

WRITING CONTINUUM

Functional

The writing may be just a string of words with:

- no paragraphs
- no capitals
- no punctuation
- and every third word misspelled.

Still, as long as the IDEAS and CONTENT are ORGANIZED in such a way that the meaning of the piece can become clear to the reader, the writing is *functional*.

Getting the meaning takes work on the part of the reader, work which the reader may be reluctant to do. Functional writers may lose their audience before they can get their ideas across.

Functional writers are able to succeed in the business world as long as they make enough money to hire someone else to do the spelling and grammar for them. They may dictate every memo and thus avoid the physical tasks of writing.

Students who are functional writers should develop their skills at oral writing. They should prewrite orally, talking out their ideas either privately or to an audience. They should recite their rough draft into a tape recorder. Then they can play back a little at a time and work on making the piece competent.

Competent

The writing is functional. In addition, standard rules are followed for:

- paragraphing
- sentence structure
- capitals
- punctuation
- spelling
- word usage
- subject/verb agreement.

If IDEAS and CONTENT are ORGANIZED in such a way that the meaning of the piece is clear to the reader, and if MECHANICS are correctly used to make the piece *easier* for the reader to understand, then the writing is *competent*.

(Note that none of those standardized rules were invented to make it easier for the writer. They were all invented to make it easier for the reader. All the work of competent writing is to benefit the audience.)

The more competent the writing, the less work the reader has to do to comprehend the meaning of the piece. Competent writers are less likely to lose their audience due to confusion or frustration. Competence is sufficient for a captive audience, but uncompelled readers may not choose to read merely competent writing if the piece is too pedantic or pedestrian.

Successful adults demonstrate a wide range of competence levels, from barely competent to very. Published work—from job applications, cover letters, or resumes, to business letters or Christmas letters, to memos, pamphlets, or brochures, to articles, reports, or books—should all demonstrate the highest level of competence the writer is able to muster.

Students need to be taught the technical skills of writing, and they need to learn to apply those skills to their own written pieces. Students developing competence will benefit from:

- targeted lessons on specific issues
- participating in peer editing
- having specific errors identified on written work
- and receiving written and oral feedback about repeated patterns of errors.

They need to rewrite their piece to correct errors before final publication.

Proficient

The writing is functional and competent. In addition, the piece sings. It has flair. It has *style*. The writing has:

- varied sentence length
- varied sentence type
- varied sentence openings
- rich, precise, evocative vocabulary
- rich, precise, evocative imagery
- alliteration, personification, simile, metaphor
- a theme (something the writer wants the audience to know, understand, believe, or feel)
- a moving, gripping, compelling tale to tell (fiction or nonfiction)

If IDEAS and CONTENT are ORGANIZED in such a way that the meaning of the piece is clear to the reader, and if MECHANICS are correctly used, and if the piece has varied SENTENCE STRUCTURE, has excellent WORD CHOICE, and is permeated with the author's passions and VOICE, then the writing is *proficient*.

Proficient writing draws the reader in. While functional writing makes it possible for the reader to dredge out the meaning, and competent writing makes the task of reading easier for the reader, proficient writing makes the reader *want* to read.

As adults, we mainly encounter proficient writing in literature, in creative writing, in short stories, novels, plays, the occasional film or television show. Sometimes we see proficiency in journalism. We encounter it less often in textbooks.

Students need to be exposed to the artistic components of proficient writing. They benefit from comparing the writing styles used in different short stories, examining, for example, each author's use of strong verbs or simile and metaphor. After a piece is edited for competence, they may be required to add certain stylistic devices before the final rewrite for publication:

- prepositional phrase opening
- participial phrase opening
- adverb opening
- adverb clause opening
- adjective opening
- an appositive
- strong verbs

Style should be a minor part of grading, though. Much of what makes for truly proficient writing comes with age and experience.