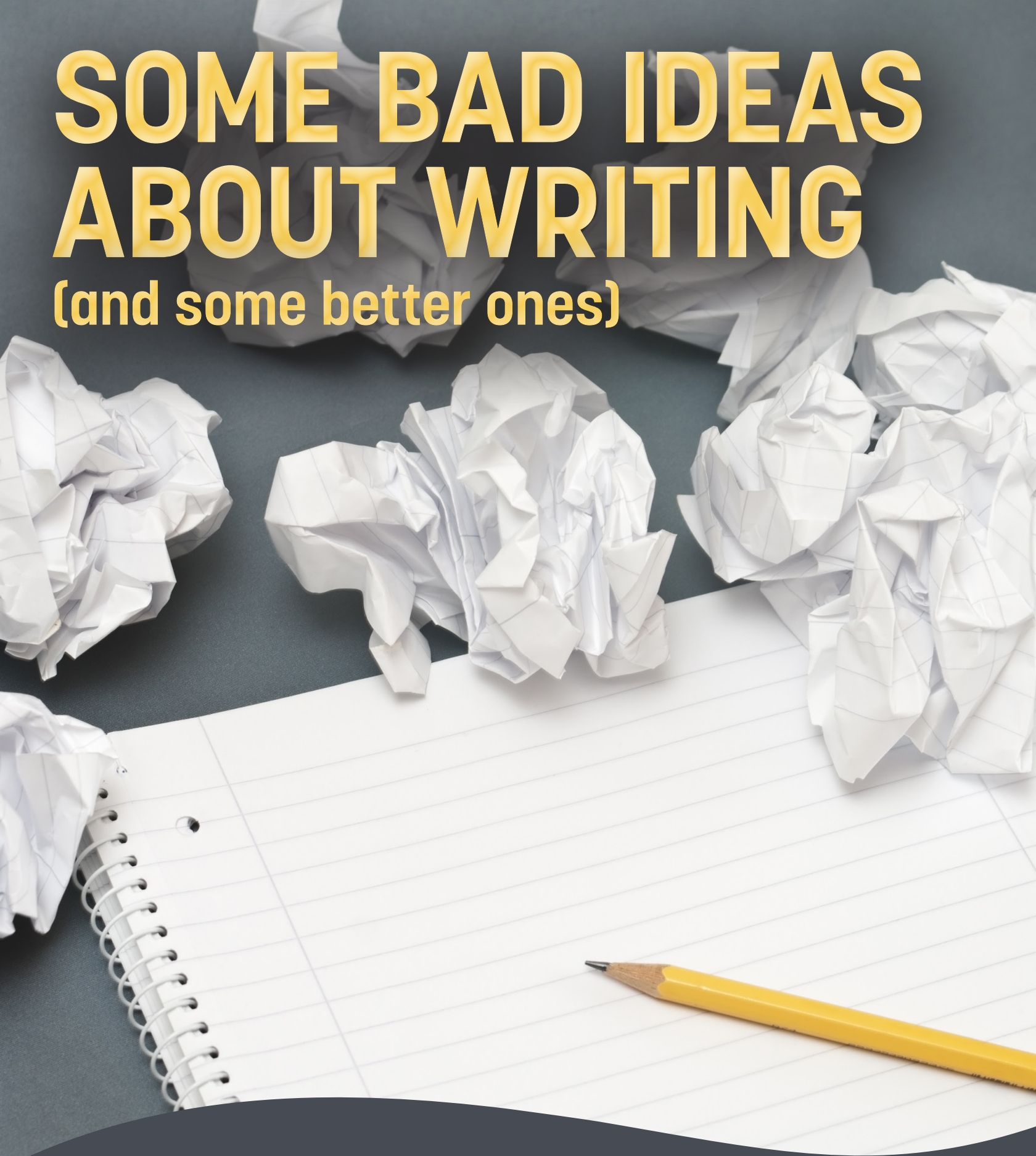
SOME BAD IDEAS ABOUT WRITING

(and some better ones)

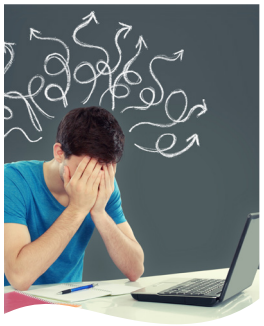


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YOU CAN LEARN TO WRITE IN GENERAL

Elizabeth Wardle

There is no such thing as writing in general. Do you doubt this claim? Test it out. Go to your desk right now and attempt to write something in general. Do not write for any specific audience, purpose, or context. Do not use any conventions that you've learned for school, work, creative writing, and so on. Just write in general.



