

Review of the book Undergraduate writing in psychology: Learning to tell the scientific story.

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Abstract:

Reviews the book, *Undergraduate writing in psychology: Learning to tell the scientific story* by R. Eric Landrum (see record 2008-03689-000). This review is written from the perspective of a student who enrolled in a course on academic writing and a professor who taught the course. From the student's perspective, Landrum covers all the bases, from the reason psychologists write scientifically to the proper way to write a notecard. However, she feels that the book is too basic, and that students will not feel that they learned anything new from it. From the professor's perspective, the book covers the basics of writing empirical papers and review papers in APA style. However, the book's difficulty level is very low, which may say a lot about the audience for psychology textbooks. The dilemma for Landrum is to decide which audience to write for: The best students don't need the book's basic points, and the worst students won't read it. Landrum's book may be the best of the APA Paper books: It's more original and more effective than its competitors. Storytelling is a good model for research articles, and Landrum nicely develops the model throughout the book. Despite its storytelling theme, however, the book recommends hiding the storyteller: students should sound objective, formal, and detached--in a word, boring.

Keywords: undergraduate writing | psychology students | scientific method | storytelling | psychology

Article:

In spring 2008, Emily Nusbaum enrolled in a course on academic writing that Paul Silvia taught. Because the course was about undergraduate writing, Emily and Paul were intrigued by Eric Landrum's *Undergraduate Writing in Psychology: Learning to Tell the Scientific Story*. Emily wrote a book review from an undergrad's perspective; Paul wrote a book review from a professor's perspective. They also wrote a funny preface about faux deaths involving wildcat attacks, Longhorn Steakhouse, and Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word*, but the journal did not find it funny. The reader should thus insert his or her own oblique references to pumas.

Emily's Review

R. Eric Landrum wrote a book that effectively walks the reader through the creation of an American Psychological Association (APA) style paper. And it leads us well. The author covers all the bases in *Undergraduate Writing in Psychology: Learning to Tell the Scientific Story*—from the reason psychologists write scientifically to the proper way to write a notecard—complete with illustrations of various poster layouts and handwritten edits on sample student papers. For the subject, Landrum could not have been more comprehensive and genuinely helpful to his readers. The trouble is, his readers won't feel they learned anything new from this book.

In the “about the author” section, we learn that Landrum has taught 10,000 undergraduates over the course of his career. He should know who we are by now, yet his writing suggests otherwise. Though his advice in this book is solid and useful, most is also so basic that it feels condescending. Granted, we are an odd bunch—we dress like a tornado touched down in our closet and we picked the first items that landed at our feet, we obsess about the latest Apple products like it's the End of Days and Steve Jobs is our savior, and we are masters at dreaming up excuses why we can't turn our papers in on time. Odd we may be, but stupid we most certainly are not. It takes a sharp mind to explain why we couldn't get a funeral card validating the fact that our poor ailing grandmother died on a test day—twice. By all means, stay 10 feet away from us—it probably has been a few weeks since we last did laundry—but don't underestimate us.

If I knew nothing about this book until a professor listed it on a syllabus, I would be really excited to find out what witty and innovative tips about writing that the author could offer me. Flipping through the pages, I would be curious what the author will demonstrate with the charts, graphs, and example illustrations that appear throughout. The table of contents looks good—chapters such as “Telling an original story through a research paper” and “Extracting useful nuggets from a literature search” give a glimmer of hope to the reader that someone has actually created a useful writing book. But when I finally delve into the 192 pages of text, all I'll be able to read between the lines is that Landrum must think I'm a moron—or else, he mistakenly substituted “undergraduates” in the title for “high school students.”

Though the author has created a good guidebook that will keep his readers' heads above a sea of methods sections and notecard writing, he has simultaneously insulted his market—and we are a moody, sleep-deprived, hungover bunch. When we are congregated in a classroom, someone ought to put a sign over the door warning the professor not to taunt the caged animals. But Landrum—ignoring all posted signs—prods us undergrads with a very large stick that he calls *Undergraduate Writing in Psychology: Learning to Tell the Scientific Story*. Maybe I don't know what it's like to stand in front of a room full of sleeping, chatting, Web-surfing, iPod-listening, and otherwise distracted students—to the professor we might seem unfit to attend college, but we know that admissions officers aren't that accommodating.

