The Rhetoric Behind Commonly Suggested Writing

Advice Generated by a Simple Internet Search

Bella Shaw

University of Denver

Introduction

In the age of the millisecond-result search engine, information is within arms reach to nearly 4.57 billion people worldwide.[1] This access is especially useful to students because it reduces the time that was once required to locate information for their studies. This study looked specifically at information and tips for writing and writers that could be located from a general search. The only keywords used in each search were "writing tips" and the results were analyzed in terms of intended audience and quality of the information provided. The purpose of this study was to understand the rhetoric behind commonly suggested tips and to recognize patterns between popular articles, videos, and memes compared to expert opinions. From an initial inspection, it appeared that a majority of the suggested tips across all three mediums were vague and were intended for a beginner student or writer. This generated the overall research question of, *What is the rhetoric behind targeting a younger or less advanced audience of writers in the media?*

After a final analysis, the top five most-common tips for writers were vague and lacked scientific reasoning or examples to support each suggestion. Expert writers appeared to have some alignment with suggestions in common media but provided in-depth examples and logical reasoning. Ph. D. Ronald T. Kellogg in *Training Writing Skills,* explains that writing cannot be mastered or improved without considering the task similarly to learning a new language or mastering the art of playing a musical instrument. This advice revealed a significant discrepancy

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[1] Statista.com "Digital Population Worldwide"

between writing experts and the observed media sources' suggestions, at least in terms of overall impactfulness for the audience. Kellogg claims that "Advanced writing skills require systematic training as well as instruction so that executive attention can successfully coordinate multiple writing processes and representations." This statement questions the credibility of most observed media sites evaluated in this experiment because the authors failed to provide instruction compared to Kellogg.

Multiple writing experts support Kellogg's claim and view writing as a very intentional process. Author Mike Sharples claims that a writer's environment is also not inert and "actively conditions the way we write."[2] The focus on a writer's environment was only introduced in two out of the thirty media samples evaluated and was only focused on a routine, and did not specifically target the writer's environmental needs. Another large flaw in the general tips provided was that they had little to do with the actual process, typically only mentioning "write every day!" and failed to incorporate tips focusing on the editing and production processes. William Zinsser, author of *On Writing Well*, emphasizes mindful editing and omitting as the keys to a successful piece and claims that there is "no better word than the short word." Zinsser also places an overall importance on being a confident writer with a focus on being concise and constantly writing with the audience in mind. These sentiments are complex individually, but Zinsser explains their importance in detail and appealed to the reader's logical understanding in his text. Writing has also been referred to as such an internalized technology in literate

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[2] Excerpt from *Writing as Design. How we Write* by Mike Sharples

societies that it cannot be separated and understood without "tremendous effort." [3] Overall, conscious writing practices are deemed the most imperative for success by all expert writers evaluated. The shortcomings of articles and media obtained in an initial google search do not facilitate these connections to the audience.

The most commonly suggested tips were compared in greater detail to the expert writers with the variables of emphasis on audience, environment, focus, intention, and confidence. Multiple theories were evaluated in this study that could explain these discrepancies and areas such as the author's or publisher's personal gain, general science behind majorly shared themes, and overall rhetorical strategies.

Methods

Data was collected throughout a period of two weeks to create variance in search engine results. Google search engine was the primary search engine used to collect data. Thirty sources were evaluated at random found using the keywords "writing tips" with minimal screen searching time to mimic the " typical user selection process." To sample varying levels of expertise, ten articles, ten memes, and five videos were evaluated. All media samples were compiled in a data table and the top five suggestions for writers or writing were listed with significant observations. After the thirty samples were collected, marks for mentioning

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[3] Excerpt from *Writing Restructures Thought* by Walter Ong

audience, environment, focus, intention, and confidence were tallied from all three mediums. Any additional suggestions were eliminated from the final results table. Comparisons to scientific literature were made to understand significant patterns and to address the overall question of the intended audience for popular media writing suggestions.

Results

Noticeable discrepancies were present between expert opinions and information provided by writing media (articles, videos, and memes). Out of thirty sources, writing consistently was suggested eleven times (articles-5, videos-2, memes-4). Having confidence and writing for an audience were each suggested two times. This was consistent with expert writers' advice, however, notes were made describing vague messages 50% of the time. Only one sample (video sample) included supporting evidence and thorough examples beyond personal anecdotes. Memes were found to offer the least diverse suggestions and articles provided the most information.

