



MID-NIGHT MUSINGS

ROD PITCHER

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Thoughts that have occupied my mind when
sleep is far away

Rod Pitcher

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Against Phonetic Spelling

Many people have proposed that words be spelt phonetically, that is, how they sound. Mostly phonetic spelling is suggested because, it is claimed, it would be easier to read and would take away some of the odd spellings of English words. This, it is again claimed, would make it easier for children to learn to spell.

However, it seems to me, that those people who want phonetic spelling have not thought through all the problems that would be created by it. The problem is that different people pronounce some words differently and so would spell them differently phonetically. Amongst people who speak English there are many different types of accents and thus pronunciations.

For instance, many words are pronounced differently in the north of England from the south. Similarly in the United States. Some countries have few variations due to different accent, such as Australia, but there are still a few differences: For instance the way people in some states pronounce ‘film’ and ‘school’.

These differences of accent and pronunciation would mean that the speaker would want to spell the words differently. Thus, different countries, and even different areas of some countries, would develop different spellings. English would then become fragmented and English speakers in different countries would have difficulties communicating with each other. At least with one standard written English the various English writers

can communicate in writing if not in speech. Phonetic spelling would only work if everyone spoke with the same accent and pronunciation.

For example, consider the word ‘path’. Some people pronounce it with a short ‘a’ as in can: They would spell it in the current way, that is, ‘path’. Some people pronounce ‘path’ with a ‘long a’ as in cart: They would spell it phonetically as ‘parth’. Yet others pronounce ‘path’ with a ‘short e’ type sound as in bet: They would spell it phonetically as something like ‘peth’.

These examples show that using phonetic spelling the English language would soon diverge into many different forms which would make it difficult for people from different backgrounds to communicate with each other in writing as now sometimes happens in their speaking with different pronunciations.

Next consider words that are pronounced the same but spelt differently, such as ‘sail’ and ‘sale’. Presumably they would both be spelt phonetically as ‘sayl’ or something similar. If the captain of a ship were to see a sign saying “Sayl on!” he would be confused. He wouldn’t know whether he should up-anchor and start his voyage or rush out and buy a bargain. Such phonetic spelling will only result in confusion for everyone.

Thus spelling words phonetically would fragment the English language and create difficulties and confusion in communication between people. Communication between different people in different countries is difficult enough as it is without making it harder. Making communications between peoples more difficult is a step backwards. We should be aiming

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to promote communications and understanding between different peoples in different countries not make it more difficult.

I doubt that phonetic spelling would help children learn to spell. They would want to spell words the way they say them. If this did not happen to be the accepted pronunciation then their writing would become illegible to other readers who say the words differently.

Changing words

Words change their meanings over time. Often this is due to the way the word is used and alterations in its usage. Sometimes these changes are deliberate – as when someone adopts a common word and gives it a new meaning – other times they just happen: As the way people talk or the environment changes the words change also. Sometimes, the change is more sinister, as when a common word is given a new meaning and used in place of a word that has bad connotations, as in propaganda, to hide what is really happening.

Recent changes in sensitivity have seen many of the old Anglo-Saxon based swear words brought back into common speech. It seems that this started as a protest by younger people, particular pop music groups, who wanted to shock their elders. The trouble, from their point of view, is that it has become so common that it is mostly accepted, except by old fogies, so it no longer shocks. The common usage of these words has also changed much of their meanings. The words have just become words with little meaning any more. For instance, swear words that originally referred to sex and sexuality are now simply expletives with no meaning other than to try to shock the sensibility of the hearer. Their original meaning has been all but lost.

The way that these swear words have moved in and out of common usage is interesting. A hundred years ago a person could be arrested and jailed for using them, particularly in print. Fifty years ago they were considered indecent and offensive. Men

might use them when talking to other men, but were careful not to use them when a woman was nearby, in case she was offended. They were still not permitted in print. Then they came into use intended deliberately to shock and offend. Now they have become common again and even women use them openly. Now it is getting to be uncommon to find a book that doesn't use the 'four-letter-words' somewhere. They have moved from illegal to common in a very short a time. Will they eventually move again and become again uncommon or even condemned? Who knows: The way the English language changes, anything is possible. It seems that, already, many of them are being used so commonly that they do not impact on the hearer, and are just ignored. The fact that some people still find them offensive doesn't seem to matter any more.

Sometimes common or pre-existing words are used for new technology, which can sometimes confuse someone who knows the origin of the words. 'Computer' originally meant a person who 'computes', that is 'works something out' or 'calculates', often mathematically. Now it has been depersonalised to mean an object rather than a person. There is a lot of difference between a person who works something out and a machine that does the same.

The twentieth century has seen many new or modified words come into use. One of the areas where this is most common is in talking about warfare. No longer do we use plain Anglo-Saxon words when talking about war and its consequences. 'War' itself has become an 'engagement'. The enemy are no longer just 'the enemy'. Now they have become 'barbarians', 'aggressors' and so on. When an unarmed town is

attacked it no longer is ‘destroyed in an attack’. Now it is ‘cancelled by a strategic operation’. The residents aren’t killed, they are ‘permanently displaced from the situation’ and they don’t become ‘homeless refugees’, but ‘displaced persons’ or ‘strategic problems’. The purpose of all these new creations is to remove the idea of war being aggressive and offensive and make it more palatable to the general public who don’t like to read of ‘massacres’ or ‘exterminations’. Unless it is the enemy who is reported as doing them, when it is used to stir up feeling against them. *We* don’t massacre civilians, *we* remove non-combatants from an offensive position: Only the enemy exterminates and massacres our ‘military advisors’! And *only foreign countries* have ‘terrorists’: *We* have ‘freedom fighters’.

Will language ever come to be like NewSpeak in Orwell’s 1984, where ‘Peace is War’, where words with once opposite meanings have been revised and redefined to mean the same thing? Sometimes, the way politicians and advertisers use words, we seem to be heading in that direction.

