WRITING CORRECTLY IS NOT NECESSARILY WRITING WELL

PHILIP VASSALLO*

DURING A RECENT discussion with a student about her assigned report, I indicated two serious logical flaws: unequal comparison and hasty generalization. Both undermined the validity of her report, which argued for increased training for New York City Transit train operators, especially experienced ones. After reading my assessment of her analysis she responded, "Yeah, that's the technical stuff. But what about my writing?"

"I am talking about your writing."

"I mean my writing. The sentences, words, grammar, punctuation."

"Your writing reflects your thinking." I answered, "and your thinking is your writing."

* Philip Vassallo holds a doctorate in educational theory and provides communication consulting services to corporate, government, nonprofit, and academic organizations. His book on business and technical writing, The Art of On-the-Job Writing (2002), is available from the International Society for General Semantics.
“I’m expressing my opinion,” she retorted. “I just want to know how well I’m expressing it.”

Her response made me remember one of my high school English teachers, who graded student essay assignments by deducting points for errors in grammar, diction, and punctuation, with far less regard for content. Thus, a well-reasoned paper that showed one error in punctuation — but one error committed 11 times — would receive no better than an 89 percent, and an ineffectual essay that showed no grammatical errors had a chance at a 100 percent score.

This reasoning never made sense to me. To illustrate why, imagine standing in Times Square, New York City, and receiving directions for walking to the United Nations from two strangers. The first, Eve, speaks limited English, and the second, Bob, speaks English proficiently. Their directions appear below.

**Eve’s Directions**


**Bob’s Directions**

I’d be happy to get you there. Which way would you like to go? The scenic route? The direct route? You could go north then east, or east then north. It’s entirely up to you because this is a free country. Isn’t it wonderful to have options? Some of those countries in the UN don’t offer their citizens such options, as you well know. I am sure you know what I mean. You do, don’t you? By the way, that’s a nice outfit you’re wearing. You have excellent taste. If you don’t mind my asking, where did you buy it? I remember purchasing something similar as a gift for a dear friend. I used a store coupon and got a great bargain. Where did you say you were going?

With her limited English, Eve achieves her objective: to get you to the UN. On the other hand, Bob, with his strong command of language, finds numerous ways of elegantly telling you nothing you need to know.

The validity and usefulness of our ideas matter far more than their grammatical correctness. I do not mean to minimize the importance of attending to proper English; however, the relevance of the idea comes first and the fluency second. With this thought in mind, let’s return to the writer proposing increased training for New York City Transit train operators, and look at her two rhetorical flaws.
First Flaw: Unequal Comparison

To prove her point that New York City Transit train operators had an excessive number of accidents, the writer argued that they caused more than double the number of accidents caused by Washington DC train operators. She did not, however, point out that New York has roughly 6 times as many train lines, 6 times as many stations, 7 times as many track miles, and 11 times as many riders, as highlighted in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>New York</th>
<th>Washington</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Lines</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Stations</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miles of Tracks</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Weekday Ridership</td>
<td>6,976,355</td>
<td>613,900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparing these two subway systems is like comparing the spending power of two people, one of whom has six to seven times the disposable income of the other, or staging a boxing match between a heavyweight champion (over 190 pounds) and a light-flyweight champion (under 108 pounds) in the same ring. The comparisons may be interesting, but not a valid measure of the wealthier person’s spending ability or the heavier fighter’s boxing superiority. If anything, her comparison may prove that New York City subways are relatively safer than those of Washington DC.

Second Flaw: Hasty Generalization

The author’s second rhetorical flaw appeared in the concluding section of her report. She wrote:

Interestingly, experienced train operators had more accidents than train operators with one year of experience or less.

This point, she asserted, was sufficient cause to roll out an intensive training program for experienced train operators. To test the weakness of this unsubstantiated proposition, I asked a group of adult students from another course what, other than the need for training, could account for the problem
— assuming the tabulations were accurate. In a list they created, they noted that experienced train operators:

1. far outnumber inexperienced ones, which means they could be expected to have a higher number of accidents overall;
2. may be assigned to more accident-prone lines, increasing the likelihood of accidents;
3. may be assigned to more antiquated or faulty trains, increasing the possibility of mechanical, not human, error;
4. may work longer hours, which contributes to fatigue and not a lax attitude;
5. may work a particular shift when accident rates are highest because of a lack of signaling or support personnel, or other circumstances beyond their control;
6. may suffer from greater family stresses, which may contribute to accidents;
7. may have a greater incidence of substance abuse — this is an employee assistance issue, not a training issue;
8. may be assigned to new lines, creating a learning curve during which accidents are more likely;
9. fitting a particular group (e.g., operators with 1 to 5 years experience) may be the cause of most accidents, suggesting that not all groups of experienced operators are accident-prone;
10. caused relatively minor accidents, involving limited or no physical or property damage, compared to those caused by new train operators;
11. were not responsible for many accidents that may have been caused by passengers.

Of course, if the train operators simply lost interest in their work or found it difficult to maneuver newer trains that are controlled by advanced technology, then they would be candidates for training. But the writer did not discuss these possibilities.
Writing It Right

Unquestionably, good writing calls for far more than a good command of standard language rules. For instance, causal analysis requires far more reasoning than stating a contributing cause of an occurrence. It demands the ability to distinguish among the contributing, necessary, and sufficient causes. The contributing cause helps make an event possible, but it alone cannot make the event happen. The necessary cause must be present to make an event occur, but it cannot by itself cause the event. A sufficient cause can by itself cause an event to occur. A possible scenario of these three causes appears in the example below.

Effect: In a nation besieged by terrorism, a suicide bomber walks into a restaurant and detonates a bomb that was supplied to his organization by a rogue nation.

Contributing Cause: Security was nonexistent at the restaurant.

Necessary Cause: The rogue nation made the bomb available to the terrorist's organization.

Sufficient Cause: The terrorist organization had at its disposal someone willing to kill himself.

The besieged nation's consideration of all three causes is imperative. All the currently available security in its own country could not prevent the necessary cause, and the complete destruction of the rogue nation would not prevent the sufficient cause. The problem, then, may be minimized — but not eliminated — by civilian or police vigilance and military strikes; therefore, the government needs to look in many places if it wants to solve the problem.

Regardless of the level of panache with which we express ourselves, our readers will see our flawed thinking if we do not think things through. Answering the questions that our ideas raise is even more important than our ability to follow the conventions of language.