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Book Review
of
“Everybody Writes”
by
Ann Handley

Grammar-Nazi. I can't begin to tell you how many times I've been called that. I don't correct people online to hurt them. Truly I don't. I correct them for their own well-being and the

betterment of civilization in general. I know, we are living in a one-hundred-and-forty character reality, so I have learned to turn the other cheek when it comes to LOL, OMG, SMH, and the seemingly endless variety of emojis. But *they're* and *their*, *your* and *you're* are not to be trifled with. And don't even get me started on *it's* and *its*! In truth I am not a Grammar Nazi. The Nazis were about death and enslavement. "Vocabu-Allies" are about life and freedom, at least that's how we like to view ourselves, and Ann Handley is my new compatriot in the never-ending battle for truth, justice and correct punctuation.

"Everybody Writes" is as enjoyable to read as "On Writing" by Stephen King and "The Lively Art of Writing" by Lucile Vaughan Payne (my personal favorite geek-fanboy-writing guide), but "Everybody Writes" is unique because it addresses writing for business, social media and all things internet, the mysterious etherworld where most of our modern communication happens.

You would expect books on writing to be fun because who else would write a book on writing except someone who loves writing, and only someone who loves writing would enjoy writing a book on writing. Ann's joy shines through from the get go; every chapter is chock full of wisdom, wit and whimsy. (In the Acknowledgements, she acknowledges that only real geeky people would actually read the Acknowledgements. Yep. Guilty as charged).

Where do you begin when writing a review of a book that has 74 chapters? You open it up at random and begin writing of course! My copy fell open on page 115 and much to my delight it was a discourse on grammar; *it's* versus *its*, *they're* versus *their* versus *there*, *then* versus *than*, *who* versus *whom* etc., you get the idea. I couldn't help thinking, "Why waste time on this? *Surely, everyone who would be reading this knows these already!*" Then my eyes fell on "*whether* versus *if*" and I had to admit that she hit one of my blind spots. (And don't call me Shirley).

In the Kevin Costner movie, *Bull Durham*, Crash Davis (Kevin Costner) says to the rookie pitcher Ebby Calvin Laloosh (Tim Robbins), “When you were a baby the gods reached down and turned your right arm into a thunderbolt.” This is the view many possess when it comes to ability: some got it and some don’t. That is not necessarily the case. To quote Handley, who was quoting Stephen King, “If you want to be a writer you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot” (Handley pg. 16). Good writing can be learned. Ann Handley describes herself as athletically challenged and details her difficulty with her first (and only ever in her life) push-up. Her point being that both writing well and doing push-ups require the consistent building of muscle. How do you write well? Well, you write! Ann quotes the essay “How I Learned to Face My Fears and Be Good at Math” by Matt Waite: “The difference between being good at math and being bad at math is hard work. It’s trying. It’s trying harder than you’ve ever tried before. That’s it” (Handley pg. 12). Being good at writing is no exception.

Ann (I feel she and I have forged enough of a connection through her book to be on a first-name basis) mentions the importance of process which, incidentally, is also one of the Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, “Leaders develop daily, not in a day”, and the same is true with writers; it’s not magical. The “Great American Novel” doesn’t come up through the ground like bubbling crude. It’s painstakingly hammered out, one word at a time. She further states that the process itself is necessary, like a “writing GPS that gets you from discombobulated thoughts to a coherent, cogent piece of writing that others can understand and appreciate” (Handley pg. 28).

Ann, you had me at “discombobulated.”

Our heroine proceeds to “dism-Ann-tle” some common misquotes that weave their way into our vocabularies:

“You’ve got another think coming.” (You’ve got another *thing* coming.)

“Nip it in the butt.” (Nip it in the *bud*.)

“Upmost.” (Utmost.)

One I’d never realized people tend to misuse is “For all intensive purposes.” (For all *intents* and purposes.) (Handley pg. 118). Again, I started out thinking that this was common knowledge but then “Duck Tape” (Duct Tape) reared its ugly beak and I had to admit that I too have made that fowl mistake.