Sometimes it is difficult for a person learning English, such as child or non-English speaker, to adjust to the changes of meaning. Sometimes they will learn the meaning of a word, only to find that when they use it in ordinary conversation it means something different. Often the difference is subtle, but it might also be offensive or important. Most of us have, at some times, had to correct the pronunciation of a child whose mistake has turned a common word into something maybe offensive or misleading, without him being aware of what s/he has done. We have also experienced the embarrassment of a non-English speaker who is trying to tell us something important or

interesting but distorts the message by choosing the wrong word, or the wrong meaning of the word.

It is important that the learner of English be aware of the changes in words. It is not enough that s/he knows the current meaning of a particular word. S/he must also know if the meaning has changed and when, where the word originated, how it evolved over time and changed its meaning, and any subtleties in its meaning. Without this knowledge, difficulties could arise. Imagine the confusion of a person reading a book about 18th century office workers, but being unaware of the change in the meaning of 'computer' mentioned above. S/he would wonder if the author has made a historical mistake by introducing computers, or, perhaps, PCs were invented a few hundred years earlier than is usually claimed.

Three examples will show how this has happened: Speed, urchin and revolve, are words as used by Shakespeare at various places in his works that now mean something very different from what the Bard intended because they have changed their meanings in the interim.

Speed once meant to achieve one's aims, to succeed in an enterprise. It had nothing to do with moving fast. So when a character says "Good speed!" s/he is wishing someone good luck and success in whatever they were going to do: "I hope you succeed in your aim and do it very well!".

Urchin is an old name for the hedgehog. It means 'having spines' and is why the spiny sea urchin is so named. So when Shakespeare refers to "the urchin in the storm" he means the hedgehog hiding in the underbrush, not lost or destitute children.

Revolve once meant to think or consider. For instance, a character in a play by Shakespeare reads a letter and is told to ‘revolve’. He is not being told to turn around in a circle, but to think about and consider the matters discussed in it.

Unfortunately, not many people (particularly producers of Shakespeare’s plays!) know about these changes, and so we have an actor turning in a circle when he should be thinking and other oddities. They change some of the points that Shakespeare was trying to make in his plays, often to their detriment.

Of course, if the student of English is to be taught all this, the teacher must also know and understand how and why and when words have changed their meanings over time. If in doubt, or curious, *The Oxford English Dictionary* is your best source, if somewhat large for everyday use. But if you look it up in the *OED* you can be sure that you know all about the word: Perhaps more than you want to know! Still, it’s always interesting to learn more about our common language, but perhaps it’s best not to become too pedantic about it.

Flying the flag

Whenever I pass my local school I see that they are flying the Australian flag. All very patriotic and respectful and to be applauded. This is common in the ACT and probably the rest of the country. My concern is that they leave the flag up at night and don't handle it properly.

To me, this shows a lack of respect for our flag and our country.

There are rules, very ancient ones, for flying a flag, what should be done, when and how. It appears that most people don't know these rules. I think that they should know and apply the rules to show respect for the flag and the country it represents.

The rules are meant to guide the person responsible for the care of the flag and to make a ritual of putting it up and taking it down, and to protect and look after it with respect. In military circumstances there would be an honour guard present at all public times to ensure the safety of the flag.

The rules are probably written down somewhere if we cared enough to look for them.

The flag should not be left up at night, in the darkness. This is said to be an insult to the flag and show disrespect for it. It also shows disrespect and is said to bring bad luck to the country it represents. If a flag must stay up at night it should be brightly floodlit so that the darkness never falls on it.

The flag should be taken down before sunset. It should be folded carefully and respectfully and stored in a safe, secure place until morning. In the morning it should be raised after sunrise.

In all these act, showing a respectful attitude to the flag is important, because not doing so is seen to be an insult to the flag and its country.

I have seen people putting up or taking down the flag at some public event, allowing it to drag on the ground and bundling it all up untidily before shoving it in a cupboard somewhere until the next time they need it. Such actions are disrespectful and insulting to the flag. The flag represents the country, and so should be respected.

The rules for properly using a flag are very old, dating back to the days of chivalry, and to most people would be so old-fashioned that they are not worth bothering about. If they even knew about them they would probably still ignore them because they are too much trouble. I think that there is value in such rituals in that they reinforce the proper values that a society should hold. Surely, respect for our flag and country are worthwhile values that should be reinforced and expressed when circumstances require it: Such as when handling and using our flag.

These rituals show respect for the flag and our country, something which is sorely lacking in much of today's society. If we retained these rituals perhaps we would also retain some of the respect for our country and flag that goes with performing them.

Life is a presentation

According to Erving Goffman, everything we do is a presentation of self and a performance. We present ourselves when we teach. We present ourselves when we interact with others. We even present ourselves when we are alone and there's no-one to see us. All life is a presentation of self. When we perform a presentation of self we present the idea of ourself that we want others, or ourselves, to see.

Some presentations of self are formalised, such as when we stand in front of a class to teach or make a presentation to parents or visitors. Others are informal, as when we talk with our colleagues in the tea room, discussing the weather or the shopping we intend doing after school. Sometimes we perform for ourselves, practicing in private, looking in a mirror, how we want to appear to others when we go out into the public gaze. According to Goffman we are constantly presenting ourselves in our lives to an audience, the people around us, where we act out a role.

This does not mean that the presentation of self or the image we project is false. Rather it means that we elect to show a particular person a side of ourselves which suits the way we want them to interact with us. We show our students our 'teacher' face, our friends our 'friend' face and our family our 'family' face, and we perform as appropriate. We show our audience the face that best suits our relationship with them.

We do this because it is necessary that we do not show everyone the same face. It would be inappropriate to show our

students our 'family' face. They are not family, and should not be treated as such. They need to see our 'teacher' face to understand that we are there to do a job, that is, to educate them and prepare them for adult life.

