

The Challenge of Writing in a Digital Age

*A speech by John August at Drake University
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It's an honor--a pleasure--to be back on campus, standing on this stage where just a couple of weeks ago, actual presidential candidates were trying to seem electable.

I feel I should stress: I have absolutely no political ambitions. But I do have a bit of a platform tonight, a list of observations about the things I see looming on the horizon, and what's to be done about it. I'm not going to ask for your vote, but I am going to ask for your attention. And most importantly, I'm going to ask you to turn off that part of your brain that automatically goes, "Yeah, well, but that doesn't apply to me."

(Actually, you don't have to turn that part of your brain off. Just put it on vibrate. Let your objections go to voicemail.)

What I'm going to try to convince you tonight is that writing matters. That seems like a pretty easy sell at a university. After all, most of you are students. You're getting grades. Of course writing matters.

But I'm going to be a little more ambitious tonight. I'm not talking about just academic writing. I'm talking about all writing. I'm talking about email. Memos. Your blog. I'm talking about what you wrote on your friend's Facebook wall. All that writing you don't think you're getting graded on--well, you are.

Whether you want to or not, you're being judged on it. And you're being judged differently because of the era you're living in.

So if I do my job right tonight, I'm going to send you out of here a little bit rattled, a little bit paranoid, but hopefully better prepared.

But first, I need to give some context. Because the people who are watching this on public television, or who are reading this on my website next week--I'm posting this on my website next week, so you can stop taking notes--those folks probably don't know Drake the way you and I do. I think it's only fair to catch them up.

Where we are tonight, Drake, is a mid-size private university in Des Moines, Iowa. The campus itself is pretty small, and after a few years, you get to know every inch of it. Even now, I could probably walk it blindfolded. In fact, I could walk it blindfolded and backwards, because for three years my job was as a student ambassador, showing prospective students and their parents around campus.

What you realize after doing that for a while is that you're really not showing the buildings. You could give them a map or a guidebook for that. What you're doing as a tour guide is providing a narrative. On a cold Saturday morning in February, when everyone is asleep or hungover, you're pointing at the Painted Street in front of Jewett. You're not talking about the artistic merits of the Theta Chi house, or the inevitably insipid theme from last year. You're talking about the experience of Relays: the emotion, the excitement, the Rites of Spring bacchanal. (Actually, you underplay the drinking.)

You're pointing at this street, a thing--a noun--but you're referring to an activity--a verb. And honestly, that's how we build our inner geography.

So if everyone right now were to take a mental walking tour of campus, you'd realize that your memories aren't really of the people, places and things, but rather what you did there. The dining hall is for eating. The dorms are for sleeping, and studying, and learning how to share a tiny space with a person you kind of got along with at the start of the semester.

Most of the buildings are for academics. Which means taking notes, taking tests, and ultimately, writing.

Writing is the fundamental product of a university education. If you have to show your parents what you did this semester, you're probably going to pull out your papers. Your essay exams. Your stories for journalism class. Writing is how we demonstrate that we understand something.

And yet writing--the activity, the verb--is not the same thing as it was when I attended Drake. And that's what I want to talk to you about tonight: how it's changed, and what it means.

I showed up at Drake with a Macintosh SE computer. It was pretty close to the top of the line. It had a 20 megabyte hard drive. Yes, I said "megabyte." Its hard drive was smaller than a short YouTube video, which would have looked terrible anyway on its black-and-white screen. I also brought with me an ImageWriter printer. Dot-matrix. It could print a page a minute on "Faster."

I'm not boasting about my technology so you'll have envy. But in terms of stringing sentences together, it was almost identical to the computers we use today. It had Microsoft Word. It had fonts. You could print.

In terms of writing, what really changed wasn't the computer, but what it was connected to. The internet as we understand it didn't exist in 1988. There weren't blogs, or websites, or Wikipedia. "Google" was still one followed by 100 zeroes. And if you knew that, you were a serious nerd.

I'm breaking absolutely no new ground with the observation that the way we get information has changed vastly over the last 20 years. But what I want to talk about tonight is how the culture of information has changed writing--not just the words, but rather the activity.

