



in memory of

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“*A*ll writing is a form of manipulation, of course, but you realize that a plain sentence can actually do so much.”

 Colm Tóibín

PREFACE

AN HONEST **assessment**

Let's begin by re-thinking what we mean by "a winning essay."

The purpose of this manual is to help you win. Of course, I can't guarantee that will happen because I probably won't judge your district or regional meet, and the people who will judge don't always agree on what constitutes "good writing," and besides, maybe you're not that good. Yet.

The real purpose of this manual is to show you how a better-than-average writer might approach and tackle the UIL Ready Writing contest. First, a warning. I will be brutally honest about much of the writing I encounter as a Ready Writing judge. Frankly, most of it is not that good, and it's getting worse every year.

I expect the students who voluntarily compete in an essay writing contest to understand basic grammar and punctuation rules. I expect them to know how to craft a complete and coherent sentence. I expect students to know how to run spell-check or use a dictionary. UIL contests—athletic, academic, fine arts—are for elite performers. You want to play baseball, you should know which end of the bat to grip. I know this sounds cruel, but I believe this contest needs some tough love.

People read these essays under the following conditions: (1) They are paid to do so; (2) Their child wrote one, and they love the child very much; (3) They are forced to do so at gunpoint. Well, perhaps that's pushing it, but I've judged enough of these essays to know that they tend to resemble school cafeteria Jell-o: shallow, dense, high calorie, low nutrition, easy to poke holes in.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

What is this manual about?

This handbook doesn't pretend to replace years of basic English instruction. In fact, I assume that since you're voluntarily competing in a UIL writing contest, you have already mastered the basics.

My goal is to show you how a stodgy, old professional writer might prepare for the contest, how I might approach the prompt and organize my notes and whip out a half-decent draft in under two hours.

It's true. Too often, these essays are vague, pretentious, rambling, redundant, byzantine. If that assessment offends you, well, that's how it is. I'm not sorry I said it, but I would hate myself if I even hinted that these essays are brilliant because "they encapsulate the thoughts and concerns of teens grappling with the challenges of coming to age in these dark and troubled times."

However much you paid for this manual, I'm certain you didn't pay to be lied to, and I refuse to do so. Here's a fairly typical Ready Writing sample.

THERE LIVES, in each person's mind, what appears to be an enduring and universal phenomenon—a mysterious and inexplicable faith in one's righteousness of self. Even in our own personal follies, even during our most excruciating, pride-gouging errors, humans react without the natural self-defense of rationalizing the wrongdoing; if most of us had our ways, we would never be wrong. It is this curious habitual defense of justification that allows nations of various disposition to claim a right of aggression against another. Never in my knowledge of history has a warring force attacked another without their so-called "reason."

I have no idea what this means, but I can tell you this, it's bad writing. It is plumage searching for a dumb peacock. This kind of writing does not exist in nature. It must be manufactured in laboratories. Not in a million years would you ever read this for pleasure. You might try to read it for edification, but you would fail.

The fact of the matter is, essays like these are not written to be read. They're written to be Scantron-graded. As such, they are written to impress, to show off, to exult in one's own verbal spit-up. By the way, "byzantine" is not verbal spit-up. It's the perfect word. Look it up. Learn it and use it appropriately. I could have used "weirdo" or "wacko" but they're not the perfect word. "Byzantine" is, and it's not high-brow.

This would be high-brow: *I am in strenuous opposition to the desultory utilization of tenebrous phraseology.* I would never say that, and that's why I would never write it because I'm not trying to sound like your idea of a writer. I'm trying to sound like me. The most important lesson you'll learn—and the one I'll emphasize over and over—is this: Write naturally. Trust your voice. Don't try to be a "writer." Just write. And if you're good enough, you'll be a writer, and you'll know the difference between good and bad writing.

Here's a true story: Occasionally, I ask my students to read two writing samples: one plain and simple, and the other complicated and obtuse. Then, I ask, "Which is better?" At least half say the obtuse one is "better writing," even though they prefer the plain one. How do you explain that? My guess is, they're taught to think the obtuse one is "good writing." In the case of UIL Ready Writing, they are, too often, rewarded for writing in this "byzantine" style.

Just a few years ago, I was judging a district contest, and I came upon a lovely piece of writing. It was simple and direct, while most of the other papers were as bland as baby food. My kid placed fourth or fifth, even though he said in 700 or 800 words twice as much as the winning 1,600-word essay. Not enough citations, apparently.

