

The Great Pyramid War

Linda's office was austere. Two desks formed an "L" in the middle. A chair with a crippled back was pushed under the desk nearest to the door. No windows. Nothing on the gray walls. A large, circular stain on the carpet was the only thing of interest in this Spartan setting, and together our eyes drew a bead on this ugliness. "I'll get maintenance to clean that," I said to Linda. The dark brown stain on the tan carpet smugly suggested a substance that would resist any attempt to remove it. "Somebody must have spilled coffee," I said.

I felt a current of embarrassment rush through me. Why? Why did this spectacle feel like premature failure? I was eager to be worthy of this internship. As the publications manager of an engineering firm, I had conducted two internships in technical communication already, but this intern was a star pupil in a large southern university. Linda was an undergraduate technical communication student who came to her interview loaded for bear: a resplendent resumé, eloquent words of recommendation from her professors, evidence of sincere scholarship, and enthusiasm. Linda was no transplant. She had lived near the university most of her life and spoke the patois of the region. Having been reared in the south myself, her manner of expression boded well for our relationship.

Her southern origin was evident during our first telephone conversation. "Mr. Connatser—" she insisted on calling me by my sir name—"how shall I dress? Is it formal? Or can I wear jeans? Will you supply a computer? When do I get paid? What are the most hours I can work?" She was making all the right noises for an intern, and I

answered her questions rather merrily. After all, these were questions I *could* answer. I knew that the tough questions would come later.

On her first day, she dressed in jeans and a white poofy shirt that seemed altogether like an abused sari, swallowing her whole. I guess that's what they're wearing these days. I was feeling my age. I introduced her to the two desks, the chair, the portable computer and its keyboard. She had already met the stain. "This is your computer," I said. "You'll mostly be working with Microsoft Word. You said that you normally use Wordperfect?" She nodded, or did she shake her head? I couldn't interpret her ambiguous gesture. "Well," I said, "they're not all that different. As long as you get the concepts behind the GUI, you can master just about any word processor."

I was testing her. I wanted to see how much she knew about common terms of technical communication. *GUI*, or graphical user interface, was not just a probe into her knowledge. In fact, I assumed that she didn't know the abbreviation. I wanted to see if she asked questions. I wanted her to be the apt pupil here, in this internship, as she was at school, but the probe met with silence. She looked at me through her thick glasses, which magnified her eyes, which perpetuated the appearance of wide-eyed astonishment. Then, she studied her black tennis shoes.

"Do you know what a GUI is?" I heard myself say and immediately regretted it. So much for subtlety. "Well," Linda said, "yeah, I've heard about it." I was looking for honesty, but in challenging times, people may paradoxically fudge the truth to preserve their honor. I figured that Linda was doing just that. I had put her on the spot, and it was my responsibility to ease the strain. "Good," I said clumsily. "Let's go around and meet everybody."

I had gotten my answer. Linda was intimidated by the idea of not knowing things. This affect seemed all too human but not very student-like. How was she going to develop her professional skills if she didn't ask questions? She was proud, and I would have to learn how to deal with it. Of course, I didn't figure this out from one trick question. This idea of Linda came to me slowly, over the course of about a week. I would say something, she would look puzzled and study her shoes, and I would determine what she didn't understand by using the Socratic method of inquiry—lots of indirect questions and reassurance. Students have egos, too.

* * *

A week or so into Linda's internship, I gave her a hefty assignment—to write an article about some laboratory work that a company engineer was conducting. When I became the manager of publications, my first charge was to create a newsletter for the supporters of our research, which are mostly electric utilities. Having a master's degree in creative writing, I developed a rather informal, conversational voice for the newsletter. I expected interns to write in the same way, and for the first two interns, that mode of writing was no problem. In fact, I sensed that it was liberating. They rose to the challenge and wrote some very good articles, relishing their freedom to indulge creative language. With their linguistic synapses popping, they approached writing assignments with zeal and ardor, and thereby learned a great deal from the experience.

To instill this philosophy of discourse into Linda's way of thinking, I challenged her to study some of the newsletter issues, especially those issues with articles written by the

two previous interns. “Do you want me to write the article like this?” she said. I ignored the tinge of incredulity in her voice. “Give it a try,” I said. “Read the engineer’s report, then write down some questions, then interview the engineer.” She looked at the ponderous report I had laid on her desk. “You don’t have to understand it all,” I said. “Try to extract the most interesting elements, and then write some questions that you think might yield some interesting answers.”