In the same way, it would be inappropriate to show our aged parent our 'teacher' face. They need to see our 'family' face to know that we care for them, even if sometimes they cause us problems and worries.

From another point of view, if parents turned up to talk to a teacher and found her acting as though she were at a football match, they would quite rightly be concerned. If however, the next Saturday they saw her cheering on her son in the under-14s soccer final they would see that as appropriate behaviour. In different places and roles, different presentations of self and faces are appropriate.

These different presentations of self are necessary because we have to perform a number of different roles each day, and it is important that we perform each of those roles in the appropriate manner and with the right demeanour. We have to show the right face and present ourselves in the right way so that everyone knows which role we are performing.

Without that information people might expect a different and inappropriate encounter. Because of these faces presented to us in certain situations we come to expect particular people to behave in particular ways and to be able to recognise their functions.

For instance, because of past presentations of self we have witnessed, we don't expect a teacher to be able to perform

surgery. For that we go to a person who wears a 'doctor' face when dealing with us, expecting that she will know what to do.

The problem is with a person who acts inappropriately, who wears the wrong face and puts on a misleading presentation of self that isn't their selves.

This can be a particular problem for children who perhaps are unsure whether the face and presentation are true ones. The person may be deliberately giving a false presentation, wearing a false face, suggesting safety or caring, when they have an ulterior motive. Some of these people can be so good at their false presentations of self that they can even fool adults and take advantage of them, as various confidence trickster have shown.

On the other hand, everyone expects a person wearing a 'policeman' face to be someone we can go to for help when we are in danger or need protection. That's what we have learnt; that his face tells us that he will help and protect us from danger.

Presentations of self have their place in society. All of us, at some time, need to keep private our feeling, perhaps out of consideration for other people. Where presentations of self go wrong is in being used to deliberately give the wrong impression to fool or mislead the observer and to take advantage of her or him. Then they become anti-social and wrong.

English rules

The English language has many anomalies. These come about because of its many and varied origins. The Anglo-Saxons, who began English as we know it, brought their language from their homelands in Europe, perhaps modified to suit changes in their new environment and cultural. They later absorbed some Latin words from Christian preachers who entered the country and converted it to Christianity. They also picked up bits of French, Scandinavian languages and some German from various seaborne raiders who plundered the country. Some of these invaders, such as the Danes, settled in as permanent residents and added their long term influence to the language. With the Norman conquest in 1066 Norman French came to dominate, and change, the English language. Later again various influences, both words and rules, arrived from almost every language on Earth.

Each of these introductions from other languages added new words with new rules of spelling. At the same time, some of these new rules affected words that were already in the English language, changing their usage and spelling, often drastically. With each new introduction the rules of English spelling changed, modified and became something new and different. This is why it is so difficult to make any general rules for English spelling. Words introduced at one time obey different rules to those introduced at other times. And sometimes people just changed the rules because they felt like it, or thought that it might work better.

The introduction of printing did help to stabilise some of the spelling, but it also changed some of it because it was to the benefit of the printers. For instance, many words were shortened to reduce the amount of time spent in typesetting. Others were lengthened to help justify the text and make it look better. There was sometimes disagreements over the changes as different printers had different ideas of the best way to treat the spelling, particularly as many of the early printers were either from, or learnt their trade, in Germany or the Netherlands. Eventually, much of it did settle down, but over time, changes still happened. With the invention of the dictionary in about the 18th century, things began to settle down more and some established forms become the accepted norm. However, words did still change sometimes. It is only over the last century or two that most words and rules have finally settled down to their modern forms. Mostly, because even now, some words still change. In the 19th century and later there was a large influx of technical words due to the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath.

The English language has never settled permanently in one form for long. English is not a static entity. It is an organism that changes itself and its rules, influenced from within or without, by plan or by whim.

Some of these changes have caused a lot of trouble, particularly for people learning English, either as a first or subsequent language.

It is because of these various changes that spelling rules such as ‘i before e except after c’ only work sometimes and have many exceptions. They apply to words adopted at some times but not at others. Different times brought about different spelling

rules. But without those different introductions, with their different words and spelling rules, English would not be the great language it is. To have the good we have to put up with the bad.

There appear to be two possible approaches that one could use in learning the spelling rules of new English words that have not been previously encountered. The first would be simply to spell the new word like those already known words that sound similar. Unfortunately, due to the variety of spelling rules, this approach will often be wrong. The second approach would be to take a broader view, understanding that the word might be anomalous and be subject to different rules than similar sounding words. This approach might suggest a number of different spellings. It might not always be right, but using this approach one would have more idea why one might be wrong. The person using this method would be more flexible in her/his approach, being more aware of the spelling inconsistencies that occur in English. Thus, I would suggest, the second approach to learning new English words and their spelling rules has some advantages. Being aware of the fact that the rules of spelling differ from word to word allows a more effective approach to the spelling of a new word not previously encountered.

The anomalies of English spelling may be problematic for ordinary English speakers, and moreso for those who study the language, but there are advantages. One of the biggest is the array of puns, wordplays and metaphors that are produced by homonyms (words that sound the same but have different meanings) and homoglyphs (words that are spelt the same but have different pronunciations and meanings). These word effects have contributed a great deal to literature. Without them

Shakespeare (and modern authors such as Terry Pratchett) wouldn't be half so much fun nor so entertaining.

Learning the rules of English, where they and the words came from, and how they developed over time are interesting in itself. That they help us to understand English better is also to the good. But the biggest and best feature of English is its range of words, either sounding or spelt the same or obeying different rules because of their different origins. They make English so flexible and versatile that it has become the *defacto* international language of trade, science, technology and negotiation, even though those same differences make it more difficult to learn. Though it is a contradiction in terms, it is true to say that English has become the *lingua franca* of the modern world.