"Why?" I asked. "This essay only has two or three, but they're relevant. They advance the thesis." The other writers splatter pre-fab quotes and irrelevant references everywhere. They arrive with a quote from Einstein or Gandhi or Eminem, and they wedge that sucker in there, no matter what.

Anyone who has judged more than two or three contests knows what I'm talking about here. Students peddle the same quotes from the same people regardless of the topic. If it's about injustice, they quote MLK or JFK. If it's about war, they quote MLK or JFK. If it's about JFK, they quote MLK. If it's about MLK, they quote JFK.

Frankly, I'm convinced that if I had not been a member of that judging panel, my favorite essay would not have placed at all. I had to throw a hissy fit, but I was willing to do it. A winning essay should not rehash the obvious, and the writing shouldn't be so cryptic that I can't even tell that the writer is rehashing the obvious.

Bottom line: You can do better if you're willing to do the work. The good news? The suggestions I offer will help you produce writing that someone will want to read and will enjoy reading. It may help you at district and at region and at state, and if so, whoopee! Great job.

More importantly, the type of writing I'm proposing will serve you not just as a high school senior trying to get into the college of your choice or trying to pass an AP exam, or as a liberal arts major, but rather as a fully-realized human being. It will serve you for the rest of your life, and if that ain't winning, I don't know what is.

“I thought their papers were brilliant. Then, I realized...”

In December, 2011, *New York* magazine published a story by Robert Kolker about the new principal at the Bronx High School of Science, one of the nation’s most legendary public secondary institutions.

The principal’s name is Valerie Reidy. The school was founded in 1938 and counts E.L. Doctorow and Stokely Carmichael among its alumni, as well as seven Nobel laureates and six Pulitzer Prize winners. By 2011, it had sponsored 135 Intel science-competition finalists—more than any other high school in America. Virtually every senior that year gained acceptance to one of the country’s top colleges.

“The faculty has long been known as among the best, most beloved anywhere,” Kolker wrote. “Teachers have traditionally held on to their jobs for decades; some have come to teach the children of their former students.”

In many ways, Bronx Science can be compared to Harvard or Yale, and landing a faculty position there was greatly prized. And yet, teachers at the school, especially veteran teachers, from across all disciplines, were leaving in droves, thanks, they claimed, to Reidy’s data-driven, systematized demands.

Testing became a major priority, Kolker wrote, and Reidy mandated new writing and research-literacy courses for freshmen.

“Kids at Bronx Science are incredibly lousy writers,” she told Kolker. “I knew this because as a biology teacher I was grading two- and three-page lab reports every week, and I was the Westinghouse-contest coordinator. I was reading papers that at first I thought were brilliant and esoteric because I couldn’t understand them. But then I realized it was because they were written so badly.”

MAKING GOOD **choices**

Don't assume you can get away with broad assumptions.

Never assume facts not in evidence. I learned that from my wife. She's a lawyer and, apparently, lawyers say it all the time. Despite the double negative, it's a more elegant version of a line offered to me by my gap-toothed boss on my first day as a wire editor for an East Texas daily newspaper, many, many years ago: "When you 'assume' something, you risk making an [synonym for donkey] out of 'U' and 'ME.'"

I assume you can figure out the synonym. So, let's apply this to Ready Writing. A few years ago, a contestant opened her 1,200-word essay with the following statement: "It's widely known that older generations resist technological change."

I didn't need to read the other 1,191 words because her essay was dead to me. Why? First, she never defined "older." I assume it means anyone older than 35, given that when I was 16 or 17, I was taught by my elders (Pete Townsend of The Who) to not trust anyone over 30. By that standard, I'm somewhere between John Wayne and Socrates.

The trouble is, I don't believe the "older" generation resists technological change. I don't even know what it means. It is widely known that the Earth is round, but I would not go so far as to suggest it's universally accepted. People are funny.

Since I'm left to interpret this statement any way I want, then I'm going to reject it entirely. This writer has just informed me that I'm a Luddite. [Look it up.] I may be a cellulite, but I'm no Luddite. I embrace purposeful and productive change.

THIS IS NOT OK.

"No one wants to live in Oklahoma."

A student opened an essay with that statement, and I thought, "I have friends who live in Oklahoma, and they're not assigned to a maximum-security prison there, someone wants to live in Oklahoma."

So, skip the wild exaggerations and the sweeping generalizations like "All Americans believe in justice and freedom" and "Everybody understands the importance of math and science except when it comes to climate change."

Edit Ruthlessly and Relentlessly

“If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter.”

— Mark Twain

✓ **wordy** — The wind will be blowing.

■ **tight** — The wind will blow.

■ **vague** — The girl was driving the sports car.