I wanted Linda to get used to talking to technical types, the subject-matter experts who create the data and information that we technical communicators shape and translate into consumable artifacts. “Is there a deadline?” Linda said. The truth is, most corporate deadlines play possum. A week’s worth of experience in the working world reveals the type of bureaupathic behavior responsible for packing three months of work into a one-month schedule. Deadlines are really just goals. Contrary to the implication of the word “deadline,” nobody perishes when a project exceeds its schedule. Deadlines can be comforting to people who require structure or oppressive to people who wax catatonic under pressure. Linda seemed to be the first type. She nodded when I said, “How about reading this stuff today and interviewing the engineer tomorrow. Then, you can write a first draft the next day.”

We parted. Linda sat in her crippled chair, and I walked across the hall to my office. A few minutes later, I heard four-letter whispers. Linda was cursing her computer in hushed but intelligible language. I got up and peeked around the corner into her office. “What’s wrong?” I said. “This floppy drive doesn’t work,” she said. “It won’t eject my disk.” Like some patient with a transplanted organ, her computer was rejecting its own floppy drive. I unfolded a paper clip and inserted it into the emergency-eject hole. The

drive reacted to this stimulus by grunting. I tried again, and the disk flew out. “I’ll get the computer guy to look at it,” I said. First the stain, now this. “In the meantime, why don’t you write the questions out by hand.”

I returned to my office. All was quiet. No cursing. She needed time to decompress, no doubt, but I was used to inquisitive interns. I waited for her head to peek around the door. Instead, I heard her office door close and then the opening and closing of the back door to the building, which was just around the corner to my office. Through a window that overlooks the parking lot, I watched her climb into a long yellow car and then drive away. That feeling came over me, the desire to look into the mirror and examine my teeth and the front of my shirt. Or was it something I said?

* * *

I coined the term *complicating why* to describe the penetrating questions posed by my two previous interns. I had to dig deep to explain *why* I write and edit the way I do. Strict and often tiring scrutinies, engendered by the complicating *why*, enabled me to dismiss stale prescriptions and talk about writing and editing in light of reading research, especially research in cognitive psychology. Through discourse, the interns and I reified the abstract and cultivated a reasonable way of working with language. I was beginning to enjoy the benefits of the complicating *why*.

Linda was reticent to ask *why*. She was not laconic by any stretch. A week into her internship, she bubbled with talk about biology, medicine, and horses, but the themes of her conversations rarely lead us into subjects closer to the heart of her academic

enterprise. I prodded her with points of grammar and mechanics, substance and style. But it wasn't until the second week—while she was crafting that newsletter article—that we had our first substantive and ultimately revealing discussion on technical communication.

I noticed in her writing the tendency to omit commas after introductory elements. At first, I simply advised her that I would prefer that she use a comma after introductory elements. She agreed, but I sensed confusion. I explained: “I know that the rules say you can use the comma after short introductory elements at your discretion, but the writer is too close to the text to decide whether a comma is needed to avoid confusion.” She nodded, or did she shake her head?

I put the following sentence on a large marker board in my office: “In this case only the subject was able to understand the command.” With this rather egregious example, I wanted to show her that omitting the comma can cause what linguists call a garden-path sentence, wherein some ambiguous construction compels the reader to make an incorrect prediction about sentence structure. Off the reader goes, down the garden path, headlong into confusion.

“Here,” I said, “the sentence has an ambiguous meaning that cannot be resolved without help from the writer. Does the comma go after ‘case,’ which renders one meaning, or after ‘only,’ which renders another? Does ‘only’ modify ‘In this case’ or ‘the subject’? Only the writer knows, and the writer doesn't come attached to the text.” There was a lot of blinking and nail-biting at this point. Her brow bunched up. “So,” I continued, “go ahead and put the commas in.”

Her head gyrated. She adjusted her glasses, breathed deep, and groaned like a slow leak of misery. She wanted to speak, I thought, but was reluctant to disagree. “Go ahead,”

I said. “My professor says that writers should *always* leave off the comma,” she said. Always? Always leave off the comma? I was enraptured by this idea. “Why?” I said, suddenly becoming the student. She managed the complicating *why* with enviable confidence. “Because,” she said, “readers recognize the end of an introductory element, so putting a comma there is redundant.” I wondered whether she had understood the example I had just scribbled on the board.

