

The Power of Words

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Description:

"Let us dare to read, speak, think, and write." This comes from the poster advertising the HBO John Adams mini-series. Words have the power to change our life. Reading and writing are of course fundamental to civilization. It's the first thing we learn in school. It's perhaps the most important thing we ever learn. Yet was there a time when we moved on in our lives and gave up learning *more* about these two basic skills?

In the first workshop, we will discover what gets each of us writing. For me, some appropriate music usually does the trick. I discovered this when I was young. A certain song will help me access the right mood and feelings, open me up; then the words come. Some people need appropriate surroundings. What do you need? What will overcome writer's block for you? We will also work to discover your "voice" and "style."

In my life, bringing this attention to writing has been extremely rewarding. Here are three examples.

Business. Often times one single email will save me an entire week of conversations with a client. All I need to do is take the time, think it through, and be thorough and articulate. It amazes me every time.

(Notice the time=money metaphor in the above paragraph.)

Personal. A couple years ago, my closest brother and I had a disagreement and weren't talking for six months. It was very tough on both of us. I was in NYC on business and one night I had had enough. I wanted so much to call him because I knew he always wanted to be there with me, but I knew he wouldn't answer. So I determined to go back to my room and write him an email to see if I could get him talking. And it worked! Words are power when used with skill. (Another metaphor. See email attached.)

Community. I was introduced to sbQA through a good friend I met with an online ad. I was responding to his ad. There was something about the way it was worded. That friendship has completely changed my life and led me to a really terrific group of friends. Think of all the online ads and responses that are written! In this course we will spend time reading Craigslist postings—that's right, direct from the net—and writing some of our own.

There are many things to discover when we read. In the second workshop we will go through some Craigslist personal ads just for fun. We will also read an op/ed piece from the NY Times. The skills that we bring to the texts we read—newspapers, online bulletins, emails, book reviews—affect

and shape our perception of the world around us. Many of us are careful when reading news to check for the credibility of the source and also to detect any bias in the tone of the piece, but there are an array of features in language that open the door to further agendas, persuasions, and hopes of the author, be they ever so subtle. For example, consider metaphors. Such as the door metaphor I used in the previous sentence. In Metaphors We Live By George Lakoff, a linguist, and Mark Johnson, a philosopher, suggest that metaphors not only make our thoughts more vivid and interesting but that they actually structure our perceptions and understanding.

That's a powerful statement. Thinking of marriage as a "contract agreement," for example, leads to one set of expectations, while thinking of it as "team play," "a negotiated settlement," "Russian roulette," "an indissoluble merger," or "a religious sacrament" will carry different sets of expectations. When a government thinks of its enemies as "turkeys" or "clowns," it does not take them as serious threats; but if they are "pawns" in the hands of the communists, they are taken seriously indeed. Becoming more aware of metaphors and other linguistic devices improves our reading skills and can bring us to a new recognition of how profoundly words, the texts we read, be they news magazines or novels, not only shape our views of life in the present but set up the expectations that determine what life will be for us in the future.

We will also enjoy some poetry just for pleasure. I've selected some pieces to show the difference in form and also to suggest how a poem comes about for those who write poetry or want to write. Finally we will spend some time (notice another time=money metaphor) with *Cannery Row*, a short novel that takes place in a local familiar place to us all and is filled with some of Steinbeck's greatest humor and nature writing.

Week	Topic	Recommended Reading
May 31 st	Writing	
June 7 th	Reading	Various Craigslist Postings, Op/Ed Column: "Faster, Higher, Stronger, No Longer," by Buzz Bissinger, "Sonnet 18" by Shakespeare, 3 Poems from "100 Love Poems" by Pablo Neruda, "birth," by Bukowski, Steinbeck's <i>Cannery Row</i> *

*I will bring Craigslist ads to the seminar. Attachments include the rest of the reading mat'l

except the very short novel by Steinbeck, which is pretty cheap at Borders. If you don't have time to read all the way through, don't sweat it.