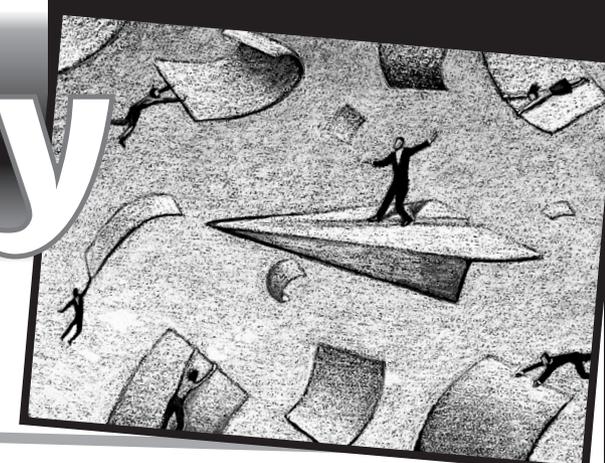


Real World Literacy



11

If you've ever asked, "When will I ever use this in the real world?" join us, Mondays and Wednesdays, for Real World Literacy, a new Skills for Everyday Living series. Series runs through April 4.

Meaningful Messages

Everybody loves getting letters. There's nothing like reading something that was written just for you. A letter is one of the most meaningful ways you can choose to communicate with another person. But we often forget that there's meaning in it for us, too, if we think carefully about who we're writing to and take the time we need to write well.

You've probably been writing letters without even knowing it. If you send e-mails, you're sending "letters." This is the easiest kind of personal correspondence — letters telling people about your life.

To make a letter effective, no matter why you're writing it, you should keep two things in mind: voice and word choice.

Your Writing Voice

If you're writing to a person you know well, try to sound like you talk. Use contractions and simple sentences. You can make sure you're sounding like you by reading your letter out loud. If it sounds like someone else, you need to revise.

What if you're upset? When we get hurt or angry, our voice changes. We might stop using contractions in an effort to sound more formal and strong. We might also use longer, more complicated sentences. Watch out for this. It's not necessarily bad but it might not be right for you — and it might send the wrong signal to the person you're writing to.

When we write formal letters, to companies for information or to hiring managers for jobs, we often use a different tone. We want to sound serious without sounding stiff, unnatural, or bored. For example, some people will tell you never to use contractions in a formal letter. But that's not a hard and fast rule. Many people speak and write with contractions in formal settings.

Your Word Choice

When you write, you have time to choose your words carefully. Say you're writing a thank you note to someone who gave you a cool sweater for your birthday. Instead of writing, "Thanks for the beautiful sweater," invest a little more time in finding specific language that more accurately describes your true feelings.

One way to do that is with a Tell-Show T-chart. Draw a big "T" on your paper with "Tell" on the left side and "Show" on the right. On the "Tell" side, write "Thanks for the beautiful sweater." Then, make a picture of that sentence in your mind and write down all the things you see in that picture on the "Show" side like this:

TELL: "Thanks for the beautiful sweater."

SHOW: "When I tried it on, it fit perfectly. I love the bold colors; they're just right for me. And it's so soft and comfortable, just the thing to keep me warm and toasty when I'm outside on snowy days."

See? It's not hard. By taking a little more care with your choice of words and your use of details, you can craft letters that will really mean something to the person you're writing. And that will mean something to you, too.

Want to make a huge impression with your next letter? Write it by hand. As e-mail becomes more and more popular, letters become more rare. And since everyone has a printer hooked up to their computer these days, handwritten letters are even rarer still. A handwritten letter has something no computer-printed letter can offer: you! Your handwriting is the ultimate personal statement. It's a clear measure of your uniqueness in the world. When you use it to write, either formally or informally, you tell your reader that you cared enough about the message to deliver it "in person."

Mr. Peha Says

In the Newspaper ...

Activity #1: It's something of a tradition that every newspaper prints letters from its readers. You can usually find them in or near the Opinion and Editorial section. Take a look at the things readers write about and the ways they choose to express themselves. Find a few that you like. And then, pick an issue you'd like to address and model your own letter to the editor after the best letters you find.

Activity #2: When it comes to getting your writing in the newspaper, you don't just have to write letters to the editor. You can write what's called an "open letter." An open letter, in this case, might be written to everyone in your town. This is your chance to use the newspaper as a vehicle for advancing your own ideas over what the newspaper chooses to print. Of course, they have to choose to print you. But you can increase the odds of that happening if you write well and if you have something important to say that many people need to hear.

Steve Peha and Margot Carmichael Lester run Teaching That Makes Sense, an education consulting company that makes teaching easier for teachers and learning more meaningful for kids. They're also the authors of two books on writing for tweens and teens: "Be A Writer: Your Guide to the Writing Life" and "Be A Better Writer: Power Tools for Young Writers" which you can learn about at www.betterwriter.com. For more information and free teaching materials, visit their web site at www.ttms.org or write to them at info@ttms.org.