



## STORYTELLING MATTERS

A story. Everybody's got at least one, and some of those people share it brilliantly. Others? Not so much.

When it comes to telling a story, academics have earned a mixed reputation. Rooted in a culture of exclusion and elitism, the Western academic canon teems with texts that bore and confuse as much as they edify. We all remember those impenetrable books and articles that had us dozing, procrastinating, losing interest, or questioning our intellect. (Imposter syndrome? You bet!)

Given the academy's inherent power dynamics, most of us put up with having to read lousy writing as part of our acculturation as scholars; wearily tramping through turgid texts became a rite of passage, even a badge of honor. Despite persistent institutional efforts to nurture that next generation of better writers, we often wind up reproducing texts much like those we have read. It seems that cultural transmission in academia has all but guaranteed that mediocre writing will always be with us.

But must it?

I say this: Demand better. Expect more from those whose writing you read. Offer constructive feedback.

When necessary and possible, require revision. Promote peer review. Ensure that your institution offers writing support for everyone (including faculty and staff) and then encourage — even insist upon — its use. Most importantly, make clear that you value the power of a carefully crafted narrative.

Help make great storytelling matter.

As an administrator, I read a lot of writing, some excellent, most good, and a small proportion regrettably ineffective. Moreover, much of what I read has serious stakes attached to it: tenure, promotion, an award, an approval. I've struggled with having to offer an unwelcome negative assessment when the story under consideration fails to make a successful case. Sometimes I'm in a position to offer feedback and allow for revision; other times, alas, the story must stand as is.

My advice has long been to encourage folks to be intentional about soliciting feedback. What dismays me is how often such counsel goes unheeded. Often the issue is

time. When we leave writing for the last minute, we shortchange the process and thereby risk diminishing the product. Then there are the twin perils of unawareness and ego. Many authors don't realize they need an editor — but they do. Other authors resist interference with something as personal as their prose — but they shouldn't. Ultimately, a story is only as compelling as the storyteller is brave: brave enough to commit to the craft, brave enough to sublimate the ego, and brave enough to invite others into the process.

I recall how once a student declared that my classes felt more like writing courses than linguistics courses. (Yes!) My strategy of integrating the art of storytelling into the acquisition of disciplinary content was being noticed, and noticing is the first step on the path to enlightenment — or, in this case, more powerful stories.

So demand better. Expect more. Celebrate the effort and courage required to craft compelling stories. Future readers will thank you.

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