I have a vested interest--I make my living as a writer. But I'd argue that most of us in this room make our living as writers. And as more aspects of our lives are conducted online, how we present ourselves in writing will only get more important.

I plan to fill this talk with a lot of verbs, because ultimately this is a call to action.

There are four qualities I want to focus on tonight, things I feel have fundamentally changed when we talk about writing in the digital age. And yes, if you're taking notes because you're going to get tested, these are probably the four things you'll want to write down. They are...

- Authority
- Immediacy
- Permanence
- Response

And here's where I apologize, because it's not a good acronym. I tried. Sorry. Let me take those one at a time.

Authority

When I was assigned a research paper, my first stop was the library, where I'd use the card catalog--a card. catalog.--to try to find a book about the topic. If it was something more recent, I'd use the green periodicals guide, and pray that it would lead to a magazine the library actually stocked. After sometimes hours of digging, I'd find something. And I'd use it. Not once do I recall retrieving a book from deep in the stacks and wondering, "Gee, does this author really know what he's talking about?"

The guy got a book published. I found it. It was really hard. How can I not use it?

Of course, in the digital age, the searching is easy. On almost any topic, you're immediately overwhelmed with information. What you're trying to

figure out is which source is accurate. And to do that, you look for authority.

I'm using "authority" as sort of the confluence of expertise and reputation. Reputation only comes with time. It's basically the degree to which people feel they can trust you to be giving your honest opinion, and to be consistent from one day to the next.

For example, I have a lot of authority on the topic of screenwriting. That's not just based on my credits. I run a website called johnaugust.com, which bills itself as, "a ton of useful information about screenwriting." Someone can look at the 500 other articles I've written about screenwriting and see that yup, he's consistent.

There have always been experts. *But writing in a digital age allows for extremely specialized authorities.*

In fact, everyone in this room is a potential authority on some subject: Northern Iowa high school basketball. The video oeuvre of Rhianna. You become one by writing about it.

But why would you want to be an authority? Because unlike expertise, authority is somewhat transferable. It's a commodity. And I'd argue that in an information age, it's one of the most valuable commodities out there.

If I link to a story, I'm lending credibility to it, and its author. Likewise, if a well-regarded site links to me, I benefit not only from the influx of new readers, but also a certain "halo effect." That's largely how Google works, but here I'm talking about a kind of emotional, qualitative process. You want street-cred, and only others can give it to you.

The second quality that's so different in a digital age is...

Immediacy

Growing up, my brother and I had a paper route. Every day after school, the Boulder Daily Camera would drop off a big stack of newspapers, which

we would fold and deliver. Every night at dinner, my family would watch the Nightly News with Tom Brokaw.

I grew up assuming that news was something that happened once a day. That seems incredibly naive now, in the era of CNN, and CNN.com. We've gotten used to the idea that news is happening continuously: it's a stream you can jump into and out of. Life is that moving ticker that's scrolling along the bottom.

Of course, I'm not the first to point out that this kind of news cycle is really only good for fast-breaking stories. I live in Los Angeles, which either invented or perfected the freeway chase: hours of continuous coverage as some idiot is trying to futilely escape the law and news helicopters. And I'll admit it. I watch. It's entertaining, and exciting, and immediate. You don't know how it's going to end.

Well, you do, but you don't know if the tires are going to blow out, or if he's finally going to turn down a one-way street.

But if you notice, that freeway chase that got hours of attention, gets basically no mention in the next day's paper. It's transient. It's only news while it's happening: which begs the question, was it ever really news?

And I should stress, by immediacy, I'm not just talking about the news, or a sense of timeliness. There's also immediacy in the emotional sense. A sense of intimacy. A false intimacy, an informality. If you look at writing over the last decade, it's become much more casual. Not just grammatically, with its sloppy punctuation and really badly thought out emoticons, but tonally. We write everything as if we're writing to our very best friends, whether it's appropriate or not.

Permanence

A few months ago, I was part of a group of screenwriters who made a deal at 20th Century Fox that gave us a lot more control over the projects we wrote for the studio. It was a pretty complicated deal, and a

groundbreaking one. When it was done, both the writers and Fox wanted to announce it in a way that made it clear just what had been accomplished.

