

Writing for e-learning

©Brooke Broadbent

Tel 613 862-4459

brooke.broadbent@gmail.com

brookebroadbent.com

Yesterday, I received a telephone call from an e-learning consultant let's call her Oxana. "People tell me I write with an accent" she lamented. We talked for a while about learning to write. I explained that it might be impossible to lose her accent when she speaks, but she could learn to write flawless English. It might take time but I was sure she can succeed, given her determination. After our conversation, a former colleague sprang to mind. Let's call her Svetlana. She is an excellent writer. After many years of hard work she has mastered the ability to write clear, engaging, flawless English. Svetlana is an accomplished author of e-learning content.

E-learning materials need to stand on their own without an instructor. In classroom approaches, when an instructor is present, the written materials are used as support. The instructor is the main show. Without an instructor, or with only a part time instructor, in e-learning, the written materials are front and center and they need to be crystal clear and engaging. Well-written e-learning produces results. Whether it's informal learning, self-paced, instructor-led or an electronic support tool, content is king. And what is content? Mostly words, sentences, ideas thinking snared in a framework of words. From my experience, creating content resembles playing a sport proficiently. It consists of 20% skill and 80% tactics and practice. Athletes excel when they devote themselves to their chosen sports. They develop their muscles, their knowledge, abilities and the right 'winning attitudes. Writing e-learning content is a similar story.

Developing your writing muscles

The muscles, or the building blocks of writing, are solid content, clear thinking and correct language. Solid content springs from experience and research. Good writers learn how to ask the right questions, conduct solid research, analyze the results and convey their findings in a convincing and, when appropriate, in an entertaining manner.

Clear thinking takes discipline analysis, patience and time. The discipline stemming from Rudyard Kipling's "six honest serving-men" (what, why, when, how, where and who) forces you to get the facts. Patience for a writer means that you might not get it right the first time. Revising, rewriting, rethinking are part of the writer's craft. Time is the writer's friend and enemy. There is never enough of it, but you must take enough time to plan your writing, to write carefully and to reflect on what you have written. Like the traditional method of preparing bread dough, writing needs to sit and take on a new form before you punch it down and start over again.

Correct language proper grammar, spelling and sentence construction is the yeast of good writing. If it's not there, your ingredients will fall flat. It does not matter how well you measure your other ingredients, how long you work your dough, or bake it, and you can't bake bread without yeast. I read some 'yeastless' writing recently. An e-learning vendor sent me a paper written by an individual who presents at conferences and is well-placed in the company. To my horror, the paper was full of grammatical errors. The weak grammar undermined the entire effort. The thinking was just as spotty as the grammar. The paper fell flat. My esteem for the company took a tumble.

Learning writing tactics

A writer's tactics are techniques to engage readers, as well as active language and short sentences. Stories engage readers by making your points less abstract. Hooks engage readers by sparking their curiosity, kindling their interest and helping them warm up to you as a person. Stories are the glue of writing, binding writers to their readers.

Active language kindles readers' curiosity. Passive language puts readers to sleep. A sentence such as one with several conjunctions that places many ideas in the same sentence and repeats words such as the sentence I am writing now is hard to follow and not very interesting to read for your readers. "You will learn in this course how to . . ." is a more gripping way to convey your thoughts than, "this course teaches the learner how to"

Professional writers prefer Anglo-Saxon related words to their Latin rivals. You should too when you write e-learning content, at least most of the time. Words springing from Anglo-Saxon roots are often more direct, shorter and sometimes more colorful than their Latin-like friends. Some examples are the Anglo-Saxon start instead of the Latin-origin commence, sight over vision, help not assistance. Latin generated French, Italian and Spanish languages that are famous for their melodious rhythms. (To make the point that Latinate words have their place when you want to create gentle prose, my last sentence, is full of the soft sounds of Latin-originating words.)

Short sentences increase the tempo of your writing. They are more dynamic, easier to follow, more engaging than long, convoluted collections of phrases.

Practicing your writing

The only way to practice writing is to do it. Training magazines are constantly on the look out for new writers and they are a great place to start. You can also self-publish on your personal Web site, as a point of departure. However, writing is not a solo act. You need others to give you comments. It's impossible for you to find all the flaws in your own writing. Secure trusted "editors" friends, family and colleagues who will help you identify the strengths and weaknesses in your writing. Stretch yourself. Agreeing to write an article for informal e-learning or to set up a self-paced Web site could help you expand your writing capacity.

Above all, good writing is about breathing life into a subject. Gather solid information. Discover an angle. Add your personal touch. Always keep your readers in mind. Ask yourself whether they will be able to follow your thoughts. If not, rewrite. If you are passionate about your subject, if you care about your readers and your writing, your musings will resonate with your readers. E-learners are reading your text in order to learn and to be entertained. If you give them content written with passion and authority they will think, smile and come back for more.

I don't know whether Oxana will master the skill of writing e-learning materials. For her sake I hope she does. The e-learning field needs good writers. And she will gain a high level of personal gratification and even career advancement from learning to write well. There is no quick fix. Steroids are banned in this sport! Be patient, focused and deliberate. Your writing will improve. Learners will understand your thoughts. They will learn smarter and faster. That way we can all win the e-learning writing race.

Examples of well-written e-learning materials

The authors of the sites listed below have developed their answers to what they consider to be well-written e-learning materials. Their sites can serve as sources of inspiration if you are looking for hints on writing for e-learning.

useit.com: Jakob Nielsen's Web site
Web site of the Internet Time Group

©Brooke Broadbent
Tel 613 862-4459
brooke.broadbent@gmail.com
brookebroadbent.com