

## The Relevance of Writing

by Robert Saba

I entered the American University in Paris (then called the “American College” or ACP) in 1966. I wanted to experience a different way of life from the one I had known in America, and, of course, experience Paris, the city of light, romance, and culture that the world loves. Certainly, the student life that my classmates and I enjoyed was singular and beautiful. We made daily treks across the *Pont de l’Alma* to attend classes on both banks of the Seine. When we had time, we stopped at one of the cafes on the way for coffee, *calva* and a chat with a friendly barman or *patron*. Still, for me there was another Paris that was superimposed on those river walks, river views and stops at the zinc counter, a Paris that mainly existed in my mind but that was no less real for that—a literary Paris that evoked the poetry of Hugo and Prévert, but even more personally for me, the Existentialists, Sartre and Camus, and the Anglo-American-Irish expatriates of the ‘20s, especially Hemingway and Joyce—writers who had shown me ways of seeing and thinking about life that had added meaning to my own.

In short, I came to Paris to immerse myself in its literary spirit. With the guidance and inspiration that I received from outstanding professors at AUP, I found what I came for and more—more because I ultimately discovered that Paris is a city too alive in too many ways to lend itself to derivative experience, literary or otherwise. Living there means knowing it in a unique way. Indeed, my *only* disappointment was the fact that AUP was a two-year college at the time and I was not ready to pack up and leave Paris after two years.

Eventually, however, I did, transferring to NYU. I arrived in New York City, much as I had arrived in Paris, not just excited to be in one of the world’s great cities, but eager to immerse myself in the city’s literary spirit and history—the Battery Park of

Melville, the Washington Square of James, the Bowery of Crane, the Broadway of O'Neil. As had been the case at AUP, I had excellent professors at NYU who mentored me through a compelling immersion process, so that, though New York and Paris are cities so different they hardly lend themselves to comparison, I found the experience of living in New York and attending NYU as satisfying and meaningful as living in Paris and attending AUP had been.

Today, I teach English at Florida International University in Miami. Writing instruction is my specialty, especially courses in first-year composition. Only a minority of my writing students—most of them prospective English majors—share the bent for writing that I had as an entering freshman in Paris. The majority of students who come into my classes do not have a strong interest in writing. I think they are as inquisitive and interested in examining life as I was when I entered college, but for many reasons, including the trend toward specialization in universities, most of them are not convinced that writing skills are important, or worth the time and effort that it takes to refine them.

I try to transfer some of my love of writing to these students. I'm not sure to what extent I'm successful. However, I think I enjoy some success trying to convince them that writing is professionally important, because on that point, evidence is on my side. Writing encompasses a set of seminal skills that is universally identified with professional success and distinction. For that reason, I think writing skills are more important today than ever.

One seminal skill that writing encompasses is communication. Even at sophisticated levels of literary art and philosophic inquiry, communication between the writer and the reader is the most basic and the most exalted consequence of writing. I felt passionate about Hemingway and Sartre because they spoke to me—Hemingway as

a man trying to find refuge and solace in a landscape of brutality and pettiness; Sartre as a man trying to reinvent meaning in a world stripped of illusions.

If writing in its highest forms is about communication, it is even more obviously so in the more pragmatic and prosaic forms that most of us practice. For reasons that are unclear to me, many writing instructors do not emphasize writing as communication or teach it in that context. The result is that students in writing classes often “can’t see the forest for the trees.” They get lost in a maze of rhetorical principles and grammatical rules without grasping the larger and more engaging purpose.

Just the same, what students, and people in general, do know is that communication—effective oral communication, if not “writing” per se—is a skill that is universally associated with success and self-fulfillment. Famous CEO’s, U.S. Presidents, media personalities, coaches, civic and humanitarian leaders, and so on are “good communicators”—often exceptional communicators. Communication skill on this spoken level has positive and pleasurable connotations for students that writing does not. Of course, writing usually has to be more exacting and precise than speaking. It seldom comes easy even for experienced writers. But to students who say “I can’t write,” I think the argument can be made that effective writing is actually as accessible a skill as effective speaking—perhaps even more so in the sense that writing requires no physical endowments like a strong or sonorous voice. A writer’s “voice” is fashioned purely out of words. Everyone who writes can have the voice of a great opera singer. Almost everyone has the tools to be a good writer, and in any case, practicing the craft of writing—using words and employing rhetorical principles effectively—can only benefit and underpin the spoken communication skills that everyone values and enjoys.