The film and television industry is essentially a small town. It's not quite Whatcheer, Iowa, but it's small. And it has two small-town newspapers, which we call the trades: Variety and The Hollywood Reporter. Variety is famous for having this impenetrable shorthand. Movies don't have premieres; they "preem." Box office isn't good; it's "boffo." The headline for a story about how people who live in rural areas don't often support movies set in rural areas was "Hix Nix Stix Pix."

The Hollywood Reporter, on the other hand, is written in English.

So, when you have something important to announce, you go to exactly one of the trades and say, hey: We're going to tell you all about this thing. That other crappy paper? We're not even going to tell them. But in exchange for doing that, we want really good placement. We want front page, above the fold.

The writers' deal was clearly worth getting above the fold, so we decided to go to Variety. The executives and the writers who negotiated the deal spoke to the reporter, Michael Fleming, at about two in the afternoon. By around four, emails started going around, saying, "Hey look! The story is online." So you read it, and you realized that they didn't get your quote in there. But fine.

But then something strange happened. For the next two hours, as you kept clicking back, the story kept changing. Suddenly, my quote was there. Now it was near the start of the story. Now it was near the end. Even the slant of the story was shifting: sometimes, it was more about the writers, other times, it was more about Fox.

Ultimately, the next morning, the print version of Variety came out, and there was a final version. But for a few hours that afternoon, it was both

published and unpublished. It was like Schrödinger's cat, existing in a state of quantum uncertainty.

And that's the quality that I'm trying to describe: Permanence. Or in this case, impermanence. Transience.

This didn't happen in a pre-digital age. Back then, if you really needed to change a story, you could shout "Stop the presses!" But there were huge costs to doing that. In a digital age, those costs are essentially zero. Particularly in a culture that values immediacy, it changes the dynamic between writer and reader. If I'm sending you to read a story online, I can't be certain you'll read the same thing I read.

This isn't just a concern for journalism. Imagine if corporate annual reports could be revised that transparently. That's dangerous. Illegal. And inevitable.

Response

Writing used to flow in one direction. I wrote, you read. Sometimes, if you were incredibly motivated, you might respond: a letter to the editor, or a letter directly to the author. But the initial writing and the response weren't linked together.

In a digital age, they are. At the bottom of a blog post, you can add comments, and they will travel with the original story forever. Even newspapers are adding comment sections directly to their articles online. If you're an author, ordinary readers will review your books on Amazon.

Isn't this good? Isn't this democracy and freedom of speech--the ability to comment and disagree. Yes, certainly.

And as I was preparing my talk tonight, I actually posted a rough outline up on my website, inviting readers to respond and redirect. That "hive mind" helped me winnow my initial seven observations down to four, which is how we can hope to get out of here at a reasonable hour.

But this culture of being able to respond to anything is a bit dangerous, too. These responses are writing, and they're subject to the same new challenges as the original writing:

Authority - How do you know if this responder knows what he's talking about? What if he's anonymous?

Immediacy - You're more rewarded for being the first person to respond to something, rather than the most eloquent or thoughtful.

Permanence - These comments we're typing at 3 a.m. are forever linked to the original article. They become part of the original article. We have no control over them.

Response to the response - We've all been in forums and threads where the original topic is long gone. It's now just these disembodied voices shouting at each other. If you're the author of the original piece, how do you get control back? Are you even allowed to? Who owns the discussion?

So these are the four qualities I want to talk about: Authority, Immediacy, Permanence, and Response.

Now, because I'm standing on a stage that's been home to politicians, I'm going to pull a politician trick and recycle an old anecdote--but use it to reach completely different conclusions.

By the way, if you're forced to watch a bunch of campaign speeches, pay attention to this--it's fascinating. The exact same story about someone's brother having cancer can miraculously transform into a statement on health care, religion, or funding for NASA. ("Because, when I look into those stars, I see my brother's hope and ambition and know that he'd want us to be traveling among them...")

So, my recycled anecdote doesn't have anything to do with cancer. But it does have a lot to do with writing in a digital age.

On March 21, 2004, at about nine in the morning, I got an email from my friend James, saying, "Hey, congrats on the great review of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory on Ain't It Cool News!"