■ **specific** — The blonde drove the Mazda Miata.

✓ **wordy** — A time will come in the future when the nation will be held responsible for its role in global climate change.

■ **tight** — The nation will soon be held responsible for its role in global climate change.

✓ **wordy** — The CEO submitted his resignation.

■ **tight** — The CEO resigned.

✓ **wordy** — It is common knowledge that jurors have impressionable minds.

■ **tight** — Jurors are impressionable.

✓ **wordy** — The obviously angry mother tightly held the hand of her young child and walked briskly in the direction of the door of the office.

■ **tight** — The irate mother clutched the toddler’s hand and stomped toward the office door.

✓ **wordy** — The meeting is taking place at the present time.

■ **tight** — The meeting is taking place now.

✓ **wordy** — A decision on the matter will be rendered by the board at a point in the near future.

■ **tight** — The board will decide the matter soon.

✓ **wordy** — The UN panel came to a final conclusion.

■ **tight** — The UN panel concluded.

✓ **wordy** — The Senate committee conducted an investigation...

■ **tight** — The Senate committee investigated...

✓ **wordy** — The ordinance was in violation of state law.

■ **tight** — The ordinance violated state law.

✓ **wordy** — The coach will do anything in order to win.

■ **tight** — The coach will do anything to win.

✓ **wordy** — I am supportive of the Second Amendment.

■ **tight** — I support the Second Amendment.

✓ **wordy** — The car was parked in close proximity to the church for the duration of the funeral service.

■ **tight** — The car was parked near the church during the funeral service.



CHOOSE THE **right word**

When it comes to choosing the right word, close isn't close enough.

Words matter. The right word can make a sentence sing. The wrong word can sink it like a can of worms. Wait! What was that? “Sink like a can of worms? When did a can of worms ever sink?” Well, probably never. I just thought it sounded cool, so I wrote it. Clever, huh?

Not really. Anyone who reads that sentence will wonder, “What the heck happened here?” So, choose your words carefully. Select the most precise word available. Play with them. Tease them. How do they feel? How do they sound individually? How do they sound together? Do they rock? Do they roll? Do they stroll? Massage them, and don't be satisfied with “close enough.” One of my former students wrote, “I lived with a flock of dogs that followed me like Mary's little lamb.”

“A flock of dogs?” I asked, and she answered, “I wanted the alliteration of flock/followed.” Well, that's fine, but dogs run in packs. You can't switch “pack to “flock” just to create alliteration. It has to be natural and accurate.

Another student wrote this: “The nation's sense of optimism surged during the reign of Ronald Reagan.” Reagan was president, not king, so he didn't “reign.” The nation's sense of optimism surged during the Reagan administration.

Get your facts right, and know that little mistakes make a big difference. One student, writing about life on the Western Plains during the 1880's, suggested that buffalo hides were shipped back East by way of horse-and-buggy. That's not true. Buffalo hides were shipped back by rail or horse-drawn wagons. A wagon is not a buggy. It's a small error, but puts the rest of the essay in jeopardy. If you can't get the small details right, can we trust you to get the big stuff right?

APPENDIX



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A popular instructor at journalism workshops and seminars for high school students nationwide, Hawthorne has been published in every national scholastic press association periodical. He is the author of *The Radical Write*, a textbook on reporting and writing for student publications that is used nationwide. He is also the author of *Longhorn Football: An Illustrated History*, and *Home Field*, both published by the University of Texas Press. He has also written numerous handbooks and manuals on writing-related topics including *Game On: Reporting and Writing Sports for Student Media*.

In 2005, he retired from the University Interscholastic League, an organization that coordinates extracurricular activities for all Texas public schools where he served as director of academics and director of journalism. In 2009, he wrote, designed and produced a 200-page history of the UIL as part of its centennial anniversary. For several years, he wrote journalism contest materials for Hexco. He is a regular columnist for Texas School Business magazine, published by the Texas Association of School Administrators.

Hawthorne has won awards from associations you have never heard of, including the Columbia Scholastic Press Association's Gold Key and James Paschal Awards; the National Scholastic Press Association's Pioneer Award; and the Interscholastic League Press Conference's Edith Fox King Award, given for distinguished service to Texas scholastic journalism.

In 1991, he was named a lifetime member by the Texas Association of Journalism Educators, and in 2000 received TAJE's Trailblazer Award. In 2007, he received from the CSPA its Charles R. O'Malley Award for Overall Excellence in Teaching, an honor that recognizes "a sustained record of outstanding teaching." In November, 2007, he received the Carl Towley Award, the Journalism Education Association's highest honor.

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