Another matter that has changed over time and often causes confusion to many people is punctuation. In the past it was often used in different ways by different people or completely ignored and not used at all, as in many early documents. Its application or omission can make the written words in old documents difficult to understand or differentiate at times: Words are often run into each other, sometimes without even having spaces between them, and commas and full stops are often not used at all.

Even today many people are not sure whether words like one's, their's, and our's should have an apostrophe or not. Even the best writing guide books sometimes disagree on the rule, so how is the ordinary person to decide? It seems to be one of those areas where one must decide for oneself, although most publishers lay down a particular rule about the placement of apostrophes and breaking it can lead to a rejection slip. The

tendency in most writing these days seems to be that the apostrophe is omitted (perhaps because the publishers insist?), but some authors still use them. It depends too on the dictionary in their/your spellchecker. In the list above at the start of this paragraph my spellchecker flagged their's and our's as errors, but ignored one's as correct. Go choose!

Since much of the world's literature and information in many fields is now published in English, either in translation or without being previously published in the author's native language, it opens up a whole new world of reading experience unlike any other language on Earth. This is the heritage that we, as English speakers and readers, have inherited. This is what makes all the effort required to learn English spelling rules worthwhile and an important investment in one's future.

This history and development and possibilities are what make and have made the English language what it is, and will go on remaking it into the future.

English rules: OK!

Phonetic spelling re-visited

In a past article, I presented some arguments against phonetic spelling. Since then I have realised that there are other, and more important, arguments against it.

In a previous article I argued that phonetic spelling would cause fragmentation of the English language

The problem is that different people pronounce some words differently and so would spell them differently phonetically. Amongst people who speak English there are many different types of accents and thus pronunciations.

These differences of accent and pronunciation would mean that the speakers would want to spell the words differently. Thus, different countries, and even different areas of some countries, would develop different spellings. English would then become fragmented and English speakers in different countries would have difficulties communicating with each other. Phonetic spelling would only work if everyone spoke with the same accent and pronunciation.

Using phonetic spelling the English language would soon diverge into many difference forms which would make it difficult for people from different backgrounds to communicate with each other. That this can happen is shown by the varied spellings of some words in Middle English. They were due to dialect and accent variations in different regions, before one spelling became dominant, replaced all the others and was carried down to modern times. Different pronunciations would, once again, produce these various ways of phonetic spelling of the words,

which might then become unintelligible to people with other accents or dialects.

Thus spelling words phonetically would fragment the English language and create difficulties and confusion in communication between people. World-wide, there are thousands of different accents used in speaking different dialects of English, and each of them would form a different Phonetic English language, many of which would prove not to be intelligible, to a greater or lesser extent, to the speakers or writers of others.

I think that these arguments still apply and that there are further good arguments against the introduction of phonetic spelling, for there is a much more important problem that would arise: The loss of a people's access to their heritage in the literature of the world.

Changing to phonetic spelling would cause people to lose contact with much of the literature and information currently available in printed form. Until all the currently printed works were translated into Phonetic English, people would either not have access to it, or would need to learn Old English so that they could access it. That, I would think, would be a very long time during which both Phonetic and Old English would have to be taught to all children.

Some works would never be translated and published, due to lack of time, lack of translators or just because it would be uneconomical to translate and publish them. So there would always be a need for people who could understand Old English to provide access to it, or it would be lost, forever. Eventually, Old English would become a dead language, understood only by the

few people who had a need to understand it. It would then have to be taught as a second language to university students and researchers of language and literature so that they could access the untranslated material for their work. Also the many of the general public who wanted to read the yet untranslated classics would need to learn Old English. Undoubtedly there would be a great loss of literature, and loss of access to it by ordinary people, making the world a poorer place for all.

A change to Phonetic English would have to take place everywhere in the world simultaneously, and it would all have to be the same form of Phonetic English. If any country changed to Phonetic English on its own, or generated its own form, it would be disastrous for the country and the people. They would be completely cut off from the literature, information and culture (including foreign relations) current in the rest of the world until their own publishers could, or would, translate it all into their own form of Phonetic English. They would have set themselves up with a foreign language that the rest of the world might not be willing to recognise or deal with.

A similar result would occur if the English language was fragmented by the development of different versions of Phonetic English as described above and in the previous article. In that case, any country that wanted to stay in touch with other countries and their literature would have to teach its children all the different phonetic languages on Earth. Or, at least, the differences between them and their own. A formidable task, and one that would probably cost too much to be even contemplated by many governments. Again the result would be the loss of the

people's heritage in the form of the literature published in Old English or any other form of Phonetic English than their own.

That loss is too much to contemplate for any country. A totalitarian country might be able to, and want to, be separated in that way, perhaps to keep its citizens uninformed and ignorant of the rest of the world, but I doubt that it could happen, or even be wanted by the people, in a democracy. Their loss would be too great.

Another problem with a change to phonetic spelling is the cost and trouble to ordinary people. I wonder if those who advocate a change to phonetic spelling have ever paused to consider the cost and trouble involved. It would be enormous. Not just the cost of re-publishing all the books in old English, but the spelling changes to place and street names that would need the replacement of signage. Then there's the trouble and cost to people or businesses who had to change the spelling of their names and would need new letterheads and paperwork. Some people and businesses might not be happy at being told to spell their names differently and to register the new spelling with the appropriate authority. And who would bear the cost?

As I see it, there are many problems involved with a change to phonetic spelling. Everyone would be affected, mostly adversely. The confusion during the change-over would be enormous, and it would not be completed quickly. Simply stating that it will happen is only the start of the troubles. I imagine that the change-over would take years. During that time everyone would suffer confusion and disorientation, not be sure which spelling to use and find themselves lost in the turmoil. Not something to be looked forward to without apprehension.

