January 2010

Can Students Still Write? In writing, Colby students juggle multiple voices in different environments

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Available at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol98/iss4/8

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round the turn of the 21st century, reports of instant-message abbreviations and emoticons insinuating themselves into school papers horrified grammar traditionalists. (OMG!)

“Some teachers see the creeping abbreviations as part of a continuing assault on formal written English,” Jennifer 8. Lee wrote in the New York Times in 2002. “Others take it more lightly, saying that it is just part of a larger arc of language evolution.”

What’s the word (or the text-message contraction) on Mayflower Hill today? As the new decade begins, have the dire predictions come true? Have IM, texts, and social networking sites really undermined students’ abilities to write a persuasive essay, a cogent lab report, or a good research paper?

Not really, professors and peer writing tutors agree. This is not to say the problem doesn’t exist in high schools (which is what Lee was writing about) or that students’ grammar is perfect. But Assistant Professor of English Paula Harrington reports that students intuitively understand a broad range of writing environments that require different levels of formality, and they do a good job adapting.

“It’s all about audience,” said Harrington, who directs the Farnham Writers’ Center. “It’s not that they should write perfectly all the time, it’s that they should figure out who...
For some it’s part of the difficult transition from high school to college. As a writing tutor, Hussain hears students say, “Oh, in high school I used to BS a lot in my papers and just get away with it and still do well,” he said. But given the higher standards they encounter on Mayflower Hill, they soon realize that they can’t fake it anymore, he said. “It’s an adjustment.”

Harrington is passionate about weaning students from overuse of the passive voice. “They hear it everywhere, because it’s the way of evading responsibility for actions. ... ‘Mistakes were made.’ ... They hear it in corporate business language. ‘Dividends were suspended.’ Our culture has become so inclined to have people not take responsibility in their language, [students] think this is the way powerful and important and highfalutin movers and shakers talk.” And so they put it in their early compositions, thinking it sounds academic.

Clarity, though, is cardinal. “Good clear writing shows good clear thinking,” Harrington said. “Even if you have good critical thinking skills, it’s not going to come across in lousy writing.”

“What I say to my students is I want them to think of their writing as a good, clear stream that someone has thrown bottle caps and twigs and gum wrappers in, and I want them to get all that stuff out so I can see all their lovely thoughts—the little fish and the rocks at the bottom of the stream.”

Simple advice. But as E.B. White wrote, “It is probably no harder to eat a woodchuck than to construct a sentence that will last a hundred years.”

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