You can't do it, because it can't be done. There is no such thing as writing in general. Writing is always in particular.

If we can remember that there is no writing in general and no magic formula that will help us write well in all situations, we are more likely to be able to use (or transfer or repurpose) what we know effectively from prior writing situations. This is because we will be aware of the new context, on the lookout for examples, and willing to accept that struggle and practice are simply a part of learning to write in a new situation.

READING AND WRITING ARE NOT CONNECTED

Ellen C. Carillo

Since the 1950s we have been hearing that Johnny can't read. In 1975, *Newsweek* [magazine] informed us that Johnny can't write, either. Over the years, a range of reasons for Johnny's illiteracy have been offered. Most recently, technology has been named one of the culprits. Johnny spends too much time on the computer and not enough time reading books. He spends so much time texting and tweeting that he has forgotten how to write correctly, how to spell, how to develop ideas in more than 140 characters. Public outcries about literacy (or lack thereof) often lead to a closer look at the education system... What is often neglected in these public debates about the best way to teach literacy at the college level is that reading and writing are connected practices and, as such, the best way to teach them is together. It is a bad idea to continue privileging writing at the expense of reading.



This problematic separation of the connected practices of reading and writing is no longer an issue in students' early schooling, where they are taught reading and writing simultaneously. Although it took decades for elementary school teachers and curricula developers to realize that young children need not learn how to read before they learned how to write, language arts instructors now teach reading and writing alongside each other. They do so because research has shown that students learn to read and write better when they are instructed in both simultaneously.

We are all encountering more text and visual images than ever before. There is a great deal at stake if we don't take the opportunity to teach active reading alongside writing. Instructors need to teach students different strategies for reading the complex texts they will encounter throughout their academic careers and in the world... Without explicit attention to reading and the relationship between reading and writing, students will not have strategies for making sense of new or difficult texts, arguments, images, and ideas they encounter.

FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION

Allison D. Carr

...Failure should be welcomed, if not actively sought out, signaling as it does both the presence of creative, risky thinking and an opportunity to explore a new direction. To writing especially, failure is integral, and I will go so far as to assert that the best writing (and the best learning-to-write) happens when one approaches the activity from a mindset trained on failure. Failure represents a certain against-the-grain jettisoning of established ideas about what counts as good writing in favor of rogue, original, attention-capturing, and intentional art. To fail willingly in writing is to be empowered by the possibilities that emerge...



What we have failed to grasp — why the idea that failure is bad needs to die — is the integral connection between failure and risk, creativity, and innovation, not to mention emotional and cognitive resilience. This relationship is well documented, making its tenacious hold on cultural ideology especially confounding. For example, many of us use and benefit daily from innovations discovered by accident: penicillin, Corn Flakes, Post-it Notes, Corningware, WD-40, oral contraception, and potato chips. All of these were discovered when the discoverer was working on a different puzzle. And discoveries like these are the norm, not the exception.

THERE IS ONE CORRECT WAY OF WRITING AND SPEAKING

Anjali Pattanayak

People consistently lament that kids today can't speak properly or that people coming to this country need to learn to write correctly. These lamentations are based on the notion that there is a single correct way of speaking and writing. Currently, the general sentiment is that people should just learn to speak and write proper English.



Most people implicitly understand that the way they communicate changes with different groups of people, from bosses to work colleagues to peers to relatives. They understand that conversations that may be appropriate over a private dinner may not be appropriate at the workplace. These conversational shifts might be subtle, but they are distinct. While most people accept and understand these nuances exist and will adapt to these unspoken rules — and while we have all committed a social faux pas when we didn't understand these unspoken rules — we do not often afford this same benefit of the doubt to people who are new to our communities or who are learning our unspoken rules.

In order to value the diversity of communication and identities that exist in the U.S., we need to start teaching and envisioning writing as a cultural and social activity. We need a more nuanced view of writing in society that encourages everyone to adapt to their audiences and contexts rather than placing an undue burden on those who do not fit the mold of standard English.

STRONG WRITING AND WRITERS DON'T NEED REVISION

Laura Giovanelli

The fantasy that good writers summon forth beautiful, lean, yet intricate sentences onto a page without sweating is an unhealthy fiction, and it is wrong. What writers need is revision.



Novice writers, experienced writers, all writers. Anyone interested in writing clearer, stronger, more persuasive and passionate prose, even those of us who are procrastinators panicking because we need to get a project finished or a paper written and it's 2:00 a.m. the night before our deadline — writers need revision because revision is not a discrete step. Revision is not the thing writers do when they're done writing. Revision is the writing.

