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## A CREDIBLE BEGINNING

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Those of us who teach technical writing as part of our duties in the English Departments of Community Colleges and Universities face a double hurdle of credibility when we first meet our technology and business students. Students bring with them certain expectations about "English" and about "English teachers."

Whether we call our courses "Effective Communication" or "Technical Writing" or "Practical Communication for Business," students know that this is an "English" course and they know that their experiences with English in the past have been discouraging. Successive English teachers have told them that their writing was substandard, referring to such mysterious features as misplaced modifiers, comma splices and awkward diction, none of which ever made much sense; they have had their writing covered with cryptic symbols (dangl, s-v, W.W., //, awk, coh) which were never explained; they have been told to look for hidden symbols in endless poems about Death and for instances of the conflict between Man & Nature in a succession of boring stories. Now, finally, when they have enrolled in something that interests them--Broadcast Technology or Forestry or Computer Information Systems--here is English again with its inevitable frustration, humiliation and pointlessness.

Their experience of English teachers has been little better. Their role, more often than not, has been to demonstrate students' shortcomings, to locate errors, to prove that they were semi-literate. Their advice was often to "use concrete words," "develop your ideas

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more fully," "improve paragraph coherence," "learn to spell," none of which ever indicated to students anything practical they could do to improve. And English teachers were always trying to trick them into discovering "significant ideas" through literature.

So how to combat these expectations? There is no simple solution, since the expectations have been deeply imbedded through long experience. However, I have found that two things can help:

1. Students should be impressed at the beginning of the course that the criteria for clear, effective technical writing have not been invented by teachers. They arise from the needs of the reader and from the fact that the purpose of technical writing is to do something to the reader.
2. The technical writing teacher should try to establish himself as having some practical relation to the students' technical discipline. This does not mean pretending to be a technical subject specialist. However, students must see that the "English" teacher is capable of understanding, and to an extent sharing, their interest in the technical discipline.

For the last two years I have taught technical writing to first year students in the Forest Resource Technology programme at the College of New Caledonia in Prince George. I developed an exercise for the first week of classes which is intended to help achieve these two aims.

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The first regular class of the semester meets not in a classroom but on the Loggers' Sports grounds adjacent to the College. There are two tall Douglas Fir climbing poles here. Prior to the class the Forestry technicians and I have chained off and marked with spray paint a semicircle on level ground 100 ft. from one of the poles. Similarly, we have marked a line 150 ft. from the College Gymnasium, which is slightly downhill from the Loggers' Sports ground.

When the students arrive, each is given a Suunto\* and a set of written instructions on how to use it to calculate the height of objects. The written instructions come in two versions, which I hand out alternately. One version is well written, well organized into sections with headings, shows sample calculations and is readable; the other is poorly organized, has no headings, is difficult to read, etc. The students' instructions are to calculate the height of the pole and of the Gym as quickly as they can and to record them, and the total time it took to complete the task, on a piece of paper attached to their instructions. When they are finished they return the Suuntos and instructions to me.

Before the next class, I analyse the data. What you might expect, and what usually happens, is that the students with the poor set of instructions take, on average, considerably longer and are somewhat more prone to error.

When I meet with the students again, I present the results of the experiment and give each student a copy of both sets of instructions. We can then spend the best part of the rest of the class making a

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list of differences between the two documents that might explain why one was easier to use than the other. When this list is finished, I group the comments they have come up with into three categories: those relating to Organization, to Readability and to Accessibility.

The following weeks of the course will give students instruction and practice in handling these three components of effective writing.

The benefits of this introductory exercise are that:

1. It starts students off by putting them in the position of users of technical writing, and generates the criteria of good writing from the needs they felt as users.
2. It introduces them to their "English" teacher giving his first lesson outdoors (in the rain if it so happens). This won't alter their attitudes all by itself, but it is a start you can build on. (Five weeks later when they learn how to use the Suunto in their Forest Measurements class, they take great glee in telling the instructor that they already learned that from their English teacher.)

\*A Suunto is a small handheld optical instrument that is often used in timber cruising. You hold it up to your eye and aim it at the top of the tree. The instrument gives a reading of the height of the tree as a percentage of your horizontal distance from the tree. The measurement is more complicated on sloping ground.

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