

# Writing Matters

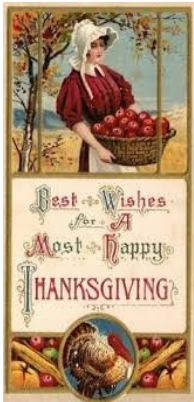


## Three Reasons I'm Thankful to Be a Writing Instructor

### In this month's

#### issue:

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- Writers' Tools



"Don't you get tired of reading all those essays?" is a question often asked of me by people outside the teaching and writing trenches. Since this is the season for giving thanks, I wanted to take a moment to identify just a few of the reasons why teaching writing is an energizing experience and one I'm often grateful for.

1. **Teaching writing affords the opportunity to be a constant learner.** In the past semester alone, student research has taught me a number of facts both practical and arcane .

2. **Teaching writing offers constant change.** Though our course materials may be similar from term to term, each class brings a crop of fresh perspective and fresh voices. In some ways, Kaplan students are largely responsible for creating the text in our courses, and their works are the basis of the dialogue that follows.

3. **Teaching writing offers an opportunity to celebrate growth.** In an accelerated, ten-week course, some students may not detect growth in their writing skills, but it is almost always there for those who have put in the effort. As a writing teacher, I have the pleasure of being the mirror that shows the student work reflected. It is a good feeling to be witness to the student who looks deep within and likes what she sees.

~ Jan Watson

## Thanks for Writing Clearly

Each term many KU-Maine students struggle mightily to express themselves clearly and succinctly in writing. Discussion Board posts, short writing assignments, Unit 9 essay projects, and the all-important "please accept my late assignment" e-mail to instructors all require students to communicate their messages with precision, tact, and even a bit of grace. Too often, however, these students run afoul of common clarity roadblocks, such as misplaced modifiers, ambiguous pronouns, confusing commas, tricky homonyms, or fragmented sentences that, grammatically, mean nothing at all.

The consequences of such rhetorical abuses may be minor if the mistakes appear in casual communiques to friends, such as tweets, texts, or Facebook posts. Consider, though, the poor beleaguered instructor trying to make sense of (and then assign points to) the nonsensical paragraph, or the horrified classmate who has been asked by a fellow student in a seminar chat or discussion post to "Please bare with me while I explain myself."

Misunderstandings, reduced grades, wasted time, anger, anguish, ruin, and despair will be the inevitable result of careless, sloppy writing. So we should all be thankful for good, clear writing, and we should all try to be good writers ourselves. ~ Kevin Kelly

## Writing Matters

### Sentences For Which We Are Thankful

**"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."**  
~ F. Scott Fitzgerald, from *The Great Gatsby*

The perfect metaphor to end this great American novel. – Harriet Duer



**"The words were on their way, and when they arrived, she would hold them in her hands like the clouds, and she would wring them out like the rain."**  
~ Markus Zusak, from *The Book Thief*

I love how the author created an amazingly vivid image for the reader through the simple, yet creative use of a simile. – Michelle Firmin

**"She didn't like to be talked about. Equally, she didn't like not to be talked about, when the high-minded chatter rushed on as though she was not there."**  
~ A.S. Byatt, from *The Children's Hour*

*I awoke this morning with devout thanksgiving for my friends, the old and new.*  
~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

This line manages to be both elegant and precise, revealing a great deal about character.  
- Jan Watson

**"Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no why."**  
~ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. from *Slaughterhouse Five*

This concerns the concept of purpose and connects further to the idea of self-determination, neither of which I much believe in. – Darren Defoe

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### Did You Know ...?

Help! is available from the KU-Maine campus libraries?

Located in South Portland, Augusta, and Lewiston, as well as online, the Maine campus libraries are designed to give students user-friendly assistance with research projects, APA requirements, database searching, and general writing project guidance.

Real living and breathing librarians are available, too, for online chatting, telephone talking, and in-person interacting on any class project students have been assigned. Program guides, an APA template, and the ever-popular NoodleTools are also standing by, waiting to assist KU-Maine students. Get help at <http://library.kaplan.edu/me>

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### The Writer's Toolbox

In my Composition courses I introduce students to the concept of a writer's toolbox: a set of proven writing skills supporting the writer's craft. I encourage students to keep a piece of paper near their computers and build a running list of new writing skills as they progress, such as crafting strong thesis statements, writing good outlines, and applying APA style and formatting to essays. Writing is about ideas, and a strong writer's toolbox can help the writer effectively communicate ideas to the reader.

