it round, if you reverse, as it were, the sequence of presentation. I often find it helpful, too, to break sentences up into their component parts and then recombine them; change the order of the sentences, change the order of clauses within sentences, splice parts of several sentences into new ones, add transitions, an adverb here or there, and *you* have done miracles. But the key to doing all this is

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detachment; if you love your writing too much, it will never bend to your will.

Writing is Storytelling: As long as the subject of transitions has come up, think of them as what keeps the story moving and fluid. Stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end, more or less in that order; they start with a grabber or hook and end with a release; they have enough repetition to make sure the reader understands and remembers, but not so much as to put him to sleep; they contain enough surprise to keep him interested, but not so much as to make him edgy.

And, by the way, you needn't try to be subtle either. Subtlety is wasted on most people and you are probably subtler than you intend, we all are. People almost never understand us quite as we mean to be understood, however explicit we think we are. One way to *ensure* explicitness is to attend to the *internal logic* of the presentation, and for this no device is so useful as the outline. An outline is to writing what the chassis is to cars. The folks at General Motors do not start with the headlights, keep going until they come to the tailpipe, and then start on the next car. The shape, if not every last detail, of the finished product, is evident at every stage of the process.

The power of words—to move, to inspire, to explain, to arouse, to embrace, to evoke, to inform, to persuade, to provoke, to prod, to wound, and to heal—is wonderful and awesome. Why deprive yourself of such power? The mere ability to articulate in prose what one sees or understands with any clarity is a teaching tool of such extraordinary versatility and force a museum educator would be demented to forego it. Indeed, there is no tool more effective, and few so easy to acquire.

Ken Yellis is the Editor-in-Chief of The Journal of Museum Education: Roundtable Reports *and the Curator of Education at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.*

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received a copy. One girl reacted to the collected writings with surprise, crying out, "Here's a poem by a girl with the same name as mine." Her teacher pointed out, to the girl's astonishment, that it was her poem in the anthology, not another girl's.

The Oakland Museum plans to continue the Museum Literacy Project and hopes that other museums will start similar projects. Although the improvement of writing skills is not usually a goal of museums, teaching teachers and students how to become better observers in museums usually is. Through writing in the galleries, more than seventy teachers and their 2,000 students have become much more talented observers and museum users.

The National Endowment for the Humanities and the Oakland Museum Association funded this project. For more information, contact Janet Helfrich, Museum Literacy Project Director, Oakland Museum.

West reporter Bob Flasher is a consultant to the Oakland Museum.

Call for Papers Guidelines

Excellence across the broad spectrum of museum education programming is the focus of the second MER/EdCom call for papers. Our intention is twofold: to define programming as widely as possible to elicit reports of exemplary activities from all aspects of museum education; and to encourage reports which move beyond description toward the presentation of models adaptable to other institutions.

Consider the following questions when structuring papers. Do the program's main concepts serve as a point of departure for other institutions? Does the program demonstrate innovation? Was a common issue addressed creatively or a unique problem solved effectively? What role did funding play in the program: were grant funds sought; did the availability of funds determine its profile? Finally, does the presentation reveal the inner logic of the program? How does the program express the nature of the institution; fit the occasion; reflect the philosophy of its planner?

The first twenty-five papers received after June 15, 1985 but before October 1 will be considered and juried by readers representing MER and EdCom. Each article can be no longer than four typewritten pages, double-spaced; photos or other illustrations must be submitted with the manuscript. The papers selected will appear in the spring 1986 issue of *The Journal of Museum Education: Roundtable Reports.* For further information or to mail papers, contact: Annette Valeo, The Textile Museum, 2320 S Street, NW, Washington, DC 20008, (202) 667-0441.

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had a marked impact on the *Journal.* In addition to regular reporting from the regions, there have been several other significant recommendations by the Advisory Committee. These were subsequently approved by the MER Board: the name change of the publication from *Roundtable Reports* to *The Journal of Museum Education* and the development, with the Editorial Committee, of a mission statement for the *Journal,* publication guidelines, and a policy on peer review. These appeared in the winter '85 issue. The committee is currently reviewing the topics covered during the past ten years of the *Journal* to make recommendations for future issues. It has also offered to assist the MER Board in its plans for the growth and development of the *Journal* and its subscription base.

—Gretchen Jennings
Chair, MER Board

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