

Literacy difficulties across the rooftops

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Amanuensis: *A person whose employment is to write what another dictates, or to copy what another has written.* (Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, 1913)

Aunt Alexandra: *When she settled in with us and life resumed its daily pace, Aunt Alexandra seemed as if she had always lived with us. Her Missionary Society refreshments added to her reputation as a hostess (she did not permit Calpurnia to make the delicacies required to sustain the Society through long reports on Rice Christians); she joined and became Secretary of the Maycomb Amanuensis Club. To all parties present and participating in the life of the county, Aunt Alexandra was one of the last of her kind: she had river-boat, boarding-school manners; let any moral come along and she would uphold it; she was born in the objective case; she was an incurable gossip. When Aunt Alexandra went to school, self-doubt could not be found in any textbook, so she knew not its meaning. She was never bored, and given the slightest chance she would exercise her royal prerogative: she would arrange, advise, caution, and warn.* (Harper Lee, 1960, p. 137)

FROM WHAT WEBWORDS HEARS, YOUR TYPICAL academic amanuensis or scribe is a flexible person prepared to work with a range of individuals with reading, writing, sensory, psychosocial or attentional challenges. Unlike Aunt Alexandra with her penchant for arranging, advising, cautioning, and warning (Lee, 1960), the skilled amanuensis resists any desire to take over. He or she masters the art of writing or typing precisely what is said without correction or interpretation, performing important functions in a variety of settings that are as conducive as possible to the person being helped. One role of the amanuensis working with candidates entitled to special arrangements. The amanuensis is to work at the student's pace in producing a verbatim record of words dictated by that individual during an examination, while simultaneously acting as invigilator. Another is to help when a student is composing assignments where using a recorder or computer will not suffice, where a student's typing is too laborious, or where a student has difficulty concentrating on typing and composing simultaneously.

Guidelines for amanuenses vary between institutions but essentially they should have a basic understanding of the subject in which they are scribing, and an appreciation of the student's preferred mode of working. It is also usual to have at least one briefing, familiarisation and practice session prior to the first examination.

Rooftops

Life being what it is, you can't always get an amanuensis who understands your subject and mode of working, or a **proofreader**¹, or a **dictionary**², or even a reliable spelling whiz when and where you need one. Take for example the plight of one determined graffiti exponent, and a writing project he conducted in the Broadway area a few convenient

strides from the University of Sydney main campus. For most of 2007 and all of 2008 a Federation Romanesque building on the corner of Broadway and City Road was mischievously dubbed "MENS TIOLTE". The new name, high in the rooftops against the skyline, in distinct black aerosol characters was clearly visible from the road. Lower down and harder to discern was the writer's tag, generated three times, in cheery **wildstyle**³.

Wildstyle

Wildstyle is a complex form of graffiti with interlocking, merging letters, arrows, spikes and connecting points. It is difficult for non-graffiti artists to read, and it took Webwords (who does not indulge) several Sunday drive-bys at 60 Km/h



to make out "SVTN", lightly crossed out (why ruin a nice piece of artwork?) and meticulously replaced with "STVEN", and crossed out again. Below the two unsatisfactory attempts, and touching to see, was "STEVEN" in triumphant, 3D characters on a purple ground, painstakingly decorated – probably over a concentrated period of three or more days.

It became obvious that the writing was on the wall for this ephemeral example of creativity, persistence and showmanship when the building was draped in green scaffolding nets, concealing Steven's little joke, and his heavenly display of literacy difficulty. We may never know who Steven was (a former client, perhaps), how he got up there (nerves of steel, no doubt) and remained there in full view of the road for long enough to complete his task, or why he favoured wildstyle. Was it pleasing to him aesthetically, did he take pride in its production, and was part of its appeal its clever capacity to camouflage his continued reliance (presumably as a young adult) upon invented spelling?

Predictors

Invented spelling is the ability to use sound-symbol relations but not necessarily orthographic rules to write words – for example, "rd" for read, "bk" for book and "STVN" for Steven. The **National Early Literacy Panel**⁴, in its widely circulated January 2009 **report**⁵ called Developing early literacy, glows pink with approbation for invented spelling abilities, along with decoding abilities in preschool and kindergarten, as early predictors of later spelling success.

