



How to Right Good

Description

How to THINK about Writing

September 6, 2018 by Donn Liston (first published in ECHO Magazine.



Ship of State. Statehood group travels to Washington, D.C. in 1950 on board a DC4. Senator Gunnard Enebreth and Bob Atwood sit behind two unidentified women.

B1990.014.5.StateBattle.2.21 Steve McCutcheon Collection, Atwood Resource Center, Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, Anchorage, Ak.

Writing isn't Talking on Paper; Writing is

Writing

Talking is spontaneous. We utter words for others to hear (or to ourselves) and—in response to their spontaneous response to each statement—we again utter more words.

Over a period of time, this becomes a “conversation.”

But writing is different. And people who simply put down their thoughts on paper as if they were chatting with a neighbor are not writing. Such a transcript of ideas is called “stream of consciousness.” It is usually boring. Like elbows, everybody has a couple of these hanging around—in their head.

So writing is different. Writing is orchestrated and deliberate and spontaneous only when the structure for ideas is ultimately set, like Jello. The stream of ideas leads to a conclusion, which may be alluded to from the beginning, and leaves the reader with satisfaction from reading that piece.

Like the title of this piece: How to Right Good. My intent for such a mangled title is to entice readers to see why I would state something so absurd as the title of an article about how to write well. That’s called a “hook.”

What comes next?

So far, if you are reading this, it has worked on YOU. The rest of my charge as a writer is to reel you in like a silver salmon kicking and trying to get away until you are landed.

Writing begins with how you THINK about what you want to say, and how you introduce your thesis to your reader. In his piece, my thesis is: “Writing is different than talking.” To explain that concept I first introduce the incorrect sentence anti-thesis: “How to Right Good.” If I had uttered that statement in a conversation it would probably float right past as other more significant ideas arose and that one sank.

But as a written statement, my title is undeniable. My argument for writing an absurd title is to get your attention and point out why the sentence is incorrect: First, the word “right” is incorrect. The correct word is “write.” Second, the word “good” is incorrect. The correct word is “well.” The correct form of that sentence is: “How to write well.”

Can you imagine how many articles must be on the Internet with that boring title? In writing that incorrect statement I antagonized the reader. I invited criticism. However, when the reader sees my explanation of the antithesis, the thesis becomes clear on its merits, through synthesis—a conjoining of thesis/antithesis.

I began my own journey into being a writer as a high school kid in Anchorage. Our schools don’t train writers; for the most part they teach how to talk on paper. First-language English speakers learn how to talk from their parents and the environment. We can hear correct language usage.

Learning to write requires extra effort.

Wannabe Writers: Would you like to improve YOUR writing?

I could teach YOU how! Do you have stories, or would you like to write your memoirs? Contact me about how we might form a group of writer Wannabes who strive to learn the craft of writing together; real writing, not talking on paper!

I could also tutor you individually if that works better. I have taught many people how to write in classrooms, and to pass the GED. Based on a response from this outreach we will develop times, meeting places, and I will provide curriculum and instruction to help any Wannabe to become a better writer.

Since anything worthwhile has value, expect to pay a fair price for this individualized instruction course!

DONN LISTON

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As a youth I carried newspapers, and I read newspapers, and I became intrigued by the random statements about life in Anchorage represented in “Letters to the Editor.” Anybody could write a letter to the editor about anything! My devious nature saw that as an opportunity to have fun.

I remember my first letter to the editor published somewhere around 1968; it was about recent public concern about homeless people sleeping in the downtown Park Strip. I concluded in my letter that the concern must be for the grass—from people wetting themselves in their sleep.

Nobody was impressed but I had been published!

This led to more letters and more sophistry. As a young person with an **Anchorage School District** education, I already knew everything, of course. I needed an outlet to tell everybody else how things work. (Some might say that hasn’t changed in my character.)

I read both Anchorage papers; the *Anchorage Daily News* and the *Anchorage Times*, and I would write letters to each. Some got published, but most importantly for me was discovering the difference of thought between those two publications.

The Viet Nam War was going on. Alaska was a new state with great expectations from recent oil discoveries in Prudhoe Bay. I could write a Letter to the Editor and see how my grammatical errors or phrasing were changed. Shockingly, I discovered, sometimes the editor actually changed the way something was stated to make it say something I had not intended!

The power of being an editor.

But my dad was not amused by my public statements in the papers of Anchorage. He made it clear to me that he thought I was making a fool of myself. So I responded to his criticism in print.

