

## **Bonehead Writing**

**by Craig Vetter**

There's a sort of low moan that goes up periodically from the English departments at colleges and universities across the country over the fact that most students, even the good ones, can't write a lick - not a love letter or a suicide note, much less an essay or a term paper. It's nothing new, but according to the teachers who have to read this crap for a living, the further we get into the computer era the worse it's becoming. So at places like Harvard and Yale and Brown, they're holding faculty conferences to hash the problem through; they're designing bonehead writing courses and setting up special peer-group tutoring problems in an all-out, last-ditch effort to ensure that their graduates will at least be able to fill out applications for day labor without embarrassing themselves.

They haven't gone so far as to suggest that a student be required to write, say, one short coherent paragraph in order to graduate, but there are signs that they're getting a little desperate. For one thing, they're hiring more and more writers, and I don't mean just the cocktail-party lions of big fiction, either. They're actually cleaning out the mop closets to make office space for journalists and other freelance grubs who have spent most of their careers below decks, sweating and wiping the greasy pipes in the engine room of the profession.

Somehow, I haven't been asked. I am qualified, though; at it almost 20 years with nothing to show except a world-class alcohol/tobacco habit, debt that follows me like a huge pet rat and a small, used Olivetti with a leatherette case. Credentials, in other words. And I know some things about writing that others are not likely to tell you; ugly things. I think I could cram most of them into the first lecture, which, given the size of the problem, would probably have to be held in a

fairly large room. If I did it right, though - if I were honest with my students - I think we could most likely hold the second class in a Datsun and get everybody in comfortably.

So picture me now, walking across the quad in my uniform - torn bathrobe, bolo tie, blown-out L.L. Bean boating mocs - smelling like a ripe field of Cannabis, making little Indian hand signals to the Jordache and Calvin coeds, then gripping the lectern and looking out into the small bay of faces that are waiting for me to teach them about writing.

"Good morning, children, and brace yourselves. This is Writing One-A. I wanted to subtitle it 'Writing for those who still sign their name with an X,' but the administration said, 'No, these kids aren't stupid or uneducated, just writing-impaired.' I love that. Makes you sound like Helen Keller at the pump, waiting for a miracle. It's not entirely your fault, though; I know that. There isn't one in a thousand teachers who knows the first damn thing about writing. All your lives, they've been reducing it to widgets and screws, clauses and semicolons for you, till what you think you're working with is a dainty sort of parlor art, something like embroidery.

"The truth is that writing is a blood sport, a walk in the garden of agony every time out, which is why those who are any good at it look older than their contemporaries, snap at children on the street, live alone. Like me.

"So you can pretty much forget the polite approach to writing in here. What I'm going to show you this semester is that you don't have what it takes to write well. You never did and you never will. In fact, you probably ought to think of this class as one of those wilderness-survival courses that are popular these days. Except that instead of taking you out in a happy little group and encouraging you to face trouble and danger as a team, I want you to imagine that you're going to be hustled into deep woods at midnight, trussed up, beaten senseless and left to die. If you do make it back to camp, we'll give you a nice T-shirt that says, I SURVIVED THE

DOWNWARD BOUND SCHOOL OF WRITING, you'll be re-beaten, then dragged to a less benign part of the forest.

"And if you think that metaphor exaggerates what's ahead of you, take a look at this. Don't turn away, you wormy little cowards. This is your enemy: a perfectly empty sheet of paper. *Nothing* will ever happen here except what you make happen. If you are stupid, what happens will be like a signed confession of that fact. If you are unfunny, a humorless patch of words will grow here. If you lack imagination, your reader will know you immediately and forever as the slug you are. Or let me put it to you this way - and you may want to tattoo this somewhere on your bodies - BLANK PAPER IS GOD'S WAY OF TELLING US THAT IT'S NOT SO EASY TO BE GOD.

"But I'm not here to give you just the good news this morning, so let's get right to the ugliest of today's ironies. I'm stealing your money. I couldn't teach you how to write if I wanted to, if *you* wanted me to. Everybody who ever learned this wretched craft taught himself, and he did it despite the lettered fools who got into the process here and there, because writing is not, first, the gathering up and stringing together of words. Writing is *thinking*, which means that every time you sit down to do it, you get another chance to find out just how perceptive you *aren't*. To come up with one simple, interesting or funny thought on anything is the hardest, dirtiest shoveling any of us ever has to do, and no one can teach you how to do it.

"There is one trick I can give you, however; a way for you to seem smarter and more clever than you really are. All you have to do is spend 40 or 50 hours working up an idea, a sentence, that looks when you've written it as if it took 90 seconds to make. You don't have to tell anyone how long you were alone in your own weak mind, floundering and whining - that it took you eight full days to write a dopey little 900-word column.

"But - and this is what I'd like you to ask yourselves before our next meeting - why in hell would anybody want to learn to do that?"

**Developing *Chops*:**  
**Yes, You can Learn to Write**  
**AND Kick Folks in the Face**

By Spencer Bennington

An axe kick is a technique in Tae Kwon Do where the practitioner lifts his leg high in the air, pulls his toes up to expose the heel, and swings the foot down at an opponent's head. The kick rises up and swings down, like an axe chopping wood. When I first started learning Tae Kwon Do, this technique was one of the simpler ones taught to me, but I still ran through a mental checklist of steps before executing the axe kick in practice.

