**Let’s Talk about Clarity!**

WIC Faculty Fall Kick-Off Lunch

Friday, October 5, 2012

“Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.”

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.2

“Grammar and mechanics are not in the fashion business, but in the meaning business. As Ernest Hemingway said, ‘Prose is architecture not interior decoration.’”

—Donald Murray, *The Craft of Revision*

**Elements of Clarity**

(Passages from: Pearlman, Daniel D. & Paula R. Pearlman. *Guide to Rapid Revision*. New York: Longman, 2003. Print.)

* *Logical Order of Ideas*—“One idea should lead clearly to the next in an orderly, step-by-step pattern with no missing links. There should be a reason that your third sentence follows the second, not vice versa” (33).
* *Diction*—“Change the word or phrase you have used to one that is more exact in *meaning*, to one that is less *wordy*, or to one that is more suited in *tone* to the rest of your essay” (52).
* *Wordiness vs. Conciseness*—Using conciseness, the writer “expresses [her/his] ideas in fewer words. Do not pad your sentences with unnecessary repetition of *words* and *ideas*” (136). Also, there are many common wordy expressions to avoid, and that can be easily replaced with a single direct word: *because* may replace *due to the fact that*, *for* may replace *for the purpose of*, *if* may replace *in the event that*, and so on (137).
* *Vagueness vs. direct, precise language*—“Rewrite …. in clear, direct, precise language. Vague writing is often described as foggy or cloudy because it lacks substance. It relies heavily on generalization and lacks specific, concrete ideas and facts” (130).

“[Vagueness] does not challenge the reader to think about a clear issue. It makes a noise without making a point. Vague writing is like a picture out of focus. To develop a clear, precise writing style, focus your mind on the idea or image you want to present before you commit it to paper. If you see it clearly in your mind’s eye, you have a good chance of bringing it out clearly on paper. Foggy writing mirrors foggy thinking” (131).

* *Abstract Expressions vs. Concrete Terms*—“*Abstract* words and phrases, like *beauty*, *evil*, and *progress*, have meanings that are somewhat different for each reader … The effect of explaining yourself further is to get more and more *specific* and *concrete* in presenting your ideas. The more precisely you define your ideas, the less you risk being misunderstood” (11).

“A *concrete* word refers to an actual object whose nature is generally known. For example, we all know what *tree* stands for. However, when the tree you are writing about plays an important role in your composition, it is better to use an even more specific concrete expression, like *elm* or *oak*. It is like zooming in for a close-up in movie-making” (11).

**Revising for Clarity**

(Passages from: Murray, Donald. *The Craft of Revision*. New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1995. Print.

When revising a paper for clarity, it is recommended to first “read for communication” and then “read for flow” (37-8). Each word must “serve a role in revealing, developing, defining and clarifying meaning” (37).

When reading to assure clarity is there, attend to “what is on the page, not to what [you] hope is on the page …. [The revision becomes] “satisfying, as meaning comes clear under [your] hand” (38).

“After I have read the final draft line-by-line, I read it through again for flow. Effective writing should carry the reader along as a person in an inner tube is carried by the flow of a river, with ease and at an interesting pace. Flow is composed of the writer’s ability to:

* Anticipate and answer the reader’s questions as they are asked
* Adjust the pace so the reader moves through simple material fast enough to avoid being bored, yet slow enough to allow understanding of difficult passages
* Tune the music in the draft’s voice so it supports the evolving meaning of the draft
* Provide information that satisfies the reader’s hunger and makes the reader want more
* Run a clear narrative line through the draft that will carry the reader to meaning” (38)