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Frank Bruni

Our Semicolons, Ourselves

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You're reading the Frank Bruni newsletter, for Times subscribers only. Reflections on the mess (and magic) of politics and life.

When I go through students' papers and flag the misplaced modifiers, note the clichés or explain that a 15-sentence paragraph is less approachable than a five-sentence one, I sometimes ask myself a question that the students who get those papers back from me perhaps ponder as well: Does it really matter?

Is skillful writing a prerequisite for accomplishment? For contentment? Even for communication? You can make your point without punctuating it properly. The most potent ideas may well survive the most flaccid prose.

Besides which, you can now generate prose without writing at all. Wait, scratch that: You do need to fashion the prompt that you're giving ChatGPT — the parameters of the composition you want, the objectives, the

guidelines. But artificial intelligence will do the rest. It will sweat the structure, the syntax, the semicolons.

When I prattle on about dangling participles and the like, some students hear a sad evangelist for a silly religion. I can tell. Even a few of my faculty colleagues look askance at me. One couldn't understand my frustration with a student who had toggled repeatedly and randomly between "and" and "&" in an essay. Didn't the student's meaning come across well enough?

I suppose so. But it could have come across a whole lot better, and that's one of the arguments for writing well — for taking the time and summoning the focus to do so. Good writing burnishes your message. It burnishes the messenger, too.

You may be dazzling on your feet, an extemporaneous ace, thanks to the brilliant thoughts that pinball around your brain. There will nonetheless be times when you must pin them down and put them in a long email. Or a medium-length email. Or a memo. Or, hell, a Slack channel. The clarity, coherence, precision and even verve with which you do that — achieving a polish and personality distinct from most of what A.I. spits out — will have an impact on the recipients of that missive, coloring their estimation of you and advancing or impeding your goals.

If you're honest with yourself, you know that, because you know your own skeptical reaction when people send you error-clouded dreck. You also know the way you perk up when they send its shining opposite. And while the epigrammatic cleverness or audiovisual genius of a viral TikTok or Instagram post has the potential to shape opinion and motivate behavior, there are organizations and institutions whose internal communications and decision making aren't conducted via social media. GIFs, memes and emojis don't apply.

When my friend Molly Worthen, a history professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a frequent contributor to Times Opinion, took the measure of the influential diplomat Charles Hill for her 2006 book “The Man on Whom Nothing Was Lost,” she wrote that a principal reason for his enormous behind-the-scenes influence was his dexterity with the written word. He took great notes. He produced great summaries. He made great arguments — on paper, not just on the fly.

Worthen noted in her book that “transmitting ideas into written words is hard, and people do not like to do it.” As a result, someone who performs that task gladly, quickly and nimbly “in most cases ends up the default author, the quarterback to whom others start to turn, out of habit, for the play.”

Good writing announces your seriousness, establishing you as someone capable of caring and discipline. But it’s not just a matter of show: The act of wrestling your thoughts into logical form, distilling them into comprehensible phrases and presenting them as persuasively and accessibly as possible is arguably the best test of those very thoughts. It either exposes them as flawed or affirms their merit and, in the process, sharpens them.

Writing *is* thinking, but it’s thinking slowed down — stilled — to a point where dimensions and nuances otherwise invisible to you appear. That’s why so many people keep journals. They want more than just a record of what’s happening in their lives. They want to make sense of it.

The subtitle of “The Notebook,” a new nonfiction book by Roland Allen, is “A History of Thinking on Paper.” In a review of it in The Guardian, Sukhdev Sandhu said that Allen “points to evidence that maintaining a notebook with pen and paper is best for processing and retaining information.”

I think you can take the pen and paper out of the equation — replace them with keystrokes in a Google Doc or Microsoft Word file — and the point largely holds. That kind of writing, too, forces you to concentrate or to elaborate. A tossed-off text message doesn't. Neither do most social media posts. They have as much to do with spleen as with brain.

What place do the traditional rules of writing and the conventional standards for it have in all this? Does purposeful, ruminative or cathartic writing demand decent grammar, some sense of pace, some glimmer of grace?

Maybe not. You can write in a manner that's comprehensible and compelling only or mostly to you. You can choose which dictums to follow and which to flout. You're still writing.

But show me someone who writes correctly and ably — and who knows that — and I'll show you someone who probably also writes more. Such people's awareness of their agility and their confidence pave the way. Show me someone who has never been pressed to write well or given the tutelage and tools to do so, and I'll show you someone who more often than not avoids it and, in avoiding it, is deprived of not only its benefits but also its pleasures.

Yes, pleasures. I've lost count of the times when I've praised a paragraph, sentence or turn of phrase in a student's paper and that student subsequently let me know that the passage had in fact been a great source of pride, delivering a jolt of excitement upon its creation. We shouldn't devalue that feeling. We should encourage — and teach — more people to experience it.