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Some thoughts on writing

How often have you thought of writing an article for a professional web site or magazine, but not been able to actually get started, or worse, been unable to finish it? Being able to write is important for teachers, whether the writing is an article or a report. Everyone has to do it at some time in their professional career.

Writing is not a simple process. It depends on a number of factors, three important ones of which are knowledge, incentive and the ability to write. I have never had any problems with the last one. I enjoy writing and apparently do it well as I have had many articles published in a variety of media. The others are not so easy.

It seems a truism to say that good writing depends on knowledge, but it is true, none the less. If you don't know what you are going to write about it will be difficult if not impossible to produce anything sensible. You need knowledge to frame the paper, give an account of what it is intended to illustrate and to provide information to the potential reader. A knowledge of others' work on your topic is necessary to provide the references that put your work into its context.

If you don't know what you are writing about, how can you expect to make sense? Whether the paper is factual, biographical or speculative you need to know the background to it. You must be familiar with the topic, the background and anything previously written on the topic so that you can place your work in the context of other's work on similar topics.

Having gained the knowledge about your topic you must then have an incentive to write. Common incentives include writing a journal paper to improve your publication list, writing a report to your supervisor or writing an application for a job that you would like. Note that the reward for doing the writing should be important to you, personally. The personal incentives are by far the best. Working to someone else's incentive is a recipe for disaster.

It is sometimes difficult to find an incentive to write, but it is important that you do so. The more important the incentive is to you the more incentive you have to write. Writing without a good incentive can be soul-destroying as you try to imbue some interest you do not have into the work.

Lastly, you need the ability to write. If you have that ability without being taught then you are lucky. If not, you can be taught to at least produce good quality prose. There are courses on writing that claim to teach you how to do it. Take all the courses you can. They can't do you any harm and you might find the spark that brings out the creative writer in you. Join a writers' group to get feedback on your work – and LISTEN to the comments, don't just let them pass you by. Take advantage of other writers' experience. Finally, practice writing. The more you write the better you will become.

Writing is not easy for most of us. We need help to produce our best. Even the best writers can use constructive feedback and comments about their writing. Use all the resources available to you to develop your writing skills. You will gain from it in your writing – and so will your audience.

It is generally better to write an article specifically for a particular destination, rather than writing the article and then trying to find someone to accept it. Since most magazines have their own requirements as to formatting, length, topic, and so on you need to investigate thoroughly before deciding on a topic and place to submit it.

However, you must be prepared for some rejections. No-one can have everything they write published: It just can't happen, there is always something that doesn't work for anyone. But the more you do the better you will get and your success rate will increase.

What I have written here is only a brief beginning and by no means covers the material in any depth, but help is always at hand. There have been many thousands of books written about writing and, no doubt, there will be thousands more. Many of them are written by professional writers and will help you to get started, point out some of the pitfalls, and have much good advice for the beginner or experienced writer, but the best teacher, as always is the experience of doing it yourself. So, go to it. The sooner you start the sooner you will be an experienced writer with published work to your credit.

It all starts with your first submission. Go ahead, pick a suitable magazine, pick a suitable topic and write! For a start, why not write about something from your experience of a being a teacher? Pick some lesson you have learnt from your teaching that you think will be of interest and use to other teachers, write it up and submit it.

What is ‘normal’ anyway?

The concept of what is ‘normal’ has changed over time as society has changed. This applies in any field one cares to think about. What is important to us as teachers and educators is the concept of the ‘normal’ child. This too has changed over time, especially since the introduction of compulsory education in the nineteenth century. The idea was always that students must conform to some concept of ‘normal’ to receive the best in education. Unfortunately, for most of the time those students who did not conform to what was expected as ‘normal’ behaviour did not receive fair treatment and often suffered punishment or expulsion. In the process they also failed to receive an education and so left school poorly equipped to take their proper part in adult society.

Even today, education authorities have some idealised picture of the ‘normal’ student and direct the best efforts and resources at the education of those students. Any child not ‘normal’ suffers. This situation is changing, although it looks very patchy in parts. There are some efforts to deal with children not seen as ‘normal’ with special classes. However, these ways of dealing with such children often seem to the outsider as inadequate, or, worse still, they sometimes mark the child as abnormal in a pejorative way, and treat them as such.

One of the ways in which children can be differentiated is by their being ‘gifted’. This is a category that is sometimes difficult to define. Most efforts in the past came down to differences in social class or hereditary. Most modern

researchers agree that a child being gifted in one area does not mean that s/he will be gifted in all areas. A child that is gifted in maths may be no different from others in music. There is some disagreement on what makes a child gifted but it is most often put down to interest in a subject, encouragement from home or a psychological inclination. One of the main problems is that no-one is yet sure how to measure these things in a way that is particularly meaningful or predictable. Whatever causes them, gifted children need special attention. They are actually being discriminated against since they aren't being educated to suit their needs.

The other type of child seen as not 'normal' is the disruptive or troublesome one. These children are often diagnosed with some psychological malfunction such as ADHD or similar. They are then put on medication to stop them disrupting the class. The trouble then is that many do not actively take part in the class because they are incapable of paying attention due to being tranquilised. Thus they are not getting an education. They are merely being kept quiet so that the other children can be taught. These children are also being discriminated against since many of them are not receiving much at all in the way of education.

There is some disagreement as to just how many children need special education. Most children seem to cope fairly well with being treated as 'normal' or 'average' and being in an ordinary class, but whether or not they are all getting the best in education or whether some or many are receiving less than their due is unknown. Some way of testing this situation is needed to better find out.

It may be that many more children than previously thought need some extra support. Current research into education methods and teaching are trying to resolve the problem of the child who does not fit the idea of the 'normal' student in various ways. It has been a problem since formal schooling began, but it is not yet solved. Only when it is solved and when education can be fitted to the individual student will everyone receive the best education to which they are entitled.

