



Why very smart people hate writing

I consider myself fortunate that I get to work with very smart people. They are scientists, engineers, IT specialists, doctors, veterinarians, nurses, teachers and more. As a writer and editor and sometimes teacher of writing, I get to learn a lot about the work they do with some interesting travel as a bonus.

Aside from being very smart, they have one other characteristic in common. They hate writing. Most would rather drill their own teeth than sit down and write up their research or a proposal, progress report, manual or reply to an email. I know because they tell me. They say, "I'm a numbers person." They say, "English is not my first language."

Hmmm....

Carl Sagan, Stephen Hawking, Oliver Sachs, Richard Feynman, Jane Goodall, Stephen Pinker; all numbers people and they write great books (I tried to find more women, honestly). From personal experience, I know a good many colleagues who are excellent writers and use English as their second or third language (many of them women).

I have some theories about why so many very smart people struggle with writing. Tell me if you agree.

It begins with our schooling.

When it comes to writing, we get grammar and English literature. English grammar is presented as a set of 'rules' but they are not rules, they are an attempt to explain patterns that evolved from people using the language. Why does the adjective come before the noun in English but after the noun in Thai? There is no explanation other than, "That's how we do it." There is no underlying logic and that drives numbers people crazy.

As for English literature, possibly interesting if presented well, but does absolutely nothing to prepare us for the kind of writing we will need in the workplace.

In university, we were forced to write term papers and essays, maybe lab reports and case studies, all with zero guidance and no meaningful feedback. When it came time to write my masters thesis, I did what every other grad student has done for generations: I went to the library, borrowed a few theses on topics like mine and copied the structure and phrasing as best I could.

My observation, based on working with professionals in over 80 organizations on five continents, is that the way you wrote your thesis determines how you will write the rest of your career. This explains why, no matter what very smart people write, it comes out looking like a research paper. And we wonder why policymakers don't heed our advice.

OK, we all had a bad writing childhood. Is there anything I can do about it now? Isn't writing a talent and either I have it or I don't, and if I don't, I do the best I can? That's a fixed mindset and very smart people generally have an open mindset, which says, "How can I solve this problem?"

Problem space

Very smart people like solving problems. What is the underlying cause of Alzheimer's? How can we pull carbon from the atmosphere on a commercial scale? How can we preserve wetlands without limiting people's livelihoods? How do we keep girls in school longer?

Each of these questions frames a problem space. According to [John Spacey](#), a problem space is, *"a set of goals for a creative process. Problem spaces do not include any details of the solution. By starting with a problem space, creative processes avoid making assumptions about the solution that eliminate possibilities too early."*

I think if very smart people were to approach writing the same way they approach problem-solving in their profession, writing would be less of a struggle. What school writing lacks is a clear definition of the problem space. Your audience is one person, the teacher. The teacher tells you what to write and your only goal is to get a good grade. That's a real but very limited problem space.

In the real world, the problem space is more complex. You have many readers, all drowning in information, who read only what they want, when they want, or when they must because they are looking for specific information. The problem space for writing includes determining the best channel, the best format and structure, and the best words to elicit frames of reference that resonate with that group of readers, which is how you persuade them to act on your words.

Take this post for example. I framed my problem space like this:

I need to persuade very busy, very smart people working in physical and social sciences, technology, engineering, health, and education to shift their mindset so they see writing in terms of a problem space and will decide to invest just a little of their time exploring how that would help them write more in less time with less effort and with greater confidence readers will get their message. The action I want them to take is...

Like and Share this post and then watch my 30 second video on The Writing Problem Space at <https://vimeo.com/387920307>

Let's see how I do.

Thanks to [Barbara Ruth Saunders](#), a fellow writer, editor and trainer in Berkeley California and new LinkedIn contact for the inspiration for the title of this post.

Terry Erle Clayton is a freelance writer, editor and writing teacher based in Udon Thani in Northeastern Thailand. When he isn't writing, editor or teaching you will most likely find him working in the garden or trying to fix things.