It's important to keep in mind I'm not talking about revision as proofreading or copy editing; no amount of grammatical, spelling, and style corrections transforms a piece of writing like focused attention to fundamental questions about purpose, evidence, and organization. That, to me, is revision: the heavy lifting of working through why I'm writing, who I'm writing for, and how I structure writing logically and effectively.

GOOD WRITERS MUST KNOW GRAMMATICAL TERMINOLOGY

Hannah J. Rule



As an English teacher, I have become used to dodging eye contact at parties when a grammar question inevitably comes up, as heads crane around to request my discourse on which form of whom or who can be deemed proper or definitively correct. It's not just expected that I know which form is eternally right (yet another bad idea about writing: that language is an unchanging system of absolute rights and wrongs), but also that I have a range of precise terminology to define the relevant grammatical parts. I don't; I don't always have that terminology at hand. Partygoers are not impressed by my method of listening to the options to see which sounds most fitting or even beautiful. They just expect me to have the names.

Conscious, definitional knowledge of grammatical terms simply doesn't impact processes of writing. Doing language in our everyday lives — crafting a meaningful text message to a crush or penning an elegy for a departed family member — isn't influenced by deliberate, memorized rules about the right form of who or whom. It doesn't have a thing to do with knowing when you're writing a noun or a participle phrase… Research has shown that complex grammar knowledge is already in us, in every one of us, in both shared and idiosyncratic ways.

A better idea about writing is rather that good writers know how to do grammar to myriad effects. The most useful grammar knowledge is much less explicit than naming, formed through exposure to language and its many options, arrangements, and infinite combinations and built upon our intuitive, tacit experiences with sentences. Leading English pedagogues have shown that the best way to increase grammatical effectiveness and style in students' writing is by having them study the choices writers have made in compelling mentor texts and then practice making those moves in their own writing.

READING IS NOT ESSENTIAL TO WRITING INSTRUCTION

Julie Myatt Barger



Writing teachers are fond of the adage "good readers are good writers," but those same teachers frequently fail to assume responsibility for teaching students how to read. This often manifests itself in teaching only surface-level reading strategies in K–12 such as skimming and reading for the gist, and in cries of, "They should know this stuff before they get here!" at the university level. This abdication of responsibility has far-reaching effects for students, particularly those from underserved populations, leading them to believe they are poor readers rather than people who have not been taught to read deeply, thus potentially limiting their abilities to compete in a market characterized by ever-changing and increasingly competitive workplace literacies…

RUBRICS SAVE TIME AND MAKE GRADING CRITERIA VISIBLE

Anne Leahy

In K–12, and in higher education, rubrics have become popular for evaluating students' writing. The straightforwardness of a rubric — a list of criteria, of what counts, often in a checklist form — appeals to the instructor or evaluator and to administrators collecting data about students because it is a time-saving tool for measuring skills demonstrated in complex tasks, such as writing assignments. Rubrics, however, are a bad idea for writers and for those who teach writing.

A Rube Goldberg machine is an overly engineered mechanism for a simple task. A rubric, by comparison, looks fancy and is often quantitative — it looks incredibly well engineered with its seemingly airtight checklist. In fact, it's overly engineered to organize feedback into criteria and levels, rows and columns. Instead of responding to writing in language — with oral or written feedback — many rubrics mechanize response. At the same time, a rubric is an overly simple way to ignore that an essay is a complicated whole; it is impossible to tease its characteristics completely apart, because they are interdependent. A rubric, then, is an odd way to simultaneously overcomplicate and oversimplify the way one looks at and judges a written text.

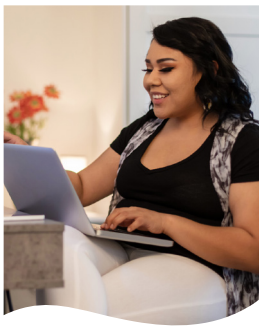


Formative and narrative feedback involves the student in analyzing and thinking about his or her own writing. Self-reflection and awareness, which are key in learning over the long haul, become part of these types of evaluation. The simple technique of posing the question "What if?" can compel a writer to try out options for writing, even when the writing task is specific in topic, audience, or length. Importantly, these types of feedback are individualized, not a one-size-fits-all response to a writing task. Feedback can be given at any time, not only when the task is complete and there's no going back, not only at a time designated to give all students feedback. While rubrics can be employed in process, the form encourages end use in practice and discourages real-time or back-and-forth exchange of information.

