

Educator's Column

By Professor Victoria Goff, Communication, UW-Green Bay

Several years ago a young woman from The Netherlands had a column in the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay's award-winning college newspaper. The column, which focused on her reactions to American life, didn't have much readership. However, one week the editor was deluged by letters from angry female students complaining about the column and the columnist.

What had the writer said to cause such a furor? She had written that UWGB co-eds had no sense of style and looked like they had fallen out of bed and gone to class in their pajamas. While style is a relative concept, the columnist's observation about girls wearing PJ bottoms to school was true.

According to some Wisconsin broadcasters, new hires at radio and TV stations, while not wearing PJ's to work, are still dressing like they did in their college days. Complaints about flip flops, short skirts, too much cleavage, etc., underscore many people's concerns about a lack of professionalism among some young people today. According to a recent Time article, cleavage is "not a corporate look" and "neither are toes." According to the same article, "only 55 percent of people surveyed by the job-hunting site Monster.com think exposed underwear is an office no-no, a stat that suggests a gaping generational divide."

Complaints about some recent graduates aren't restricted to how they dress. Many don't have a good grasp of history, according to Danielle Bina, a former radio news director who will be teaching at UWGB in the fall. "From a news reporting perspective, that sense of history makes all the difference between a mediocre report and an in-depth, insightful report," she says. "The reporter who studies history most definitely has an edge in a very competitive industry." And, of course, there is widespread agreement around the state and throughout the country that many graduates don't have a good grasp of the fundamentals of writing radio and television news. Trish Ossmann, executive producer at Green Bay's WBAY, has to correct her scripts every day before they go on air. "This is third-, fourth-grade stuff," she says. "It's basic grammar, proper word choice, simple things like confusing 'there,' 'their,' and 'they're' or 'to,' 'two,' and 'too.'" Some other writing problems she and other producers see include not understanding how to use action verbs or active voice, not knowing how to agree subjects and verbs or pronouns with their antecedents, using long words where short ones would do, and writing long, complicated sentences (like this one, for instance). Lackluster leads, missing attribution, unclear sentences, unnatural-sounding transitions, repetition, wordiness, jargon, and clichés are other adulterants. Writing like this results in broadcast news losing credibility.

In addition, newcomers and seasoned professionals alike often misuse adjectives. According to Deborah Potter of NewsLab, "in a 15-minute span one recent morning, reporters and anchors on one channel promised 'stunning new developments' that weren't in the least bit astonishing, described a Vatican gathering of visibly delighted cardinals as a 'solemn ceremony,' and discussed the possible punishment for a 'heinous crime' without ever mentioning what had actually happened." This type of writing turns off viewers and listeners, who can spot when they're being sold instead of being told.

Problems with writing quality for both new and veteran news writers are not exactly new. Thirteen years ago consultant Mackie Morris, in an article in the American Journalism Review, said he believed many people entering broadcast news had been under-trained and had developed bad writing habits. In the same article, Carole Kneeland of KVUE-TV in Austin, Texas, said she was spending as much as \$500 (\$691 in today's dollars) per staffer for consultants to train the

station's writers. "One of the reasons our writing isn't as strong as I would like is that I and my managers have not had enough time to help bring people along," she said. "With all the pressures on us in covering news...we need outside help."

Many professors, who teach writing classes, would argue that the quality of student writing has actually gone down those 13 years. Ossmann, who has taught part time for the past six years, says she has seen students' writing getting worse. According to a sampling of my colleagues around the country, they typically have to spend at least 50 percent of their class time teaching remedial English since many of their students can't define the parts of speech. So time that should be spent on news writing instruction is lost. This is a frustrating situation for the teacher and for students with good skills, who are being held back because of their colleagues' poor skills.

It must be emphasized that dismal writing is not restricted to one region, state, or type of college. In addition to teaching at a state university, I taught at a private university where the students' parents were movie stars, recording artists, writers, producers, CEO's, etc. These well-to-do parents had the wherewithal to give their children the best preparatory education money could buy. Nonetheless, the students at this expensive university had very poor writing skills. A colleague of mine who teaches at the law school at Syracuse University told me law students there are required to take three English classes. The problem with poor grammar, spelling, and punctuation is national in scope. Industry today is spending billions of dollars either bringing in consultants to teach seminars or sending employees back to school for classes to bring their writing skills up to an acceptable level.

So who is to blame for this situation? The college professor blames the high schools. The high school teacher blames the elementary schools. Where does the buck stop? And why do some students come to college with an excellent command of English while others are almost functionally illiterate?

It's always easier to point out problems or spot other people's failings than it is to come up with solutions to these problems. So instead of lamenting the level of writing many modern students bring to college and to the workplace, it would be beneficial for academics and broadcasters to sit down together to pinpoint areas of concern and ways to improve things. However, a third party should join the conversation. "There needs to be a dialog between universities and high schools," Ossmann says. A discussion among these groups could be a win-win situation for all concerned.