Table 1. Top 5 Suggestions for Writing Advice from Articles, Videos, and Memes. Data was compiled through Google Search Engine on Google Chrome through a testing period of two weeks. Writing consistently was the most suggested writing tip and having confidence and writing for an audience were the least suggested writing tips out of five categories used by experts. This data reveals a discrepancy between expert opinions and advice accessible on a free search.

Source	Suggestion				
	Write consistently	Write with Intention/ plan your writing	Write for an audience	Create a writing environment	Have confidence
Articles	5	6	1	4	1
Videos	2	2	1	1	1
Memes	4	0	0	0	0
Total	11	8	2	5	2

Discussion

Writing is an imperative part of society, especially in highly literate societies like the United States. Writing technologies also change as society does and access to the internet allows writing tools to be more accessible than ever before. However, only 25% of internet users will go past the first page of results from a search engine search.[4] When searching for writing tips as

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[4] SEO Statistics 2020 from WebFX

a common user a noticeable discrepancy was present between advice offered on the first page

of articles, videos, and memes to expert and scholarly advice. The information provided by

these sites could be summarized as short, vague, and intended for a beginner audience.

However, the advice provided by these sites seemed counterproductive as a writer must

receive mindful criticism and instruction to improve their craft.[5] The question of this study, to

identify the rhetoric behind this pattern of targeting a very unadvanced audience, went

seemingly unanswered by the end of this evaluation. Nonetheless, several connections were

made to science and expert advice.

First, articles appeared to provide the best information to users above

memes and videos. Memes only targeted one of the five categories

suggested by expert writers and made appeals to humor over

providing significant advice. One meme, in particular, made a nod at

how unhelpful some sources of writing advice were as pictured to the

left. [6] All ten of ten observed memes only suggested writing often as a

writing tip, which is not supported without additional suggestions by

experts.

The second media type evaluated were videos sources from the first page of video results,

which included two youtube videos. The notes for the five video samples were overall positive

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[5] Quote by Mike Sharples
[6] Image provided by Writing Tip memes on Imgflip.com

because the tips captured helpful advice in few words like "write to make a point, not a target word count"[7] or "establish a writing routine and stick to it."[8] Nonetheless, all five videos failed to provide any supporting information for their claims. Again, only inefficiently targeting a very general audience.

Articles aligned the most with expert advice scoring multiple times in 3 out of the 5 advice categories. However, notes were made on most sources for being too vague even though they addressed the five advice sectors. Noticeably, the articles that were the most successful were written by writing experts. The most successful article was paired with a video titled "How To Be A Better Writer: 6 Tips From Harvard's Steven Pinker." The article appealed to a general audience like the other sources but included outside sources, thorough examples, and scientific reasoning behind the advice. The findings in this article beg the question if some articles are willing to do this, why aren't they all? The most common suggestion overall was to write consistently. Why was this tip so heavily suggested? The impactfulness of this suggestion was cross-examined with external scientific sources to better understand why this nod was commonly mentioned by sources, while other advice was not.

The Science Behind "Writing Consistently"

This data was not easily obtainable from a scientific perspective. Even most scientific articles suggested no more than writing often *as* the suggestion without an explanation as to why.

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[7] Tip from "9 Expert Tips for Writing" on LifeHacK.
[8] Tip from "How to Improve Your Writing Skills: 15 Simple Tips" by Jerry Jenkins.

Therefore, a readjustment was made to identify why *any skill* should be practiced repeatedly.

Kellogg explains that mastery of a skill functions with working memory and develops as

cognitive control is heightened. Neurologically, the neural pathways associated with a specific

skill will become stronger.[9] However, a shortcoming found in the evaluated sources was that

simple role repetition by itself will not improve performance and deliberate practice is required

to master a skill.[10] Moreover, it has been found that "high- and low- frequency intermittent

feedback results in strong improvement of student's early procedural skill acquisition."[11]

Therefore, writing suggestions must be given from an author with a basic understanding of the

skill acquisition required for the reader.

Based on this analysis and understanding, a majority of the evaluated sources are not providing

adequate information for a beginning writer, or any writer, to successfully strengthen their skill.