DIGITAL NATIVES AND DIGITAL IMMIGRANTS

Phill Michael Alexander

As a mixed-blood Cherokee, I've always been troubled when people use Indigenous phrases or images inaccurately to try to present an argument: from mascots to the overworked use of the phrase pow-wow. I understand the precarious nature of using words like native. That was why I rolled my eyes the first time I heard the phrase digital native.



We have to understand that as technology changes, culture also changes, and as writers we have to think about how audiences change and how composing practices change across time. This is a difficult and nuanced, an always changing and complex practice. We must always think about the words we use to speak about important concepts. We have to work against the fatalistic generalization that the young understand technology and the old do not. Digital is not a place. You are not native to it, nor do you need to apply for residence on its shores. You're not too old, nor are you so young that you'll have magic powers that cause you to innately understand everything digital. But digital technology does shape how you write and will continue to shape how you write. You need to watch, and take note, and learn, and follow the writing wherever it takes you.

FORMAL OUTLINES ARE ALWAYS USEFUL

Kristin Milligan

In many classrooms around the country, students are handed assignment sheets that nicely detail what is expected of them as writers. Regardless of the genre, one (outdated) mainstay is the mandate for formal outlines. It's good for writers to collect their thoughts before jumping into the physical process of writing, and most people would agree with this concept, but unfortunately, not everyone thinks or writes the same way. As a result, formal outlines required at the beginning of the writing process may hinder creativity and progress. Even more likely, students write the mandated outline after the piece has been revised and edited, as a means of meeting the assignment requirements. Requiring students to create an outline as the first step of the writing process teaches them that writing is a linear movement, when in reality, it's actually recursive.



Howard Gardner is well known for developing the idea of multiple intelligences (or the different ways that people learn, such as kinesthetically, visually, aurally, etc.). Through an exploration of multiple intelligences, it has been found that mathematically minded people are the ones who do their best work using outlines. One out of six intelligences prefers outlines, and yet in some classrooms, outlines are still a required part of writing assignments. Essentially, requiring students to create a formal outline for their written work excludes other valuable organizational strategies, such as mind mapping, picture drawing, and manipulating physical representations of ideas, such as rearranging Post-It notes on a whiteboard. Instead of only choosing a familiar and mandated organizational form, students should instead be allowed to use strategies that work best with their own intelligences to foster their growth.

THE PASSIVE VOICE SHOULD BE AVOIDED

Collin Gifford Brooke

Many of the rules that we find in writing handbooks are customs or personal preferences that, over time, pass from the realm of advice to proscription. Some are grounded in the differences between spoken and written language, whereas others represent the stylistic or aesthetic tastes of their inventors. While rules in general may vary with time, place, and genre, the directive that we should "use the active voice," in the words of Strunk and White, is so common (and so enthusiastically repeated) that it might as well be universal. This hostility to the passive voice, however, is misplaced. Active verbs are often our first, best choice when writing, but truly skilled writers know how to use passive verbs effectively, rather than ignoring them out of hand.

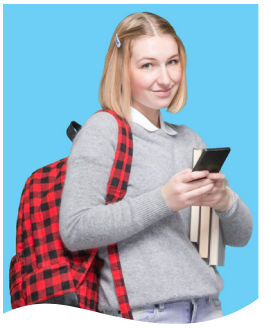


There is nothing intrinsically weak, evasive, or bureaucratic about the passive voice, nor anything about it that makes a sentence necessarily inferior. The passive voice is appropriate in some contexts and less so in others, but this is a matter for a writer's judgment rather than a rule to be (dis)obeyed.

TEXTING RUINS LITERACY SKILLS

Christopher Justice

...[A]s linguist John McWhorter claims, texting is a "miraculous thing" that marks "an emergent complexity" with how we use language. Texting is a "new way of writing" that we can use alongside traditional writing and "an expansion of [our] linguistic repertoire," marking a new type of bilingualism that reflects a positive development in our constantly evolving linguistic selves. Or, as Crystal states, "Texting is one of the most innovative linguistic phenomena of modern times." Texting should be respected and taken more seriously as a sophisticated form of discourse that has the potential to revolutionize how we write and our overall relationship to language.



Encouraging students to use texting to communicate with each other while working on group projects seems logical. Using examples in class about language usage that relates to texting is relevant to students' lives. Comparing texting's conventions to those found in other types of writing is valuable. Asking students to reflect on their texting behaviors will raise their awareness of texting's strengths and weaknesses. Cultivating within students the notion that texting is one useful medium within a spectrum of various communications media will only help them discern when it's best to text and when it's not. In a world rife with alternative discourses and media, embracing the diverse opportunities for communication marks the best path to literacy.

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