A writer's toolbox is not so different from a carpenter's toolbox; the apprentice carpenter gradually builds a collection of tools, learning how to use the tools and carefully adding them to the toolbox. In much the same way, writing students collect writing skills, along with the experience and knowledge of how to use them wisely.

Many students are surprised by this comparison, believing that carpentry and writing are at best distantly related. Yet the common thread of craft runs through the core of both disciplines. Consider the famous poem by Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa:

the man pulling radishes  
pointed my way  
with a radish



We as writers tend to use the tools that are readily available to us, much like the farmer in the poem uses a radish from his crop to point a lost traveler in the proper direction. If you have a moment, take an inventory of your writing skills and build your own writer's toolbox to keep your important writing tools readily at hand.

~ Tyler Pruett

### Giving Thanks for Punctuation

We may take them for granted just like we take so much for granted in our lives but have you ever stopped to consider how thankful we all should be for the simple easily ignored yet vitally essential work of punctuation marks like the period comma semicolon colon apostrophe quotation mark or question mark I would bet you rarely stop to consider how difficult it would be to make sense of any piece of writing if we did not have those happy squiggly curvy confounding or perhaps just straight and boldly unwavering little symbols that guide our understanding of written work yet are so confusing to use that we often give up and do not bother to use them or perhaps if we do use them we just close our eyes and sprinkle them into our sentences and paragraphs in some totally random way hoping for the best yet fearing the worst as we compose a piece of writing I wonder if you can add the correct punctuation to this incomprehensible paragraph

Try these bad boys on for size

Period . Semicolon ; Comma , Colon : Parentheses ( ) Question Mark ? Exclamation Point! Hyphen-Dash – Brackets [ ] Ellipsis . . . Slash /

~~ Kevin Kelly

## Sentences . . . Continued from page 2

**“Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo.”**

~ James Joyce, from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

The phrase “Once upon a time” still makes me stop, drop everything, and walk into a new story. – Jola Grodzka

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**"They had seen her bend down and change her footwear....So might we fail to see the real sadness that lies behind the acts of others; so might we look at one of our fellow men going about his business and not know of the sorrow that he is feeling, the effort that he is making, the things that he has lost."**

~Alexander McCall Smith, from *The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party*

This sentence demonstrates the author's use of visual and lyrical writing to express simple yet profound depths of emotion. – Laurie Bastien

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**“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”** ~ Harper Lee, from *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Everything you need to know in life you can learn from reading this book. - Gerry Ney

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**“She’s smooth as a gravel on a roadside creek bank,  
Sweet as a flower on a knotty pine casket.  
She’s hot as a fire on the end of a cigarette,  
Rich as a church’s Wednesday night basket.  
And there ain’t no man who can get his head around it.”**

**Lyrics from Angaleena Presley’s song “Ain’t No Man”**



The use of similes create a contradiction of who this woman is: gritty and rough around the edges, yet strong, sweet, smart, and a bit crazy. Guess I am thankful for amazing songwriters! - Lenore DiFiore

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**"Be well, do good work, and keep in touch."** ~ Garrison Keillor’s “The Writer’s Almanac” closing.

This addresses two of the most common usage errors (“good” and “well”), and ends with a popular phrase that, in the context of all that correct grammar, can be seen as nonsensical words strung together. – Mike Bowe

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**“The boy, crouched on his nail keg at the back of the crowded room, knew he smelled cheese, and more: from where he sat he could see the ranked shelves close-packed with the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans whose labels his stomach read, not from the lettering which meant nothing to his mind but from the scarlet devils and the silver curve of fish - this, the cheese which he knew he smelled and the hermetic meat which his intestines believed he smelled coming in intermittent gusts momentary and brief between the other constant one, the smell and sense just a little of fear because mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood.”**

~ William Faulkner, from *Barn Burning*

The combining of point of view with intimate descriptive details powerfully depicts the boy’s physical and emotional state as he wrestles with real hunger and conflicting feelings about loyalty to his malevolent father.

– Kevin Kelly