Chapter 48 is about posting news that is actually *news*! I had the desire to climb to the highest peak and post this to the world! But since there probably wouldn’t be reliable wifi up there I’ll just post it from my study. My pet web peeve is blatant clickbait (“You’ll never guess what he/she looks like today!”) which, although blatant, I still often fall for. (Incidentally, Ann has given me permission to end a sentence with a preposition, so it’s not something points can be docked for.) Then, twenty-two clicks later (yes, I have that much patience) and I say adios to twelve minutes of my life I’ll never see again, although I do believe that God can redeem the time. So, what is “News?” Ann writes, “What would make the reader turn and say to her husband, ‘Now, listen to this, Ira....’?” (Handley pg. 149). Now, that’s worth twenty-three clicks.

Chapter 32 urges the gentle reader-cum-writer to know the difference between passive and active voice, another manhole into which I tend to fall while gazing up at lofty phrases.

Passive: The video was edited by a guy named Hibachi.

Active: A guy named Hibachi edited the video.

Passive: Duduk theme music is rarely featured on podcasts.

Active: Podcasts rarely feature duduk theme music. (A duduk is a reed instrument, akin to a flute, made of apricot wood. I had to Google that and share before proceeding.)

My favorite chapter (until I discover another favorite chapter) is Chapter 30: Avoid Frankenwords, Obese Words and Words Pretending to Be Something They’re Not. Frankenwords are “words stitched awkwardly together to create something of a monstrous, ugly frightening

mess. And, yes, I suppose *Frankenwords* is in fact a Frankenword” (Handley pg. 93).

- Amazeballs
- Clickability
- Solopreneur
- Awesomesauce
- Fantabulous
- Ginormous
- Chillaxin’

The truly frightening thing is that spell check only flagged *Chillaxin’*.

“Write in a way that comes naturally...prefer the standard to the offbeat.” Don’t obsequitively (my made up Frankenword mashing obsequious and positively) try to impress with massively overblown language when simple, common words would suffice. “The cat sat on the mat” tells you everything you need to know for the moment. What breed of cat or manner of mat really wouldn’t change the situation very much. “(Franken)words are the chemical additives of business writing online: You can use them, and maybe one or two used sparingly don’t matter. But use too many of them and they become toxic. The problem is that business jargon is like New England weather in March: just when you think you are done with the snowstorms, a new one crops up.” (Handley, 91) As a side note, I spent 40 years in New England, so I can attest to this observation personally.

“Everybody Writes” is not a “read then donate” book. It is something you keep close and handy: like the Bible, Linus’s blanket, and, nowadays, the iPhone. There are, as I mentioned earlier, seventy-four chapters not including the foreword, introduction, acknowledgements and resource section. There are chapters on Writing for Twitter (Dialogue, not Monologue), Writing with Hashtags (Don’t be a *Hash-hole*), Writing for Facebook (Rallying Cries That Unite an

Audience), advice for LinkedIn profiles and all social media in general. I have the strong desire to delete all my social media accounts out of embarrassment and start fresh.

If my review seems to ramble it's because this book itself rambles a bit. That's not a negative criticism. *Everybody Writes* is arranged to be a "go-to" book for writing style and in so doing it is not to be read like a novel or anything approaching a linear thesis, but is a treasure trove of tidbits for those who need to learn the rules, and for those that already know the rules but still "un" or "sub" consciously break and decimate them, these are gentle reminders offered with a wink and a nod.

Everybody Writes is a book not to be devoured in one sitting but nibbled and savored over months; not a weekend romance, but a long-term commitment, complete with mortgage, children and golden retriever. The book will most likely be a hit with the Geek Squad, but as with *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* by Lynne Truss, *Everybody Writes* is useful, witty and accessible enough to be enjoyed by nearly everyone.