

Linda Spencer

*Writing Well in the 21st Century: The Five Essentials*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. 156 pp.

Cynthia Joyce

*Please Forward: How Blogging Reconnected New Orleans After Katrina*. New Orleans, LA: University of New Orleans Press, 2015. 403 pp.

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Writing is equal parts skill and soul—even in the digital era of spell-check and auto-correct. Two new texts hope to highlight how technology has evolved the way we write. One book—*Writing Well in the 21st Century*—focuses on the “how.” The other text—*Please Forward: How Blogging Reconnected New Orleans After Katrina*—emphasizes the “why.”

Robust editing functions on today’s computing devices may lead novice word-smiths to believe that good writing is easy and quick. Spencer writes that crafting coherence still requires technique and time. This brief tome suggests that all writers—from beginners to professionals—adopt the “PGFSV” method, where five key facets of writing take center stage: (a) punctuation, (b) grammar, (c) facts, (d) style, and (e) voice. These elements work in tandem to propel a piece from good to great, Spencer writes.

In a world where the word “Google” is both a noun and a verb, it is time to revisit some of the more esoteric rules of writing, Spencer argues. She begins her call for a 21st-century writing reboot by likening authors to Thomas Edison. She claims, “Like inventors, writers invent or create something new: a story, a new idea, or an opinion—a cohesive narrative on a blank page using words” (p. 2). Today’s writer must be aware of current American English trends too, she says. It is now permissible to start sentences with conjunctions, such as “but” or “and,” for example. After Spencer’s urge-to-upgrade introductory chapter, she organizes her book into five subsequent sections for each element in her PGFSV method.

The punctuation chapter sheds light on some of the most commonly misused symbols in our language, such as the ellipses—which should contain only three dots, not four!—and the *en* dash versus the *em* dash. Those who believed a hyphen is just a hyphen will appreciate this section on the six different ways to use commas and what never to do with a “slash.” The only thing missing from this chapter is how we should begin to think about using “@” symbols or hashtags in our writing. For a generation that spends much of its time texting or Tweeting, some mention of whether these glyphs should be added to the punctuation pack would have been welcome.

The grammar chapter explains just how relaxed we have become culturally about how we organize our sentences. Although the parts have not changed—Spencer still believes a noun is a person, place, or thing, for instance—the length of our expressions has evolved. Compared with the days of Victorian English, we are writing more

compact, yet meaningful sentences. Students who are used to communicating in 140 characters or less may not be too surprised by this claim, yet the sections on the necessity of strong adjectives and adverbs may be helpful to the writer who has become accustomed to describing all manner of things as “awesome” or “epic.”

The facts chapter has strong ethical undertones. Spencer opens it by mentioning that misinformation can travel faster than ever before now, thanks to the Internet. She urges writers, then, to fact-check their material rigorously. She also recycles the time-honored advice of citing everything to avoid plagiarism. She even suggests that students use a continuum to evaluate the credibility of a website, with .edu or .gov site as most trustworthy, and .com or .net sites at the lower end of the credibility scale.

The style chapter finally analyzes the hidden flair that separates ho-hum writers from the extraordinary. Clarity, mechanics, and substance are the elements of style, Spencer says. She discourages the use of run-on sentences and suggests that writers choose clear over clunky. Of course, having something important to say is paramount too, and Spencer pushes for writers to devise an outline so that writing can remain focused.

The voice chapter attempts to define a writer’s *je ne sais quoi*. Spencer writes, “Voice is the intangible that makes writing memorable. Just like the sounds of your spoken voice, your written voice can have *sound* to it” (p. 117). Although some writers would argue that voice cannot be taught, Spencer says that voice is easily discernible when one considers a writer’s word choices, and how they play with meaning to denote or connote varying tones.

Joyce’s anthology, *Please Forward: How Blogging Reconnected New Orleans After Katrina*, is a fantastic study in tone. The text contains nearly 100 original blog posts from residents of New Orleans who reflect on life before, during, and after the natural disaster. News audiences may have images of submerged homes and people waving from rooftops indelibly imprinted in their memories. This text manages to provide what those bird’s-eye view stories lacked though: the immediate sense of panic, chaos, and doom those trapped by the floods felt as their city’s infrastructure fell apart. In an August 30, 2005, blog post, aptly titled “The Horror,” Greg Henderson writes,

“The city has no clean water, no sewage system, no electricity, and no real communications. Bodies are still being recovered, found floating in the floods. We are worried about a cholera epidemic” (p. 27). Henderson describes a near-apocalyptic scene of gunshots ringing out regularly and makeshift hospitals erected in hotels. “Where is the National Guard?” Henderson asks, adding, “There is no Red Cross and no Salvation Army” (p. 27).

As waters recede and New Orleans residents begin to relocate to other parts of the country, some have reached a glum state of acceptance; others’ fury borders on the sacrilegious. “Well, I guess Mississippi isn’t so bad,” Clifton Harris writes on October 12, 2005 (p. 125). One can almost hear the sigh in his tone as he scans his new home. Another blogger who uses the pseudonym, “Da Po’Boy,” sneers, “And so has Reggie Bush been anointed. The savior of the Saints franchise” (p. 273). The blog post title is, “Jesus in Cleats.”

Despite distance, time, and its digital format, blogging knit New Orleans together since Katrina. Reading each of these posts is very much like peeking into a diary entry of a loved one—there is a guilty, almost voyeuristic quality to absorbing the words, but an inability to look away. As the blogs span several years and include a multitude of voices, the act of reading this polyphonic prose produces almost the same emotions that one witnessing the floods from afar felt. There is a keen sense of helplessness one feels in knowing that this tragic thing has happened, but one feels hopeful that the city will pull itself back together. Joyce has captured in her anthology more than words on a computer screen. These are stories that make you *feel*.

Communication instructors who are looking to instill equal parts skill and soul would do well to assign these instructional writing texts together. The former book is a great little pocket guide to writing's key essentials, packaged in a highly readable format. The latter text is a great example of how to meld good writing from multiple sources to create a multilayered account of a well-known event. Both books advance our understanding of writing as more than a mere perfunctory act required by the academy. Instead, writing is portrayed in both texts as a powerful tool for self-reflection and interpersonal communication.

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Jon L. Mills

*Privacy in the New Media Age*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015. 239 pp.

**Reviewed by:** Jeremy Harris Lipschultz, *University of Nebraska Omaha, Omaha, NE, USA*

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The US\$140 million Florida jury award for Hulk Hogan in 2016 against Gawker Media was another sign of the legal struggle over celebrity privacy law. The award, which was 3 times annual revenue, threatened to bring the site to an end.

At issue was whether or not Gawker violated the former professional wrestler's reasonable expectation of privacy in posting a sex tape from a bedroom affair with the wife of shock jock Bubba "the Love Sponge" Clem. Six jurors rejected a newsworthiness defense.

Although such cases may not have an impact on First Amendment law, Mills has long been a proponent of broadening privacy rights. The University of Florida law professor and former Florida Speaker of the House represented the widow of National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) driver Dale Earnhardt in a case to block publication of autopsy photographs.

Professor Mills suggests that new media magnify the traditional privacy conflict because of the speed of social media and the volume of false information. The heart of his argument is that the new media landscape threatens values, such as "personal autonomy, freedom, liberty, and the ability to be an individual" (p. 3).

The book worked well for my honors program seminar on Free Expression and Social Media, as Mills offers a survey of marketplace of ideas and newsworthiness