The two types of children mentioned above as not fitting in with the current idea of 'normal' need special education. This would involve special schools and/or classes where the teachers are specially trained to deal with them. In some cases this might involve each teacher dealing with only one child. Unfortunately, the powers that control the education purse strings would balk at the expense of such special treatment. Thus the discrimination against children who are not considered 'normal' students will continue. That the current system of education does not prepare these students for their future adult life appears not to be a major consideration of those who design and run the current education system.

But 'normal' is a culturally and temporally changeable characteristic. It was different in the past and will surely be different in the future. Just how it will change in the future is problematic and probably indeterminable, until it happens. What 'normal' will mean in the future and how it will change is unknowable at the present. However, what is sure is that the education system must change in step with what is seen as 'normal' at any particular time if it is to provide the best and appropriate education to all children. Those who do not fit the

‘normal’ mould must be treated in ways that compensate for their differences to ensure that they get the best education.

The Pleasure (or Not) of Learning

If children are to learn in class they must be interested and the learning pleasurable. If they are not interested nor enjoying the lesson they will not learn. Whatever attitude to learning they learn at school may remain with them in later life.

I well remember the horrible days when I was at school, copying boring facts out of text books or listening to the teacher droning on about matters that had no apparent relationship to my normal life. Needless to say, I didn't learn much which is why my knowledge of geography is still less than desirable. Geography was always a lesson I hated because it was so boring.

On the other hand I had a very interesting, and interested, English teacher, which is why I still enjoy writing and reading and my English grammar and vocabulary is very good.

The attitudes I learnt at school have carried on into my later life: I still find it difficult to get interested in geography, but anything about reading, writing or literature interests me to a great extent.

The difference between these two situations was my interest in the topic and the attitude of the teacher. Geography was dull and boring because it wasn't interesting. English was enjoyable because my teacher made it interesting. Any teacher who is interested in her/his students improving themselves will encourage them to learn by making the lesson and topic interesting and enjoyable.

There is a lesson to be gained from my experience. If the topic is made interesting and enjoyable children will learn and

remember what they have learnt and also develop a positive attitude to learning in general. If the topic is made uninteresting then they won't want to learn and will not remember. This attitude to learning may be carried on into later life: A good school experience of learning will enable the person to take an interest and enjoy learning about new topics later in life. If the child comes away with the attitude that learning is boring and a chore then s/he won't want to learn later in life.

Thus the school experience of learning in general – whether it is interesting and enjoyable or just a chore imposed by other people – may influence the student's whole life. The best thing a teacher can do to help the child in later life is to instil the attitude that learning is a pleasure and can be enjoyed at any time and with any topic. That way the person's learning will continue after the school years are over and s/he will always be able to keep up with knowledge as required in his/her chosen field. Or just for the pleasure of learning.

‘Intelligent’ Design?

In this article I discuss some of the implications of Intelligent Design that have probably never occurred to its believers. Putting aside, for now, the validity or otherwise of Intelligent Design, I argue that, using the believers’ own arguments, it is possible to show that the creator is not god. I do this by showing that the human body, rather than being the creation of a perfect god, is in fact a sign of engineering incompetence.

As the main part of my argument, I do this by discussing the design of the human eye. The believers in Intelligent Design claim that the human eye is the best argument against evolution, so it seems only fair to use their own arguments against them. I could use other parts of the human body to demonstrate my point, since there are many of what can only be called badly (engineeringly) designed systems and organs within it, but it seems only fair to use the human eye as my example, since the believers in Intelligent Design use it in an attempt to support their arguments. That way they can’t say that I’m picking a different organ for my own purposes. They picked it first, I’m just going along with their choice.

The believers in Intelligent Design claim that the human eye is too complicated to have evolved from anything simpler. They say that if it did evolve there would be some creatures which had only half an eye, which, so they say, would be useless because it wouldn’t work. They argue that only a complete eye, such as the human one, can be of any use.

Evolutionists have answered these claims by proving that the human eye could evolve. Beginning with a light sensitive patch of skin, plus a few million years of evolution, a working human eye, or something very similar, can be the result. The intermediate results may not be very good, but they are better than nothing.

In fact, even half an eye is useful: It is better than no eyes at all. Being able to detect the difference between light and shadow increases the creatures awareness of its surroundings and any approaching dangers. Having half an eye is a better survival strategy than not being able to sense light at all. Since it aids survival, that is all that evolution needs to eventually produce a human eye.

Followers of Intelligent Design assume that features such as the human eye are perfect for the job they do. This must be so, they say, because they were created that way. However, the human eye is not perfect. It does a good enough job to be very useful, but it is very far from being perfect. Professor Greg Downey of Macquarie University, in a lecture on the evolution of the human eye, made the comment that if a first year engineering student handed up a plan for the human eye as a design for an organ of seeing s/he would be immediately failed and told to go and do it properly. If a first year engineering student could do better, what does that say about the creator? I shall discuss this question in more detail below.

One of the worst design faults in the human eye is the way in which information from the light sensitive cells of the retina are passed to the brain. The output of the light sensitive cells is actually taken from the front, that is, in the direction from which

the light is coming and entering the cell. This means that the connection from the light sensitive cell to the nerve cell partly blocks off the cell in the retina, reducing its efficiency and sensitivity. Worse, those nerves then pass across the front of the retina, again blocking off some of its sensitivity. All the nerve cells exit the eyeball through one fairly large opening. This means that part of the retina has no light sensitive cells, which produces a blind spot in vision. We don't notice this blind spot, usually, because the brain fills in the gap by extrapolating from the data coming from other nerves. But it is there, and its existence can easily be shown by a simple experiment that can be found in any book which discusses the eye and vision.

