

Beyond Proficiency Towards Exceptional Writing

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Can you remember a time in your life when you learned a new skill by practicing for hours and hours over months or even years? It might have been when you learned how to play the piano, or learned how to paint with watercolors, or learned how to communicate using a new language. We have all gone through this process at least once when we learned our native language as children. It took all of us many years of practice to learn how to communicate proficiently.

As you might remember from your childhood, when we learn a new language (whether it is our first, second, or tenth), we start with simple vocabulary and simple sentences. You might recall learning to read using the Dick and Jane books if you grew up in the US, or the Manee books if you grew up in Thailand. These books were mostly pictures with short bits of easy to understand text. But as you grew older and improved your language skills, you were able to read and write texts with more sophisticated words and complex sentence structures. You also learned how to link sentences together to create coherent paragraphs, and combine paragraphs into stories, essays, and reports.

However, this steady march of adding more and more sophistication and complexity to our language as our proficiency increases cannot go on forever. At some point, too much sentence complexity and too much arcane and rare vocabulary will make a text unreadable. You might recall points in your life where you have read legal contracts or academic articles that are just too complex to understand easily.

So, this implies that language proficiency and language complexity go hand in hand, but only up to a certain point. Once a person reaches a "proficient" level where they can read most texts and write in complete sentences with correct grammar, how can they improve further? How can they become an award-winning, world-class writer? They can't just add more complexity and sophistication, so there must be something else.

To discover what this "something else" is, we analyzed texts that we considered to be "exceptional" and compared them to those we considered to be "proficient." For our exceptional texts, we collected movie reviews written by Pulitzer Prize winners. We collected movie reviews of the same movies written by "regular" bloggers on the Internet for our proficient texts.

Our findings showed that the movie reviews written by Pulitzer Prize-winning authors did not contain additional sentence complexity but did have a little bit more sophisticated vocabulary. The biggest difference between these two sets of movie reviews, however, was in the way that the ideas in the texts were connected. There are many ways to connect ideas in a text. The easiest ways are by simply repeating words, or by using pronouns to refer to previous ideas. A more advanced way of connecting ideas, however, is to use synonyms, hypernyms, and other "word associations". That is, ideas are connected to each other by the use of words that have similar or related meanings.

In our study, the proficient movie reviews written by bloggers depended on word repetition and pronouns to link concepts between sentences. But the Pulitzer Prize winners were more

likely to use the advanced method of connecting ideas using vocabulary that is meaning-related. For example, in one movie review of the movie "Moonrise Kingdom," the opening paragraphs contained associated words about home (*home, habitat, house, cozy, comfort, inside*), family (*family, mothers, nursery*), and art (*handmade, artisanal, art, create, bespoke, production*). These associations create a vibrant, evocative atmosphere about a family home, while also highlighting the movie director's refined artistic sensibilities.

So, what can we all do to improve our own writing ability, whether it is in our first or second language? Based on the above, the first thing we should do is to endeavor to use sophisticated vocabulary as appropriate. This task can be aided by reading extensively in order to expand our working vocabularies. But more importantly, we can improve our writing by focusing on connecting our ideas using vocabulary with similar or related meanings, rather than just repeating words or using pronouns to refer to previous ideas. In this way, we can create coherent texts containing detailed, rich content that can help us make an impact on our readers.

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