

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Writing ESL

William Zinsser · Thursday, August 25th, 2011



A talk to the incoming international students at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, August 11, 2009

Five years ago one of your deans at the journalism school, Elizabeth Fishman, asked me if I would be interested in tutoring international students who might need some extra help with their writing. She knew I had done a lot of traveling in Asia and Africa and other parts of the world where many of you come from.

I knew I would enjoy that, and I have—I've been doing it ever since. I'm the doctor that students get sent to see if they have a writing problem that their professor thinks I can fix. As a bonus, I've made many friends—from Uganda, Uzbekistan, India, Ethiopia, Thailand, Iraq, Nigeria, Poland, China, Colombia and many other countries. Several young Asian women, when they went back home, sent me invitations to their weddings. I never made it to Bhutan or Korea, but I did see the wedding pictures. Such beautiful brides!

I can't imagine how hard it must be to learn to write comfortably in a second—or third or fourth—language. I don't think *I* could do it, and I admire your grace in taking on that difficult task. Much of the anxiety that I see in foreign students could be avoided if certain principles of writing good English—which nobody ever told them—were explained in advance. So I asked if I could talk to all of you during orientation week and tell you some of the things my students have found helpful.

So that's why we're here today.

I'll start with a question: What is good writing?...

Jump to the rest of the talk including the rousing finish ? ? ? Which is:

“Short is better than long.
Simple is good. (*Louder*)
Long Latin nouns are the enemy.
Anglo-Saxon active verbs are your best friend.
One thought per sentence.”

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