We grew up in the age of Google. We know how to use a search engine—even if the results are less like a YouTube video titled “Dog pees on man” and more like a journal article titled “Hairiness and warning colors as components of antipredator defense: Additive or interactive benefits?” And yes, some readers—or even the majority—might not know what PsycINFO in particular is, but once we know where to find it, there is no additional explanation needed. I think that in trying to reach the widest range of readers, Landrum has alienated himself from those of us who would actually appreciate his efforts to make us better writers. My suggestion to the author—as he asks for it in the introduction—would be to narrow his audience to those undergrads who are interested in writing well for the sake of writing—not writing well enough to avoid failing a class.

Professors know that undergraduates are an ornery group. They can tell us to do the assigned reading until they're blue in the face—they can even warn us in writing that the text will be on the exam—but we still refuse to do the reading. That cycle will never change so long as psychologists write textbooks that they think an undergraduate wants to read. We are not hormonally charged 13-year-olds stomping up stairs and slamming doors—authors need not patronize us to avoid an explosion of whining fits; all we ask for is a book that reads like it was meant for adults and teaches us something useful—because we learned how to write a notecard in ninth grade. Like the proverbial horse to water, authors can lead undergraduates to the tree of knowledge, but they can't make us eat the apple.

So instead of spiking their writing with a hip and chatty tone, a decade's worth of exclamation points, or words emphasized with all capital letters (and Landrum is guilty of all three of these malformed motivators), authors penning texts for undergraduates ought to remember that although we bear a striking resemblance in attitude and occasionally in smell, we undergrads are not caged monkeys in a zoo. Hopefully, for the sake of red ink everywhere, authors will remember this fact and write for undergrads like we are capable of understanding even their most intricately designed sentences—because just once I'd like to enjoy reading the expensive books that my professors make me buy.

Paul's Review

This semester, I am teaching two writing-intensive classes. It has been grim. My heart is heavy; my mind is hazy; my right hand is deformed into a claw. The skin on my fingers has grown around the felt-tipped red pen I use for marking pronoun disasters (“a child and their parents”), commas omitted and misplaced (“Past work found no effect but, our experiment did”), and the peculiar abstruseness of undergraduates trying to sound smart (“Since the origination of the human species, it has been widely known by researchers in the scientific exploration of psychology that...”).

Undergraduates in psychology write badly. But professors of psychology write badly, too. And one group's mediocrity is to blame for the other's incompetence. Most professors write too poorly

to teach students how to write well: the blind are grading the blind. I feel guilty saying this, but I'm concerned about how psychology teaches writing. We are failing, and I suspect that we will continue failing unless we hold ourselves to account.

Expertise in writing comes from formal knowledge and thousands of hours of practice. How is our formal knowledge? I give a writing quiz the first day of class; here are typical questions:

What are two uses of a semicolon?

What is an em-dash, and how is it used?

What is a compound sentence? What is a complex sentence?

What are some rules for using commas?

What is a restrictive clause? What is a nonrestrictive clause? If you're silently taking this quiz, how are you doing? "Well, okay," professors will say. "My style isn't elegant, but my writing is at least correct and clear." This claim—like its cousins "I'm not smart, but I'm creative" and "I got a D in the class, but I tried really hard"—deserves the awkward silence that it evokes.

How much do we practice writing? According to expertise research, practicing for 3,000 hours produces the skill of a distinguished amateur, and practicing for 10,000 hours produces the skill of a world-class expert (Howe, 1999). If you write an hour per day, 8 years will pass before you reach 3,000 hours. Writing in binges—cramming writing into the desperate days before deadlines (Silvia, 2007)—will extend the 8 years into painful decades.

And how well do we write? "Writing must be clear and precise," we intone, but correctness and clarity are low standards. Who enters a bookstore and asks "Do you have any clear and precise books that I can read for fun?" Our behavior reveals our preferences—we want books written with a sense of voice, books written with "humanity and warmth" (Zinsser, 2001, p. 5). We should teach students how to write well, not how to write like professors write.