“All right,” I said. “I see. But for now, please put a comma after all introductory elements.” Her head moved around a bit, a gesture of assent? Perplexed, we both retreated to our corners. I must think about what just happened. Now, it seems so obvious why this internship so quickly failed to flourish. But as in any James Joyce story, a series of unforeseen human events would suspend my understanding.

* * *

One sweltering summer morning, I looked through my office window as Linda pulled her long yellow car into a parking space. I heard the building door creak open and slam shut, then the tinkle of keys, then the mechanical noise of a lock turning. That was my cue. Her article for the newsletter was due, and I was determined to get it in shape quickly for the next issue. I walked into her office. “Linda,” I said, “how’s that article coming?” She was still toting her portable computer, the one with the haywire immune system. “I can’t get the computer to eject my disk,” she said. There was no vitriol in her voice, just a calm statement of fact. She was standing in the middle of the stain. “You’ll have to read it on the computer,” she said.

I took her computer to my office. I had to climb under my desk to find an empty electrical socket. After I booted the computer and opened a file named “Article1.doc,” I read the article from the dingy computer screen. She had worked on it for about a week, and my expectations were high. I had used the word “interest” a thousand times, but the story read like a gush of facts rushing down a sluice. There was no opening to speak of, but rather an abrupt sentence jammed with truths: the name of the engineer, the project he was working on, the objective of the project, and so on. Interest had been waylaid by data.

In a rare state of repose, I spent an hour in silence developing an encouraging, instructive monologue about the qualities of a good opening, the virtues of a dramatic story structure, the elements of good prose. Certainly she was embarking on a mission of technical communication. Verity was important, but verity wasn’t all.

“You’re very good with facts,” I said to Linda. She was some distance away, sitting cockeyed in her chair. We both folded our arms. The building seemed very cold. “But what you’ve got here reads like a list. Why don’t you pick the most interesting fact in this story and build toward it. Try to create a dramatic arc.” She stared at me. Dramatic arc? I demonstrated with a joke.

“Did you read in the paper this morning about the three boys throwing cinder blocks off an overpass?” She had not. “They tied a cinder block to a rope, dropped it on a passing truck, and tried to reel it back. But the cinder block went through the windshield, and the truck pulled one of the boys arm off.” She winced. “Yeah, they arrested the truck driver.” Now, she is interested, outraged even. “Why?” she said. “Arm robbery,” I said.

She gave me that you-got-me-but-I-don't-appreciate-it look. "Oh," she said. I said, "Do you see how everything in that little story builds toward the punch line? Upon reflection you can, but while you were caught up in the story you weren't able to see where the words were leading you because the author didn't leave any scaffolding. You didn't see that you were caught up in a dramatic arc. That's what I want you to do. Think about the most important point of the story—a fact or a concept, something you want the reader to think about most—and construct the story around it. When you're done, the editor will make sure you didn't leave any scaffolding standing. You don't want the reader to say, 'I see where this is going.'"

We both sighed, I in relief—I felt that I had done a pretty good job explaining what I wanted—and she because who knows why? The imposition of a daunting task? The frustration of misunderstanding? "Well," she said, the dreaded preface to insistence, defiance. Technical writing, Linda explained, should be as economical as possible. The most important information should be near the top, with less important information following. This, she said, was called the inverted pyramid.

Having taught journalism in a small southern college, I was well acquainted with this passé journalistic technique, but I had no idea that it had been adopted by the field of technical communication. The comma quandary did not begin to compare to this loggerhead. "That's what I've been taught," she added, exerting her full measure of allegiance to that corpus of incontrovertible rules inexorably adhering itself to her long-term memory. Who was I to challenge the wisdom of the professoriate? Thus began the great pyramid war, which would rage on for days, concealed from those around us by a veil of awkward pleasantries.

Still, I, the heretic, insisted that she revise the story. She agreed to a one-day turnaround. Ok, then, many thanks. War is hell.

* * *

I was excited to see the revision, excited to see what kind of influence, if any, I had exerted on this young communicator, who was now seeming more incorrigible and less impressionable than my first idea of her. I walked to her office. Her head was bent to the keyboard of the portable computer, as if she were pondering its function. I rapped my knuckles on the door frame. She started. I walked to her desk, which was still rather bare. Linda had placed a tin of peppermints next to a sheaf of papers, but the lid was closed. “Linda, did you repair that story?” I said, then immediately reflected: I didn’t say, “Good morning,” and that word “repair” was a bit confrontational, loaded with the implication that what she had crafted the day before was not just in need of refinement but was *broken*. For heaven’s sake, I thought, absolving myself as guilt surfaced. These interns must be hardened to the real world. What did Abraham Lincoln say? The occasion is piled high with difficulty. That’s life beyond the succor of the academy. Every day is a new challenge. She forced a smile as she handed me a floppy disk. “I hope you can read a PC disk,” she said. “It’s much easier to work on my computer at home.”