To the liberal *Daily News*, I wrote a letter about how terrible it was that America was involved in Viet Nam. I used colorful language of the time and signed with my newly assumed name, DONN, to distinguish myself from being a junior with the same name as my father. To the conservative *Times*, I wrote a letter praising the Viet Nam war effort and castigating misguided youth who opposed it with slogans and protests. I signed that letter with my dad's name, Donald Liston. The final statement, posed as being from my own father in the Times letter, was: "My good father gave me a spanking when I was 18 years old and I believe that is what a lot of these young people need today!"

Both letters appeared in their respective papers on the same day! I was delighted but my father was not amused in the least. He later told me he was offended when one of his blue-collar co-workers slapped him on the back and said: "I agree entirely with you, Don. Your kid is a nut!"

Writing is about elevating ideas into something mutual for others to share. Writing requires premeditation, planting of a seed in your consciousness, and letting the resulting stream become enriched just as a wall is built with each new brick.

I liked to write so much that one day as a college student at *Alaska Methodist University* (Now APU) I went to see the *Daily News* editorial page editor, **Tom Brown**, and told him I wanted to work there. I agreed to write for any section and by now he kind of liked me. I had attended the same church as publisher **Kay Fanning** so she was open to the idea, and they signed me up. I still have many of the stories I wrote over the 2-3 years I worked as a staff writer for *The Daily News*.

What they needed most was a sports reporter. I was up for that and even covered some cross-country ski events on skis. But the event that taught me how to write under pressure happened one night when I was sent to cover a hockey game.

"Have you ever watched hockey, Donny?" asked the copy editor. "No," I replied. I remember his pitch even today: "Well, it is an exciting sport I bet you would like," he continued. "Two teams wearing ice skates, and using sticks, skate around a rink trying to knock this little disk called a puck into opposing goals. We need somebody to cover tonight's game at the Sports Arena. I was hoping you would do it," he explained.

"Sure I will," I responded.

I went to the game and kept track of what happened on my reporter's pad.

I talked to fans and gained clarification of anything I didn't understand by the officials. I took it very seriously and it was late by the time the game ended.

Upon arriving back at the newspaper plant, then located on Post Road, in the dark of winter. I remember how quiet it was. There at his desk sat the copy editor, who lit up as he saw me come into the newsroom.

"Did you get the story?" he enthused. "Yep, I got it!" I replied. "Wonderful, he continued stepping around the desk toward me and putting his arm around my shoulders. Come."

So we walked through the doors to the “back shop” of the *Daily News* together, past the rattling teletype machines, into the hot metal press tomb. There all the pressmen were standing around with arms folded against their chest, or holding a coffee cup, obviously waiting for something to happen. A line of trolleys also waited patiently with metal plates, all having reverse renderings of everything that would soon be printed. The editor walked me up the line to Page One.

“How do you like it?” he asked, pointing to a reverse image of an event from the hockey game I had just covered. Photographer got a great shot, huh?”

“Well, yes!” I responded.

“And, right here next to that picture, do you see this big hole? That’s where YOUR story is going!” With a sweep of his hands, he continued: “These guys are all getting union pay to stand around until they can start the presses, meaning I need your story in about 10 minutes, okay? Oh, and no pressure, but if you screw up the whole town will know about it in the morning...”

That was a turning point in my writing career.

The adrenalin was intoxicating. I wrote that story and went on to cover hockey for the rest of the season.

And, many years later when I became a teacher, I told that story to my students. Then I would declare a topic and set a timer for them to produce a Page One story. Being 6th graders, they shared the thrill of writing for publication when I put each story on a construction paper backing and posted on the wall in the hallway for everyone in the school community to see.

I believe more people writing about the things that are important in our lives is enriching for all. So does any good editor.

One more reflection is in order: After graduating from AMU, and quitting *The Daily News* to start my own company, I had the occasion to stop at the *Times* to talk with its publisher, **Robert Atwood**. I felt that since I too was publishing regularly I deserved an audience with the old goat. I started the conversation in his intimidating office by saying: “You are supposed to have horns and a spiked tail from everything I’ve heard about you!”

He wasn’t fazed by that comment. He showed some interest in recent publications I showed him as we chatted, and then I asked him: “What are you looking at—those pieces of paper?”

“These are Letters to the Editor,” he replied, “and I’ve sure thrown a hell of lot of YOURS in the trash!”

Category

1. Autobiography
2. Alaska Hope

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