

A NEW COLUMN ABOUT AN OLD CRAFT

BY DANNY HEITMAN

Not long ago, in the interest of keeping things tidy, I decided to gather all the books I own about how to write. I expected to find perhaps half a dozen volumes to set aside in a small corner of my bookcase.

To my surprise, I came across 39, and from where I write this, I can see them all. They fill a whole shelf, and they range from William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White's *The Elements of Style* to William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* to Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*.

My personal collection, of course, doesn't represent even a fraction of the titles in the ever-growing genre of books about writing. There are no doubt enough of them to line a city library.

At first glance, why we should be so fascinated by the challenge of stringing words together seems a mystery. For those of us lucky enough to achieve basic literacy, writing down what we mean should be as simple as breathing.

But as Nicholas Delbanco points out in *Why Writing Matters*, one of the books in my collection, humans are relative newcomers to writing. We chatted away for generations before it occurred to anyone that language could be physically recorded. "Writing is the junior sibling – the great-

great-grandchild, even – of speech," Delbanco tells readers. "Shouts and screams came first."

Apparently, our brains are still getting used to writing. Even the best writers need to work at it, think about it, discuss it, find ways to improve their game. To help advance that conversation, *Forum* with this issue debuts "On Writing," a regular column about the perils and promise of the craft.

There's no more important time to focus on how to use written language with skill and grace. When the world is broken, as George Orwell argued in his celebrated 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," good writing can help put society in better repair.

Orwell noted that while bad writing is the result of unclear thinking, the reverse is also true. When we don't write well, we don't think well, and that inevitably stifles progress. Given that reality, "the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers," Orwell wrote.

Though a genius at the keyboard, Orwell took care to concede his own limitations as a scribe. In writing, he suggested, we are all muddling through and learning from our mistakes.

What was true of Orwell in this regard is even truer for those of us with exponentially more modest abilities. I've been a journalist for nearly four decades and have done several kinds of writing, including writing about writing. I've taught a few writing students, too.

But I still think of myself as a student of the craft, as perhaps we all must be. As we learn together, please feel free to reach me about topics we might explore in "On Writing." I have some ideas for future columns, but I welcome yours. You can email me at dheitman@phikappaphi.org. We'll also plan some interesting conversations in "The Writer's Block," a discussion forum within Phi Kappa Phi's online Link community. It's open to all active members at Link.PhiKappaPhi.org.

I look forward to taking this journey with you. Maybe, along the way, we can also have a little fun.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications and taught writing to university students.