R. Eric Landrum's *Undergraduate Writing in Psychology: Learning to Tell the Scientific Story*, intended for undergraduates learning to write research papers in APA style, is an intriguing book. Like all textbooks, this book reveals a field's values, habits, and prejudices. For example, psychology obviously loves the APA style research paper. Every department that teaches Research Methods makes students write a big research paper, and most psychology majors write a few of them during college. The APA Paper is a genre, although we don't think of it this way. Like two-act plays and modern short fiction, APA Papers are defined by formal rules, tacit norms, and a community of writers and readers.

Should we teach this genre? When professors claim to teach writing, they are typically teaching the genre's rules, not the craft of writing. And most students write too badly to gain much from instruction in the genre—they learn a new way to write badly, not how to write well. My feelings

are mixed, but the orthodox prevails against the heterodox. I have no rational opposition to teaching the APA Paper, only my weary cynicism born of years of teaching and grading writing. In favor, I agree with Zinsser (1988) that writing is a way to learn: writing about psychology will help students think about psychology. Landrum is right when he proposes that writing APA Papers models the process of scientific reasoning.

Landrum's book covers the basics of writing empirical papers and review papers in APA style. Along the way, he describes the nuts and bolts of writing: finding a guiding idea, tracking down sources, avoiding plagiarism, outlining the paper, and getting down to writing and revising. I have quibbles with some of the advice—for example, telling students to write in bursts when they feel inspired perpetuates the sad cycle of binge writing (Silvia, 2007)—but the book in general presents a mainstream approach to writing. The book's difficulty level is low—really low, which says a lot about the audience for psychology textbooks. Psychology attracts some great students, but it also attracts hordes of students who need remedial work in math and literacy. I can sympathize with Landrum's authorial dilemma: it's hard to decide which audience to write for. The best students don't need the book's basic points, and the worst students won't read it.

(As an aside, I thought that the book devoted a startling amount of time to index cards: how to use them, which sizes to use, and how to write on them. In case you don't know what these look like, the book reprints several index cards, complete with Landrum's handwritten comments and APA-style references, as illustrations. For tech-minded readers, the book describes several computer programs that—wait for it—simulate index cards.)

Professors writing for undergraduates are like parents talking to babies: sensible adults lose their normal voices and start talking crazy talk. The tone of Landrum's book is what I call “Undergraduate Folksy,” a tone perfected by textbook publishers. Exclamation points, a cardinal symptom of the malady, appear in the book's Preface (e.g., “The ability to write scientifically is essential if you want to learn to think like a psychologist!”; p. xxi) and persist until the bitter-yet-perky end. When reading about the proper tone for science writing, for example, we see:

Although a good scientific writer wants the reader to become engaged with the topic, scientific writing is not a conversation between writer and reader. But wait! Throughout this chapter (and throughout this book) I have been referring to you and we and us—that isn't APA format, is it? It is not! (p. 16)

Other sentences have words in capital letters. In the Introduction's first sentence, for example, we read “If you are an undergraduate psychology student reading this introduction, this book is for YOU” (p. 3). A few alarming sentences combine both, creating a miasma of emphasis: “Remember, this is what NOT to do!” (p. 79). Reading paragraphs like these is like driving with a neurotic passenger who yelps at each yellow light.

Landrum's *Undergraduate Writing in Psychology* is probably the best of the APA Paper books: it's more original and more effective than its competitors, which I won't single out here. Storytelling is a good model for research articles, and Landrum nicely develops the model throughout the book. Despite its storytelling theme, however, the book (like all APA Paper books) recommends hiding the storyteller: students should sound objective, formal, and detached—in a word, boring. Psychology's journal articles are formal, detached, and boring, so these books effectively train students. But I am not sure why we want our undergraduates to sound like maritime lawyers. Journal articles aren't diaries, but they aren't tax treaties, either. Nevertheless, some professors grade the interestingness out of students' papers like they are delousing an old mattress. Students who write well are often told to “tone it down,” to write in a “more scientific style.” The good student-writers thus learn to “dumb it down” for their professors, who then praise them for their improvement. This is sad, but we get what we ask for.

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