*Check your fighting stance—are you balanced?*

*Raise your knee as high as you can—try to touch your shoulder...*

*Extend the leg*

*Pull your toes back*

*Use your hips to create power—abandon leg strength*

*Keep your head and chest in a safe-zone—can you defend against counter-attacks?*

Even though many of these rudimentary steps take a fraction of a second to perform, I was still conscious of every aspect that I was uncomfortable with. And, since this was a completely new skill, I was uncomfortable with ALL of the steps at first. As time went on, however, I practiced more and more and became less conscious of things like using my hips or extending my knee. Sure, I would still check my balance and my defensive position, but those too would eventually become automatic.

Learning the axe kick is an example of what Stanley Aronowitz would call developing a skill. In his article “Writing is Not a Skill,” Aronowitz makes the distinction between skills (like operating a lathe or photocopier) and arts (his prime example is writing). While I don’t totally disagree with Aronowitz on the subject of writing being an art form, I do take issue with his binary opposition between the terms *skill* and *art*.

To return to the axe kick—yes, it is most assuredly a learned skill. My instructor provided me with a list of steps which acted like ingredients in a recipe. Put all the ingredients together in the correct proportion and *voila!* You have yourself an axe kick. But, if Tae Kwon Do is simply a collection of techniques that fall into the category of learned *skills*, why would anyone refer to it as a martial *art*?

Maybe it has to do with the fact that after I learned the axe kick and countless other techniques, I was forced to use them all in my own personal way during a sparring bout. My collection of skills was utterly useless without some level of critical thinking and imagination. In other words, my mental checklist for the axe kick began to take a different shape:

*What techniques can I use to set up my axe kick?*

*Should I attack my opponent’s open side or blind side?*

*Does the axe kick even need to score, or can I use it as a feint?*

*What if he counters with a spinning hook kick? Can I recover?*

This combination of learned skills and creative execution elevated manual labor to artistry. In other words, my ability to experiment with a skill that I had become comfortable with led to a richer and more original performance.

I think what Aronowitz is missing here is that any artist has a particular set of skills which allows him to create art. Similarly, in his article “Bonehead Writing,” Craig Vetter openly

denies the fact that students have the ability to learn how to write. “I couldn’t teach you how to write if I wanted to, if *you* wanted me to” he says. “Everybody who ever learned this wretched craft taught himself”.

Come on Craig, you’re telling me and all the college freshman out there that you never learned a thing or two about your own style by reading someone else’s work? So stereotyping yourself as a drunken savant with a heartbeat in time to the clacking of an electric typewriter has nothing to do with an admiration for Hemingway or Hunter S. Thompson? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not attacking Mr. Vetter, but I am pretty fed up with this romanticized notion of writers as self-important, gonzo-wannabe, prehistoric hipsters. “Bonehead Writing” is funny and entertaining, but it only serves to propagate this tired image of the tortured writer waiting for some mystic inspiration. Vetter is right about one thing though, a blank page truly is “God’s way of telling us that it’s not so easy to be God,” but, what he neglects to mention is that it’s not impossible to learn—how to be God, that is.

Like Tae Kwon Do, writing is an art form comprised of many skills. I know first-hand through roughly five years of experience that these skills can be learned AND they can be taught. For instance, texts like *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* and Chuck Palahniuk’s *36 Essays on Craft* provided me with mental checklists much like the one I had for my axe kick.

*Are you using too many adverbs? Does this mean you need stronger verbs or nouns?*

*Check your work for unnecessary thought verbs. How can you unpack?*

*What placeholder clichés do you use? What do these actions/ideas really look like?*

Soon, after writing and practicing more, many of these questions left my conscious mind and became part of my unconscious ability. These things were becoming learned skills that gave me the tools to make my writing more vivid, detailed, and well-rounded. When I shared these skills

with my students through lectures, exercises, and critique, I watched as they developed the abilities as well.

Again, much like the Tae Kwon Do example, the *art* of writing was still present when I was faced with that dreaded blank page—when I had to decide which skills to use and in what order. In this regard, Vetter is not wrong, “writing is *thinking*” (38). But, oftentimes, it’s thinking about the skills you’ve developed and how they can help you overcome a problem of writer’s block, plot order, character development, voice, etc. Writing can be learned, it can be taught, but in order for it to transform from skill to art, the writer must be willing to infuse the work with something personal, something unique to his own soul.

An axe kick is a technique in Tae Kwon Do where the practitioner lifts his leg high in the air, pulls his toes up to expose the heel, and swings the foot down at an opponent’s head. The kick rises up and swings down, like an axe chopping wood. But, where, when, and how you decide to chop is up to you—*that* is your art.

So, yes, while the blank canvas is any artist’s worst nightmare and while imagination/inspiration is, in fact, some fifth element originating only from the teat of Olympian Muses, no man is an island, and, despite what Craig Vetter would have you believe, no writer is ever completely self-taught.

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