

Reynolds, Jean. *What Your English Teacher Didn't Tell You: How to Showcase Yourself through Writing*. Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015. 288 pages. ISBN 148279697X.

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It is no secret today that hundreds of thousands of students graduate from high school and enter college unprepared or without the skills they need to write successfully. After their college graduation, many of these same individuals continue their education as they matriculate in graduate or law schools across the country where their writing skills are often again criticized: “It’s lamented by colleagues in the law school halls. It’s lamented in faculty lounges. Incoming law students aren’t ‘what they used to be’” (Flanagan 135). Clearly, many employers, as well as graduate school faculty and law school professors, feel that “[u]ndergraduate education has changed over the last fifty years,” with others suggesting that “the quality of student writing is worse than ever before...” (Flanagan 135). Scholars also debate the nature and causes of this perceived decline. Michael Carter and Heather Harper, for example, contend that education has changed as a result of “budget cuts, an increasing emphasis on national standards, and the influence of market-based logic in education” (286). Noting education standards have decreased, Richard Aruru and Josipa Roksa assert that the writing abilities of today’s students suggest that students are not held to rigorous educational standards, particularly those related to reading and writing.

Although there is a variety of explanations as to why students and/or professionals do not demonstrate an understanding of basic writing principles, the fact is that people who lack sound writing skills will often continue to struggle when faced with any sort of writing task, let alone a writing-intensive course or career. Individuals will continue to have problems with any number of elements of writing—from subject/verb agreement and correct usage to formulating sound arguments and integrating secondary

sources. How can teachers help individuals develop effective writing skills, or how can people help themselves to improve their writing skills?

Jean Reynolds, author of *What Your English Teacher Didn't Tell You: How to Showcase Yourself through Writing*, offers a comprehensive and useful resource for both students and professionals, regardless of age or ability, that will assist them in improving their writing skills. From explaining the various rhetorical modes to developing sound and logical arguments, Reynolds simplifies this information in direct, easy-to-understand lessons while incorporating exercises for readers to complete that reinforce her lessons. Her ultimate objective is to teach her readers “how to produce thoughtful, intelligent writing without befuddling . . . readers” (Reynolds 11).

A Professor Emerita of English at Polk State College and a former instructor at a correctional facility as well as an internationally recognized Shaw Scholar, Reynolds draws upon her experience in the classroom to address common issues that are troublesome for writers who possess various levels of experience. The author realized that her students were becoming increasingly frustrated with their writing skills, and this served as the impetus for her book. She writes that she simply answered the question, “What didn't your English teacher tell you?”, ultimately phrasing the question as a statement to form the book's title. Expounding upon her motivation to write this text, Reynolds writes, “Quite simply, the curriculums, textbooks, and teaching software found in many school systems aren't always designed to prepare students for real-world writing” (ii). Noting that many writing textbooks only address writing for academic purposes, she stresses the importance of maintaining a professional tone when writing for business (i.e., composing emails, memos, letters, reports, etc.) as well as for academia.

Her 288-page book is divided into seven parts, each of which is composed of several chapters designed to teach real-world practical writing. In the first part of her book, she emphasizes the importance of effective writing, as she contends, “This epidemic of bad writing creates confusion and inefficiency that waste a great deal

of time and money” (Reynolds 2). Seeing a need for effective writing as it benefits everyone from students to employers to governmental agencies, Reynolds emphasizes that the “purpose of this book is, very simply, to teach you how to think like a *writer*” (4). Part of thinking as a writer for Reynolds involves thinking critically, which ultimately allows an individual to communicate effectively, thus saving time and money both at work and in school. After explaining the importance of effective writing and critical thinking, Reynolds encourages her readers to make a writing plan, which keeps them focused and motivated. She suggests that the writing plan consists of goals and challenges that one will encounter during the writing process as well as the strategies one will use to improve one’s writing.

As the goal is to become a better writer, Reynolds, in part two of her text, outlines a three stage writing process, which consists of preparing, drafting, and revising, to help writers effectively plan and compose an essay. Reynolds explains that when individuals are preparing to write, they should gather information and generate ideas, while writers in the drafting stage should develop a thesis statement as well as ideas that support the thesis. Finally, in stage three, Reynolds discusses that writers during the revision process should examine the organization of their paragraphs, as well as edit the content of their essays. Certainly, this advice will be familiar to K-12 writing teachers and compositionists as firmly situated in the writing process movement. However, Reynolds’ advice is intended for lay readers seeking sound and accessible advice for tackling writing tasks and enhancing their strategies for approaching those tasks.

In part three of her text, Reynolds offers writers another set of familiar strategies for developing their introductions and incorporating examples and narratives to improve their essays. She also focuses on using closure to end paragraphs and transitions to establish flow between each paragraph. Although the information presented in parts one through three is geared toward any writer of any level, part four is geared solely toward high school and college students. Here, Reynolds directs her advice to students writing essays. She

advises them to be mindful of the basics: Remember to follow the assignment instructions and to manage time wisely. Reynolds also encourages students to seek outside help on their essays from a writing lab, if one is accessible at their campus, and to write on topics that are somewhat stimulating to their audiences.

