

**For 2007, The 15th Annual Omer C. Stewart Memorial Award:
Three Rules of Straight Talk¹**

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Abstract

Talk is an important category of culture in general and of our culture of anthropology in particular. By sharing three parting participant-observations as the outgoing editor in chief of The Applied Anthropologist, I offer practices about written talk to bear in mind. My remarks here are pertinent to my grateful acceptance of the Fifteenth Annual Omer Call Stewart Memorial Award of the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology presented to me talk-wise by fellow anthropologists Lenora Bohren and Peter Van Arsdale. I talked about the need for clear and simple talk, not jargon, however useful as specialized vocabulary jargon might be. That talk took place on the Auraria Campus shared by the University of Colorado at Denver, the Metropolitan State College of Denver, and the Community College of Denver on April 28, 2007, at the twenty-seventh annual meeting of High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology.

Introduction

As the third and sixth editor of this journal, I believe in *talk stories*. I believe in aiming to publish in each instance a talk story, meaning one about which “people can’t stop talking ...because it has so many interesting dimensions” (Temple 2008:2). However on reflection, perhaps we have published few talk stories, and perhaps even the term *few* is too high in quantity. Nevertheless, I submit that Robert Hackenberg’s last paper “Applied and Practicing Anthropology: The Fifth Sub-discipline at the University of Colorado at Boulder” (Hackenberg 2007:209-216) and Deward Walker’s *In Memoriam* in honor of Robert Hackenberg (1928-2007) (Walker 2007:207-208) fit this category. Both contribute to the history and content of anthropology by providing definite examples of concepts and applications. Above all, they are clear and unburdened by jargon. Clarity, devoid of jargon, should be our goal.

Our multi-review treatment of the book *On Bullshit* by Princeton philosophy professor emeritus Harry Frankfurt (Frankfurt 2005; Van Horn 2006:82-83; Magee 2006:84-85; Scott 2006:86-87) also shows the importance of writing clearly and straightforwardly. It is interesting to note that one of the characteristics of *bullshit*, and of *cowshit*, too, for that matter, is employing more

words than needed to accurately express ideas (Frankfurt 2005:6).

What do these examples have in common? They (1) deal with facts in description and analysis; they (2) try to avoid putting words and phrases in unnecessary quotation marks for emphasis, and they (3) embrace, with regard to the word count, the *less-is-more* philosophy of writing. These findings, while perhaps mundane, are what I have internalized as editor in chief and what I leave with you as a farewell commentary in this issue, my last as editor. If mundane, they nonetheless are seemingly all too rare.

Be Accurate

Recently in the mail I received a booklet with a compact disc and written synopses of a 60-second lecture series, the location of which is outside on Locust Walk on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia:

Each semester since 2003, a handful of School of Arts and Sciences faculty have taken on the unusual challenge of delivering a minute-long presentation [ranging from the “Nature of Nature” by Rebecca Bushnell, dean and professor of English to “Language Change in Philadelphia” by William Labov, professor of linguistics] to students gathered on Locust Walk. Mark Twain [Samuel Lang-

horne Clemens, 1835-1910] summed up the paradox of this challenge when he famously noted, "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead." As Twain recognized, it's not easy for a writer – or a Penn professor – to distill a thought into an eloquent and brief message (School of Arts and Sciences, University of Pennsylvania 2008).

The idea is intriguing and the practice well taken. But to only attribute the no-time-to-write-a-short-letter comment to Mark Twain is to miss the fact that the French scientist and theologian Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) said it earlier in a 1657 letter:

I have made this letter longer than usual because I lack the time to make it short (*The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* 1966:374).

By definition, facts are true, or they would not be facts. Did Mark Twain independently make a no-time-to-write-a-short-letter comment? Did he borrow it from Blaise Pascal? Did he say it at all? *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (1966:550) makes no mention of it, if he did, in its section on Mark Twain. And the University of Pennsylvania booklet above contains no citation concerning its attribution to Mark Twain. We need more information, more facts. As the Penn paragraph stands, it is incomplete and hints at inaccuracy, if not smacks of it. Thus, the first rule I leave with you is to be accurate.

Avoid the Abusive Use of Quotation Marks

Some might say that it is stylistically fine to sprinkle freely one's prose with quotation marks. Confusion then reigns because the editor does not absolutely know if the author intends a double meaning, even a contrary one, or is just emphasizing a precept. The reader would not know for certain either.

As a rule, quotation marks should not be used for emphasis. Rather, it is preferable to use italic font for emphasis. As editor in chief, I have tried to follow this practice. Thus, the second rule I leave with you is to use quotation marks only when pointing to a double meaning. That applies, of course, to situations when not actu-

ally signifying a quote with an attributed citation, which do take quotation marks.

In this regard, I am in complete agreement with Bethany Keeley, a communications graduate student specializing in rhetoric at the University of Georgia in Athens (Noveck 2007:31). She rightfully says that if one employs quotation marks unnecessarily, one is in danger of calling the *meaning* of a word or phrase into question, leading to the confusion of ambiguity. Online, she offers examples and accepts observations by e-mail. See <http://www.quotation-marks.blogspot.com>, and bethanykeeley@gmail.com respectively. A reported example:

There's the security guard [station] at a [highway] rest area in Mississippi [with] a "SECURITY GUARD" sign beneath...that [with quotation marks] unwittingly casts doubt on the whole enterprise (Noveck 2007:31).

Less Is More

Are too many words often used? Do too many words obscure meaning? Yes, they are, and they do. As noted above, Harry Frankfurt certainly thinks so. The anthropologist Carleton Coon (1904-1981) would seem to think so, too:

In the academic world...people will express much more awe and admiration for something complicated which they do not quite understand than for something simple and clear (Coon 1980:12).

That is unfortunate because too many words culminate in *complications* in Coon's terms (1980). Thus, the third rule I leave with you is to write sparsely and succinctly. Keep poetry in mind for its economy of precision and dare to write clearly. And yes, in Carleton Coon's terms, do not be afraid to be understood *simply and clearly* by your colleagues despite their possible awe for something more complicated. Be bold and follow the adage of President Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826):

The most valuable of all talents is never using two words when one will do (Jefferson 2003:17). ○

Notes

1. Lawrence F. Van Horn's remarks here stem from his acceptance of the Fifteenth Annual Omer C. Stewart Memorial Award of the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology in Denver, Colorado on April 28, 2007.

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