This was troubling for a couple of reasons.

First off, the movie hadn't been shot yet. We weren't even in production. So the review was really a review of the script. Studios and filmmakers really, really don't like it when scripts leak out and get reviewed on the internet, because it starts this cycle of conjecture and fuss about things that may or may not ever be shot. So I knew that no matter what, I was going to get panicked phone calls from Warner Bros.

But first, I had to read what was on Ain't It Cool News. I'm assuming most of you know what Ain't It Cool News is. It's that web site run by the fat guy with red hair where they talk about upcoming movies and how everyone sucks. And at the end of every article, readers write in their comments, which are generally incomprehensible ramblings about Hulk Hogan. That's Ain't It Cool News.

So I clicked over there. And started reading. I'm going to sort of excerpt it here, because it's really long. And it wasn't written by one of the regular guys. It came from someone calling himself Michael Marker.

Dear All, I m no inside source, just a lucky kid with a parent in the business. So with half-permission from Dad, a deep love for Roald Dahl, and a reinforced respect for John August, I m writing my thoughts on his adaptation of Dahl s Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

So at this point, one paragraph in, I'm certainly nervous. But "reinforced respect" sounds good, so who knows?

First let me say that there will be spoilers: The script is made of them. Too many details are twisted in with the plot and themes like the red in a candy cane -- enriching and vital.

Okay, a little flowery. But still.

As with P.J. Hogan's adaptation of Peter Pan, August keeps a firm focus on Dahl's text and subtexts, not only highlighting key pieces of the story and characters, but reiterating Dahl's vision with a brash inventiveness.

Cool. I rock.

August made the choice early on in the re-construction of this story to reset the locale from a Britishy, Oliver Twistian, Sixties game-show world into an amalgam of Hershey, PA and Detroit/Pittsburgh/Chicago/Suburbia. With Walgreen's-esquestores selling Wonka Bars, and Charlie's mom working overtime at the tennis shoe factory, August may be in critical danger of arrogantly over-Americanizing for shock value. I'm sure Mr. Dahl would be proud.

And here's where I get perplexed. "Perplexed" is probably the wrong word, because that implies an intellectual reaction, when what I actually feel is physical. It's the kind of nausea you get when you're falling. Because here's the thing: I didn't set it in Hershey, PA. Charlie's mom doesn't work at a tennis shoe factory. At all. But I keep reading.

Wonka's Entrance: The classic cane fall of course. Until an old man in the crowd kills the fun. "Imposter" he screams. ... The man produces a remote and freezes Wonka with a click. The man rips off his face and VIOLA!

It actually says, "Viola!" But I'm sure the writer meant "Voila!"

It was Wonka all along. He rolls the putty face into a ball and bites off a piece like jerky. He clicks the remote and robot-Wonka bows.

This is not even remotely what happens in my script. Our version has a parody-slash-homage to “It’s a Small World” in which the little puppets catch on fire and melt. So I have to stop and think, “What the hell am I reading?” Did this guy get a copy of some other, older Charlie script without a writer’s name on it and just assume that it was mine? Or is he completely bullshitting? Either way, that nausea is becoming actual shaking.

But I keep reading:

A small touch: The doors in the Bucket house and the Chocolate Factory never close entirely. In the house it is a human habit, in the factory it is a mechanical hiss halting all doors at 99% closure.

I have no idea what this is. I have no idea what it even means.

Though modest with most visual descriptions, August has every sentence read like candy: “Show your hands and arms child, I want no secrets in this house”, “A distant dog barks, a different dog, dark, seductive”.

Hey, if I can write a seductive dog, I am a damn good writer.

And then we get to the Oompa Loompas.

Wonka explains their history in a tone as eerie as Thomas Jefferson’s letter to Tom Hart, a fellow slave owner, in 1806, “The negro has been transplanted from the Deadly Jungle of Tribal Conflict and the demons of Disease and Famine, but has done so against his will. Some would say this is the white man’s benevolence. I say it is the way of things.”

Holy crap. Thomas Jefferson? White man’s benevolence? For the record, this is a movie about a Golden Ticket and magical chocolate factory. I think we’re trying to avoid the larger socio-political ramifications of Western imperialism. The article is signed, “A loving work of fiction by Michael Marker.”