After offering this advice, Reynolds provides a detailed explanation of the various modes of development, including comparison/contrast, classification, process, cause and effect, narratives, and informative/research. She introduces the various rhetorical modes, noting that they may be unfamiliar to students but also acknowledging that the strategies behind the modes are those they use frequently in their writing and speaking. Although this information concerning the writing modes is not new information to teachers and scholars, Reynolds has found a way to make this information more practical for student writers. She emphasizes the importance for students to incorporate the modes in their writing, which allow them productive means of arranging and communicating their ideas. Instead of just offering a string of ideas, she uses examples that help students see the benefits, for example, of using a comparison/contrast structure to examine and assess the specific formats of classes over listing ideas about the differences between online and face-to-face classes in a less systematic fashion. Not only does Reynolds present examples in her book that incorporate the modes, but she also encourages students to use the rhetorical modes as strategies for structuring their own thinking and writing.

After she addresses writing issues as they pertain to students, she moves to parts five and six, discussing sentence, grammar, and writing issues that prove troublesome for many writers of various levels. Moving to part seven, Reynolds includes a section that focuses on the mistakes that professional writers often make. She explains advanced grammatical issues, including indefinite pronoun references, misplaced modifiers, parallel construction, citation mistakes, and advanced punctuation. Also, included in part seven is a chapter that focuses on business writing and the importance of using an appropriate tone in workplace correspondence. The last section of

part seven is geared toward professional writers who want to publish as well as developing writers who wish to become professional writers. Reynolds' guidance on business writing and self-publishing are two of the commendable aspects of her book that set it apart from traditional writing textbooks or writing manuals. For example, for those interested in self-publishing, Reynolds explains the step-by-step process of how individuals can publish and market their own books.

While a great deal of the information that Reynolds presents is not innovative, as much of the information she presents has previously been taught in classrooms and included in textbooks, she presents information in a simplified manner, allowing students and professionals to easily understand and digest the information. Her book does not include any jargon or technical language that confuses her readers. When she does include terminology pertaining to writing, she explains those terms clearly and completely. For example, Reynolds defines the process essay as a rhetorical mode that "refers to something that happens the same way, step-by-step, over and over" (131). She also then explains how the process essay differs from a narrative essay, as it focuses on an event that occurred one time only.

Not only does she thoroughly explain the concepts she presents in her text, but she also uses examples that further illustrate her points and discusses how individuals will use the skills acquired from her book in the workplace. For example, she suggests that process writing can be used to explain to others how to cook a meal in a remote location or expose a questionable process in society. In addition to her examples, she presents practice exercises that readers can complete, and she includes the answers to the exercises. For instance, she presents a practice exercise on writing effective paragraphs. The practice exercise involves reading a short paragraph and then answering questions concerning her purpose for writing, points that support her purpose, and examples that illustrate her purpose for writing. Reynolds also includes the answers to her questions so that her readers can receive immediate feedback, ensuring they understand the previous concepts. Another aspect

that sets her text apart from most writing texts is that it is applicable to a wide audience, including professionals and students. She spends one part of her book directly addressing students, yet any professional needing a refresher on writing will find her text useful.

Framing much of Reynolds' approach to writing instruction is what Barack Rosenshine originally referred to as guided practice, which has evolved into the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model. This model suggests that learning slowly transitions from the teacher to the student or the reader, in this case (Duke and Pearson; Pearson and Gallagher; Rosenshine). The teacher initially is responsible for all learning that occurs, but after being exposed to the lesson, the idea is that the responsibility for learning and understanding the material shifts to the student. This shift in responsibility occurs when students begin using model paragraphs, guided examples, or practice exercises, all of which are included in Reynolds' book.

While some writing teachers will appreciate the structured approach that Reynolds suggests, writing scholars, theorists, and instructors may find it troubling or problematic or resist the informality that Reynolds encourages her readers to incorporate into their writing. In fact, many writing teachers may—as an example—disagree with Reynolds' advice to use contractions and not avoid split infinitives. As far as contemporary pedagogical approaches are concerned, those who subscribe to a current traditionalist approach to writing will support many of Reynolds' ideas, although she includes theories from various pedagogical approaches. After all, she offers a very structured approach to writing that is driven by a thesis, supported by main ideas and related details, which are characteristic of a current traditionalist approach to writing (Connors). In a number of chapters in her text, she presents outline templates that her readers can use to arrange their ideas, which helps them organize their ideas into a manageable format. At other points, Reynolds departs from a current traditionalist approach and incorporates other pedagogical

approaches in order to offer her readers the most useful and beneficial writing advice she can.

Jean Reynolds' *What Your English Teacher Didn't Tell You* is a valuable and informative resource that is of service to a diverse readership. It offers a practical approach to writing and grammar that both novice and professional writers can reference. Reynolds' years of expertise in the classroom are compiled in this text and inform the advice she offers her readers. She knows the problematic issues that students struggle with as writers. She clearly and succinctly addresses common writing problems and offers writing advice that will help students overcome these challenges and become more confident writers.

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