I have no reticence in saying that any competent designer of the human eye would have avoided these problems by taking the nerves out of the back of the light sensitive cells in the retina. No exit hole for the nerves would then be necessary and there would be no blind spot in the person's vision and no lose of sensitivity due to the nerves blocking off some of the retina. It seems safe to say that the human eye was not designed by anyone with the engineering competence of a first year engineering student. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the designer was completely incompetent.

This is the incompetent design that believers in Intelligent Design want to lay in the hands of their god the creator of humankind.

It follows from the above discussion that if the human eye was designed and made by a creator, then s/he was an incompetent engineer.

However, a god must be perfect, omniscient and omnipotent, so s/he could not be incompetent nor make a mistake. If god was the creator, then the human eye would be perfect. It would not have the faults described above,

It follows from this that god did not create the human eye, nor, assumedly, the rest of the human body, which also has faults that indicate an incompetent engineer.

If god didn't create humans, who did? Was there a creator who was not god?

I think that it is unnecessary to follow that thought any further. Enough to say that, using the arguments put forward by believers in Intelligent Design, we can use those same arguments back at them to prove that they are wrong.

Evolution is the answer to origins of the very imperfect, but very useful, human eye. The believers in Intelligent design are wrong.

Learning conflicting cultural norms: Which is right, school or home?

Some educationalists have argued that an important part of a child's schooling is learning proper social values and behaviour. That is, teaching them how society expects them to act while they are children and later when they come to take their place in society as adults. But what happens if the values learnt at school conflict with the ones learnt at home, perhaps due to a parents' religious or political views?

As a country becomes more and more multi-cultural these situations become more common. Parents born into and having learnt different cultural values, will often want to bring up their children to have cultural values like their own. Unfortunately, those cultural values sometimes conflict with the rules of their new country, or may even be illegal.

For instance, school will teach a boy that he must control his aggressive instincts, particularly towards women and children who are less able to defend themselves. However, at home, his father tells him that a man's wife and children must obey him, and that he has the right to beat them to make them obey. What is he to believe? How should he act towards women and other children?

If he learns the 'right' cultural values at school he will tend to fit in well as an adult. If he follows his father's teachings he will maybe end up breaking the law and probably serving a prison sentence.

Not only will there be a conflict in the way the child acts in different circumstances, trying to decide whether to follow his/her parents or teachers advice, but there will also be conflict within the child as s/he tries to balance and reconcile the two conflicting behaviour patterns implanted in her/his mind. In this situation s/he will often act wrongly, applying the wrong influence. This will cause conflict with parents, teachers, the law and the rest of society, particularly later in life when s/he is expected to act as a proper socially adjusted adult.

It is often the teacher who has to deal with the results of this conflict when the child becomes unruly and disturbs the class. There may also be outraged or intolerant parents to deal with who cannot, or will not, understand why their child comes home with ideas that conflict with their own. It is sometimes difficult to get parents to understand that our social norms are different from their own, and that the child has to live with our's if s/he is to have a proper part in adult society.

It cannot be a good situation for the parents who think that they know what is best for their child, and perhaps have a political or religious agendas of their own. There will be conflict at home, too, over proper behaviour which will further exacerbate the child's problems.

Some parents with this situation in mind send their children to schools that have a religious or political bias with which they identify. In this way they hope that the child will learn what they see as the proper behaviour. Unfortunately, this doesn't always work and when it does it can cause further problems, because the child has not had sufficient contact with other children to learn social norms properly. This may make the

child conform to his/her parents' ideals but may also lead to adjustment problems later in life when the child becomes an adult and must deal with the larger society. Not knowing the proper behaviour may lead to ostracism or inability to perform outside the culture into which s/he has been educated. This can lead to what the rest of society sees as anti-social or even illegal behaviour.

I was told of one father who complained loudly and angrily that his son must not sit behind his sister in class. His argument was that boys are inherently superior to girls, therefore the boy must sit in front of his sister. When the teacher refused to reorganise the class to suit him, the man transferred his son to a school associated with his religion. This, I would argue, was a very bad move. In attending the religious school the boy's beliefs in gender inequality would be reinforced and strengthened, causing him problems later in life when he has to deal with women as equals. If he had been left in the state school he would have learned that society expects him not to discriminate against other genders. He would become a better adjusted member of society with an ordinary state education rather than a religious one. Conforming to his parents religious beliefs would cause him grief in his later life.

Many parents don't understand the problems they are causing their children. This often happens because they have a religious or political agenda of their own which they want their children to follow. There are no laws in this country which dictate how people are to raise their children. It is parents' 'right' to raise their children as they see fit. Unfortunately, the result is often not to the benefit of the child nor society.

Individual people may not socialise very well – many become deviant because they have trouble observing the ‘norms’ of society – but most people manage to learn and act socially well enough to cope. However, teaching young children unusual or irrational modes of behaviour isn’t productive. It only creates more problems for the person and for society.

The creation myths in the Bible

Fundamentalists use the stories of the creation in the Bible to construct what they mis-name as ‘creation science’ in opposition to Evolution and the known long history of the universe. However, there are two creation stories in the Bible – and they differ somewhat in important details. These differences in the two accounts have some important implications for the fundamentalist’s belief in the literal truth of the Bible. In fact, they prove that belief to be wrong, as I shall show below. I argue that these contradictions support the argument that the Bible is not literally true.

In the first story (Genesis 1 to Genesis 2:3), creation takes six days and man and woman are created last after all the plants and animals. In the second story (Genesis 2:4 to Genesis 2:25), creation takes one day, man is created first, then all the plants and animals, and finally woman is created last of all.

It can be seen that the major differences between these two accounts of creation are (1) the overall length of time it took, (2) the stage at which humans were created and (3) whether man and woman were created at the same or different times. These contradictions are obvious in the above brief outline and will be discussed further below.