This guy is basically saying that he made up the whole thing, but here it is online, presented as if it's true. This "review" is overwhelmingly positive, but also overwhelmingly wrong.

So what do I do?

Fortunately, I know exactly one person at Ain't It Cool News. His name is Jeremy, but he goes by the handle "Mr. Beaks." I'd had lunch with him a couple of weeks earlier to talk about Big Fish and Tarzan. So I email him, and say, hey, that review of the Charlie script is bullshit.

Actually, I don't say that. I say, "That guy is bullshitting you." It's not that I'm wronged, no. It's that that guy, Michael Marker, is besmirching the good name of Ain't It Cool News by trying to pass off his deluded ramblings as truth. How dare he!

And it works. Mr. Beaks talks to Harry, and Harry posts a new article saying that the review was bogus. The end. Sort of.

Now, when I initially wrote about this incident, it was part of a discussion on professionalism. Sites like Ain't It Cool News will often fall back on the defense of, "Hey, we're not professional journalists! You can't hold us to those standards."

But as I was preparing for my speech tonight, what struck me was that this situation embodied these four frustrating qualities of the digital age. So let's review them:

Authority

You don't go to Harry Knowles for information about installing storm windows or landing a 747. You go to him for crazy ramblings about upcoming movies that appeal to geeky fanboys. It's a narrow subject matter, but in that subject matter, Harry is an authority.

Now, in a pre-digital age, he might have had those same opinions, but he could have only shared them with his few buddies in Austin. Thanks to the Ain't It Cool News, he can reach the world.

If this exactly fake review had appeared on someone's Blogger account, it wouldn't have had nearly the same impact. It was trading on the authority of Harry's name and Ain't It Cool News. Remember when I said authority was a commodity? That's what I was talking about.

You can even use that authority in areas that are a little out of your domain.

For instance, Harry recently had a long post about his decision to buy an HD-DVD player rather than a Blu-ray. That might seem like a random thing to blog about, except the two sides competing are spending hundreds of millions of dollars, each trying to come out on top. I don't know whether Harry was paid money to pick one over the other. But it would have been a smart idea. He's exactly the kind of authority they want: passionate, vocal, and prone to hyperbole.

Immediacy

I don't know the exact turnaround time at Ain't It Cool News, but I'd guess the email from "Michael Marker" was in Harry's in-box just a few hours before he posted it. Because if it had been sitting there any longer, there's a very good chance it would have shown up at one of the two or three other sites like it.

Actually, I know that AICN can get a story up on the site quickly. After the first test screening of Charlie and Chocolate Factory in Chicago, I returned to my hotel room to find that a review was already up on the site--less than two hours later.

Permanence

After I complained, there was a follow-up article saying, “Oops.” Actually, it wasn’t even oops. There wasn’t an apology, or an admission of fault. There was just a story to say, “Hey, ignore that other article.”

But here’s the thing: that other article, the fake review, it still exists. They never took it down. They never corrected it.

And to be fair, when printed newspapers issue corrections, they don’t go through the archives with white-out to fix their mistakes. But in the digital age, there’s essentially no difference between the archives and the front page. Everything is live, and searchable, at once.

Response

Where AICN has been so successful is in sponsoring a sense of community. Empowering a sense of ownership among movie fanboys. And quite smartly, they do that not through messageboards or forums, but in the “Talkback” sections of each article. So in the case of the fake review of Charlie, you had dozens of responses, pro and con and completely off-topic. What’s interesting is that quite a few posters yelled “Plant!” meaning they thought the positive review was the result of studio manipulation.

So, here’s the Call to Action part of the evening.

I’ve listed these challenges facing writers in the digital age, but what are we supposed to do with them?

Let’s start with Authority. The cliché thing for me to say is to question authority. Yes, it’s a cliché because it’s true--you need to always be looking at the source of a message to figure out whether it’s worth considering. Whether something was difficult to find--like that book in the

library in 1988--or incredibly easy--like an article on Wikipedia, you need to be rigorous.