A second seminal skill that writing helps develop—a skill that accounts for why communication is so important in the first place—is problem solving. Professional success in almost any field—business, law, medicine, engineering, finance, civil service,

politics, education and so on—involves complex problem solving on a daily basis. Problem solving is *the* quintessential professional skill, the skill that people are recognized and rewarded for above all others. As college students know all too well, just being given a writing assignment means having a problem to solve—what do I write about? how do I do it? what am I going to say? More to the point, the inherent purpose of a writing assignment or task—whether it is an essay, a report, a research paper, etc.—is to address and try to solve a problem or set of problems through close examination, analysis, critical thinking and often research. In other words, to undertake a writing task—certainly a college writing task—means doing exactly what professionals all over the world have to do every day—address and try to solve problems.

Sometimes professionals solve problems by thinking them through on their own and applying their experience and expertise. Students do much the same when they write essays. But in professional life most of the problems that need to be solved are too complex for reflective and solitary solutions. They require collecting, analyzing, evaluating and synthesizing the best available information—talking to people, poring over documents, statistics, studies, etc. This process is the problem-solving process college students engage in when they write research papers. Research writing is tantamount to problem solving. Colleges and universities place a tremendous emphasis on research writing precisely because research, and the problem-solving that it involves, are vital skills. When we contemplate human achievement—whether it's Hannibal's near-conquest of Rome, the Founding Fathers' creation of a new government and nation, Darwin's unraveling of natural selection or Oppenheimer's management of the Manhattan Project—we see the same set of skills eclipsing all others: communication, critical thinking, research, analysis, and ultimately, problem solving. These are the skills we use and exercise as writers.

A few weeks ago I asked several professionals here in Miami if they would be willing to compose a brief statement about the relevance of writing in their fields—a statement that I wanted to share with my writing students. One person I contacted was Irene Marie, president of the Irene Marie Management Group, a South Beach modeling agency that is featured in the MTV series *8th and Ocean*. Irene Marie wrote:

In the Fashion Industry, communication with our clients and models is a critical part of doing business successfully. We enjoy and prefer communicating in person when we can, but in a modern business environment, face-to-face communication isn't always possible.

Much of the communicating that we do is done in writing—through emails, client presentation packages, inner-office memos, agency web message boards and more. We take our written communication seriously because it has to convey practical and aesthetic details of our business, as well as intangible qualities like trust, confidence and dedication that are indispensable to our success.

Another person I contacted was Susan Reyna, executive director of M.U.J.E.R. Inc. ("*MUJERES UNIDAS EN JUSTICIA, EDUCACION Y REFORMA*"), a non-profit agency that provides outreach and social services to the Mexican-American migrant community. Susan Reyna wrote:

The greatest challenge of any non-profit executive is to raise funding for the organization in order to sustain its services in the community. Today's funding climate is very competitive. Only those agencies that are able to compose logical, compelling and thoughtful proposals will be successful in obtaining funding.

Non-profits sell "people's" stories and market "hope" for a better tomorrow. The ability to effectively communicate the needs of the community, to demonstrate, in writing, a sound plan of action, and put a "face" on the problems while promoting the dignity of an agency's constituents requires creative and innovative thinking and writing skills.

These statements express practical applications of writing that I was expecting to hear about and share with my students. What I didn't expect was the importance that Irene Marie and Susan Reyna attach to writing as a way of connecting to people, of

building bridges in their respective professions. As I have suggested, connecting and building bridges is exactly what the writers of my literary Paris did so well—why I have devoted my life to writing and teaching, and why Paris and 1966 remain so important to me.