I had presented Linda with a less-than-ideal situation, and my expectations of her had been too lofty. The least I could do in the way of recompense was allow her to use her own computer at home. The least I could do. “Thanks,” I said. “I’ll look it over.”

My word processor translated her file without difficulty. Words popped up on the screen. The title, in bold letters, read “Researchers Study Long-Lead Effect.” So far, so good. Then, I read. I rubbed my eyes. I read some more. What she gave me was much less a story than a manifesto, a defense of her position supported by a selection of class notes and textbook quotes. “Dear Mr. Connatser. Please allow me to explain why I think this article should be written in the inverted-pyramid style.” One of her missiles landed in my artillery dump. I was about to reach for a white flag, when I suddenly remembered something. I was her boss. Recalcitrance in the classroom is one thing, but my employer had actually *paid* this intern to explain why she didn’t want to follow directions from her supervisor.

“Linda,” I said just loud enough for her to hear me across the hall. “Can you come in here?” She appeared in the doorway. “Listen,” I said. “I don’t want you to think of this place as a word factory where you punch the clock, do your time like an automaton, fill your quota, and leave. But I also don’t want you to think of this place as. . . .” As what? What was the analog here? An internship is neither fish nor fowl. An intern has one foot in the academy and the other in corporate America. Perhaps this ambiguity was confusing her sense of propriety. “I want you to learn about technical communication, but I also want you to learn to work within the constraints of a hierarchy. So when I say, ‘Try to do it this way,’ I’d appreciate a sincere effort. Does that make sense?” I asked her that question a lot. Her expressions were hard to fathom, and I had learned to interpret the mostly inscrutable motion of her head as the mere release of contained nervous energy. “Sure,” she said.

Questions came rolling toward me like logs down a hill. These weren't merely complicating; they were confounding, disconcerting *whys*. Linda didn't understand. Could I explain exactly what I was looking for? Exchanges were painful for us both. She seemed exquisitely awkward about repeatedly asking the same questions, and I felt exhausted. Most of my ideas perished by attrition before they reached my lips. My explanations had more angles than a geometry book, but none were lucid enough to convey the idea of a dramatic arc. "Mr. Connatser, this isn't working," she said. We had failed in the very thing we claimed as our expertise: communication.

Adapting from PC to Macintosh, from the classroom to the office, and from many teachers to one boss was intractable. For Linda, the learning curve was so steep that it became a wall, with a supporting cast of professors on the ground and me atop the wall, exhorting her like a relentless drill sergeant to climb that wall. This polarizing circumstance notwithstanding, winning Linda over seemed insurmountable. It was time to call a truce.

I decided to play to Linda's strengths. She was good with organizing facts and making lists, so I directed her toward a project that had been nagging me for months: compiling vita information about company employees and organizing that information into employee profiles. Each profile would include current job title and duties, work history, education, professional achievements, and publications. Linda took to this work, despite the computer handicaps and the staleness of her struggle to adapt to a corporate environment.

She worked diligently on this project. As the few weeks of her internship faded, so did her footfalls become more furtive. The hand that turned the key was more deliberate

now, so as not to wake the sleeping dragon across the hall. She was putting in time. The money was useful. The project was no challenge, but now she could record some professional experience on her resumé. She must have been disappointed not to have her work appear in one of the company's publications, a piece for her portfolio. In a few days, this would all be over.

* * *

Later that year, Linda conducted a student conference on technical communication for her university and the local chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. By all accounts, it was a success. She brought in speakers from all over, and handled the affair deftly. At her suggestion, I criticized the flyer that announced this conference, but suggestions for revision were *stet*.

I wondered whether her experience as an intern sullied or attenuated the gratification of success. Oscar Wilde once said, "It's not enough that I succeed; my friends must also fail." I want to believe that Linda transcends that sentiment, that she's not impaling my effigy with mojo pins, that we are both now more humble in our assumptions, and that challenging the assumptions of another can be constructive if it is done with tact, benevolence, and as few stains as possible.