This deduction prompted the question of why authors would provide writing support at all if it

wasn't created to benefit a writer. The simple answer appears to lie within the audience in

numbers. Using the google search analysis tool, a scale out of 100, 1 being an

unpopular/infrequently searched topic, to 100 being a commonly searched, popular topic the

subjects, "How to Write" and "Writing Tips" were evaluated. The peak popularity in the U.S. for

researching "How to Write" averaged around 75 out of 100 in the past year. "Writing tips"

averaged closer to 50 out of 100 year-round, but peaked at 100 during the springtime, a

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[9] "How practice changes the brain by Australian Academy of Science
[10] "Designing activities with the goal of transferring knowledge" by the American Psychological Association
[11] "The benefit of repetitive skills training and frequency of expert feedback in the early acquisition of procedural skills" by BMC Medical Education

common time for program applications and final projects to appear for students. Regardless of

intentions, a writing help page will accrue a profit for the author or publisher year-round due to

this demand.

Website Profits from Page Interactions

Site views do not typically result in a money incentive on their own, but ad revenue can fund

whoever is running the page. On average, the average Cost Per Click for an in-site ad is $0.73.

However, 3,000,000 site visits typically result in 6,000 ad clicks and $4,380.00 for the ad host.[12]

For some sites, 3,000,000 site visits may seem large, but for a commonly searched topic on the

first page of search suggestions, that number is not out of reach. Profitability may be a main

motive for some author's publishing the observed sources.

Rhetorical Strategies Used to Influence Online Communities

Most importantly, possible rhetorical strategies used by these sources must be evaluated. In

order to appeal to the right audience, in this case, a younger/less advanced writer, strategic

planning is required. Four rhetorical strategies were identified with persuasive text and

consumption experiences: setting expectations, prescribing, claiming expertise, and celebrating

acquiescence.[13] These findings were produced from a study of online community members,

however, the results are easily transferable to this study.

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[12] "How much advertising revenue will my website make?" by Goingclear Interactive
[13] How consumers persuade each other: rhetorical strategies of interpersonal influence in online communities

Setting Expectations

Authors of all the writing tip source pages provided introductory clauses that persuaded the novice user to continue interacting with their page, either through reader or watching. An example of this was found in "17 Writing Tips You Can Use Today [From Experts!]" Upon first glance, you can see the big bolded letters claiming "What you didn't know is that you'll learn a whole lot more than that by reading this post-"such phrasing immediately sets expectations for the reader.

Prescribing

This situation refers to the tone or "peer-pressure" present in the text. This can be seen as personal anecdotes or phrases like "we've all been there" that try to level with the reader while simultaneously asserting a dominance that they are no longer "there." This was common in fifteen of the thirty sources.

Claiming Expertise

Of all rhetorical strategies, claiming expertise was the most predominant. Nearly all articles and videos used jargon in their introduction that suggested an expert was involved in curating the suggested writing tips. The meme sources also seemed to make a joke that only a writer could understand. The use of definitive statements appeals to the reader or viewer's ethos.

Celebrating Acquiescence

Acquiescence in this form means to express gratitude for gaining something useful from the

site. In a moment of need, the easily-accessible sources evaluated offer a bit of guidance to

new writers and in-turn the viewer will build attention for the site and generate ad revenue.

This was a common rhetorical strategy used in all articles and videos because they provided a

starting place for the writers in distress.

Conclusion

The largest takeaway from this study was that obvious rhetorical strategies, like claiming

expertise and setting expectations, were being used to appeal to a novice writer by the writing

media platforms. It is also clear that the writing suggestions, like writing every day, provided are

not sufficient enough to build writing skill. This also means that the author chose to appeal to

an audience that would react positively to suggestions that required less work to generate and

recognized that the target audience would celebrate acquiescence regardless. Regardless of

how intentional these patterns were throughout all thirty sources, it is important as an author

to report information that cannot be easily misinterpreted. Even the sources with seemingly

good intentions are still capturing vulnerable readers and appear to be capitalizing off of being

on the first page of search results.

Out of the thirty sources, only one source was comparable to the expert opinions introduced

earlier in the study. This is unacceptable and higher standards should be set for media pages

that are accessible on the first page of search results. To understand the importance of being

on the first page of results in more detail, a secondary study could test a larger sampling size of sources only found past the first page of search results to see if the author's appeals change.

Overall, the writing tips for writing consistently, writing with intention/planning, writing for an audience, creating a writing environment, and having confidence are all key factors for successful writing. However, the writing process is a meticulous and conscious practice. Writers of all levels deserve support that is structured for their success.

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