It is a fundamental principle in logic that if two statements contradict each other then both cannot be true. Therefore at least one of the creation myths briefly summarised above is, at least partially, untrue because of the contradictions between the two. That is, if we believe that one of the accounts is true, (which does

not necessarily apply) then the other will be untrue. However, it is also quite possible that both accounts are untrue. We should keep this principle of contradiction between accounts proving the falsity of at least one of the accounts in mind as we examine the Bible stories of creation in the following.

If one accepts the truth of both accounts of the creation one will have problems in trying to argue away the differences. The differences, between one and six days for the whole event, for the timing at which humans were created, and the fact that woman was either created at the same time as man or later, are not minor and need some serious explaining if they are to be ignored or accepted. If, as the fundamentalists argue, the whole of the Bible is literally true, then the discrepancies cannot be explained away, they must be accepted as true. The Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* may have found herself able to believe six impossible things before breakfast, but I find it difficult to even think of a way that the stories can be made compatible without a major re-write. Or abandoning one of them. Since the fundamentalists would not allow either of these devices, even to give their beliefs some extra support, we have reached a major stumbling block in any attempt to describe the Bible as literally true.

If the Bible is taken as nothing more than a story then these contradictions in the accounts of creation are of little importance. They might simply be storyteller's errors, changes in the story for dramatic effect or just different versions of the same story, perhaps from different origins in different cultures or places. But if one is looking for truth, then the contradictions in those accounts show that one must look elsewhere, because both

the accounts can not be taken as literally true. One, at least, must be wrong.

That the accounts of creation are not literally true also shows that the Bible is not literally true, which is important and in contradiction to fundamentalists who want to believe that the Bible is literally true. Unfortunately, for them, they are wrong. The Bible is nothing more than a story. That is not to say that the Bible is not a good story nor interesting, as a story, but it does mean that it must not be given the value the fundamentalists place upon it. That is, it is not the truth, and should not be seen nor taken as the truth. No matter how much one wishes it to be so.

This fact that the contradictions in the creation stories cannot be explained away also counts against the fundamentalists in that it shows that their beliefs can be proved wrong using the same source which they use to argue that they are right. The Bible cannot be relied upon as valid, supporting evidence for any beliefs from the existence of god to the rites or history of a religion, because it simply is not reliable nor effective as a source of evidence to back any theory.

If one is faced with a fundamentalist arguing for creationism, then ask him/her whether s/he believes in the Bible story of creation. The answer will, of course, be "Yes". Then ask *which* creation story s/he believes in, the one in Genesis 1 or the one in Genesis 2, and then point out that the two are contradictory in much of the details. Since most fundamentalists are not apparently aware that there are two creations stories in the Bible, which contradict each other to some extent, confusion will follow. But don't expect enlightenment to follow because

fundamentalists don't give up their false beliefs that easily, even when they are proved wrong. On the other hand, perhaps it would be kinder to allow the fundamentalist to continue in his/her false beliefs. Some of them are so mentally and emotionally tied to their beliefs that it would be dreadfully traumatic to have them taken away. Perhaps sympathy and kindness rather than education and enlightenment is the best policy. As someone once said "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise". Perhaps it is better to allow the fundamentalist to be happy in his/her ignorance. In actual fact, you will never convince the fundamentalists of their error. They will always have an answer that satisfies them that they are right and you are wrong. Even when they are wrong.

‘White Knowledge’: White noise in your brain

According to Sir Terry Pratchett, ‘white knowledge’ is like white noise on a radio or television. White noise is the background hiss you hear when you tune off a station, but is actually present all the time. Even when you are tuned to a station it is there in the background. It is there, it is unavoidable, it can hide useful information and we tend to ignore its influence and effects.

Pratchett suggests that we all depend on white knowledge when we make decisions. It is the background state of things we know. But it is often in error, because it is not formal knowledge we have learnt from reliable sources. Rather it is our general knowledge based on many, mostly unreliable, sources. It is the knowledge we pick up in our social interactions, reading the newspaper by skimming the headlines rather than reading the article fully, or pick up while half-listening to the radio or television. In other words, it is not based on proper evidence because we never bother to check out its validity, mostly because it is too much trouble. We just absorb it, and accept it, without thinking about it, mostly unconscious that it is being absorbed into our memory ready to shape our thinking.

When was the last time that you followed up a newspaper article by checking other, perhaps contradictory, sources, to check how accurately the event has been described in your favourite newspaper? Have you ever done it? You would probably do it for an academic paper relevant to your profession,

but no-one bothers for a newspaper article. The result is white knowledge: Knowledge that is not based on factual proof, but on impressions and is accepted without being tested.

When we base our decisions and actions on this precariously obtained white knowledge we are basing them on doubtful grounds. Our logic can be true, that is follow from the untested premises, but our conclusions can often be wrong or inappropriate, because the premises are doubtful or in error.

Although reasoning based on white knowledge may be useful, or maybe not, in our social activities, it can be very dangerous in our professional lives where other people depend on us making the right decisions. In our professional lives, white knowledge might be formed from lunchtime chatter with colleagues, skimming a report without looking at the details, or listening to advice from an unqualified person. All these may be unreliable sources of information. Using that unreliable information can be dangerous or produce unwanted consequences.

As trained teachers we have all been university educated, where we received our basic training in how to deliver teaching to our students. But have you ever questioned what you were told in university? Even university lecturers can be wrong or make unintentional mistakes. Did you go back to the sources cited in your textbooks, or just accept that they were right?

How's your 'white knowledge' level?

To keep control of your white knowledge level it is important to question everything. Unfortunately, that is not always possible, due to the pressures of work, or just because you would like to spend some time with your family and friends,

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instead of working all the hours of the day and night. But when it comes to important decisions it is imperative to check everything thoroughly, so that you can be sure that your conclusion is the correct one. Basing your decision on white knowledge will, too often, lead you astray. That is likely to have unpleasant implications for your professional standing and self-esteem. No one wants to be wrong by making decisions based on doubtful evidence nor to suffer the consequences, professional or personal.



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