But I want to move beyond Questioning Authority to set a more ambitious goal for you: *Become an Authority*. I'm not exaggerating to say that in this audience, everyone one of you is a potential authority on some topic, no matter how esoteric. You become an expert by researching. You become an authority by writing. Writing consistently; writing fairly; and writing for an audience that is eager to hear about it. The internet has billions of readers. What it needs are writers who write with authority.

Next, let's deal with immediacy.

We're never going to slow down culture. The news cycle is only going to continue to accelerate. I can assure you that the US Weekly's of the world already have a story banked for when Britney Spears inevitably attempts suicide. If she succeeds, the headline will be "Who's to blame?" If not, the headline will be, "Why can't she do anything right?"

So if you can't stop the madness, what can you do? You can step out of it. You can refuse to participate. Turn off CNN. Stop reading the Drudge Report. Stop trying to "keep up with current events," because they're irrelevant. I know it seems like I'm urging you to be less informed, which is heretical for a journalism major. I'm actually telling you to go deeper.

The only things you should follow closely are those things you find fascinating. Those things you might just be an authority on.

That's the only way out of the trap of immediacy. Stop reading, and start writing. Be the guy who provides context, criticism, reflection. Organize your own thoughts, and help organize them for others.

Permanence

The challenge with the digital age is that the things you wish would go away linger forever, while the things you really wish you could find are always stuck behind a broken link.

But if you're proactive, you can get through it. So here's my advice: *Treat the internet as your resume.*

If there's stuff you don't want out there, delete what you can. Provide context for things you can't. More importantly, make sure the things you do want to represent you are easy to find. Register a site in your own name, and make it a showcase of your best work. Keep your Facebook profile professional. It doesn't have to be acceptable to your grandmother, but it should accurately reflect how you'd like the world to see you.

Response

One of the best, and one of the worst things about today's media is that everyone's welcome to comment. You comment in blog posts, you comment on forums. You put up response videos on YouTube.

You can choose not to participate. You can still be a passive consumer of media. You can choose to close comments on your blog, so that your article is simply your article, and not the launch pad for a protracted discussion.

But in order to become an authority, you have to participate. You have to offer your thoughtful opinion when appropriate, and you have to invite others' responses. Remember: an expert is someone who knows something. An authority is someone with the reputation to back it up. You get that reputation from your peers. That's why your professors publish articles in journals with peer-review.

What should be obvious, but I'm going to point out again, is that you need to approach everything you write with the same degree of thoughtfulness,

and that includes your responses. Your comments. Remember--they have your name on them, and once you've made them, you can't take them back. So make sure you're going to be willing to stand by them a year from now. Or twenty years from now.

In closing, I want to say that my criticisms of Ain't It Cool News, or CNN or crappy blogs aren't meant to be disheartening. I think we're actually living in one of the most exciting times in media history. You can write something tonight, and be a worldwide sensation the next day. With a blog, you can respond to media in ways you never could before, and your readers can respond back.

I think the closest parallel to where we're at was when I was at Drake in the early 90's. I was getting by with my ImageWriter, then suddenly, we had laser printers. I was a graphic designer, so I was in heaven. But I think we all remember what happened, don't we? Suddenly, there were a lot of crappy newsletters. And we learned a painful lesson: Just because you can make a newsletter with 50 fonts on the cover, doesn't mean you should.

Bad newsletters are ugly. Bad writing is dangerous.

So I guess what I'm asking, what I'm pleading for, is that we approach all of our writing--in the classroom, at work, in life--like it's going to be around for centuries. Unlike that crappy newsletter, which got recycled, your blog post is going to be around forever. Forever. Historians will read it and wonder, "Jesus. Didn't they have spell check?"

No matter what career you end up choosing, or what career is chosen for you by fate, you will be a writer for the rest of your life. As the digital age accelerates, I'm convinced that writing is going to get more important each year. It's not a noun anymore. It's not the term papers and the memos and

the screenplays. Writing is a verb. It's an action. It's a crucial way in which we process the world around us.

So do it well. Do it carefully. And do it like your life depends on it, because I'm convinced it does.

And if you disagree, by all means. That's why this is going up on my blog. Just leave your comment below.

Thank you.