The panel's report has been welcomed and praised as a needed tool for literacy instruction that includes training tips

for parents. The same enthusiasm has not been universally afforded to their conclusion that teaching the **alphabet**⁶ and letter **sounds**⁷ in the preschool years strengthens children's subsequent chances of conquering the task of **learning to read**⁸. This finding has worried some commentators, raising images of tender 3- and 4-year olds grappling with skills-driven instruction like their infants or elementary school aged siblings and friends. But maybe that, plus a good serving of play, fun and common sense in its implementation, is just what little Steven needed.

Translation

Importantly, the panel underscored the need for translational research to bridge the gap between key experimental **findings**⁹ and the non-expert laypersons' understanding of literacy. Predating this recommendation, and launched in 2007, the forces behind the accessible and freely shared *Encyclopedia of Language and Literacy Development* plan to do exactly that. The **Encyclopaedia**¹⁰ forms a component of The Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network website. Its answers to questions about children's language and literacy are based upon relevant and up-to-date research, clearly explained. It includes authoritative articles on the classroom implications of spelling research, fostering literacy development at home with typical and at-risk children, reading comprehension, the social consequences of low language and literacy skills, and more.

Attitudes, advocacy and openness

Adults¹¹ with learning disabilities are often encouraged to develop positive attitudes in their student years, to engage in self-advocacy in the workplace, and to be open with employers. One thing that can help them meet such goals is the knowledge that help is often available. Good starting points for motivated individuals are to check out the Learner Support options offered by **TAFEs**¹² around the country, the BBC's **Skillwise**¹³ resources, and the **Irish Adult Literacy Agency**¹⁴.

Another rooftop view

"That's enough", I murmured to Webwords who had cadged a lift to the Macquarie University library to meet up with me, and was waiting, while I tapped out the last few words, to be chauffeured home. "It just needs a list of related links and I'm done."

Sidetracked in the link hunt by the problem of **Who killed Angela Spelling?**¹⁵ and the fascination of George Orwell's **Why I write**¹⁶, and deep in thought, Webwords' sudden, unfitting (for a library) cry of, "Quick! Look!" made me jump. There parked below our third floor window was a purple Mini Minor. Webwords was beside herself. "I thought

it was a sunroof! But look!" There on the little car's roof, in small but distinct black aerosol characters, clearly visible from the window, it said "ELAFNS". "It's ELEPHANTS!" she enthused, her inner schoolmarm piqued. "It's an elephant joke. How many elephants can you fit in a Mini? He's so smart and funny!" Below the black capitals was a miniature, multicoloured tag. "STEVEN" it shouted in fearless 3D wildstyle on a purple ground. What was it with university campuses and Steven?

The librarian was not amused. "Public humiliation is what that fellow needs," he muttered grimly, "I'd know what I'd do if I found him."

It was Webwords' turn to think, "I think I know what I'd do too."

Reference

Lee, H. (1960). *To kill a mockingbird*¹⁷. New York: J.B. Lippincott.

Links

- 1 http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/proofing_grammar.shtml
- 2 <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>
- 3 <http://www.hiphop-network.com/articles/graffitiarticles/streetmathwildstyle.asp>
- 4 http://www.familit.org/site/c.gtJWJdMQIsE/b.2133427/k.2623/National_Early_Literacy_Panel.htm
- 5 <http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/publications/pdf/NELPReport09.pdf>
- 6 <http://www.poissonrouge.com/abc/index.htm>
- 7 <http://teacher.scholastic.com/clifford1/flash/phonics/index.htm>
- 8 <http://www.ldaustralia.org/coltheart202620prior2020075b15d.pdf>
- 9 <http://www.asha.org/about/publications/literacy/literacy-journals.htm>
- 10 <http://www.literacyencyclopedia.ca/>
- 11 <http://www.idonline.org/article/c680>
- 12 <http://www.nci.tafensw.edu.au/courses/general%20education/9999-tafe-statement-learner-support.htm>
- 13 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/reading/>
- 14 <http://www.literacytools.ie/>
- 15 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/reading/techniques/scanning/game.shtml>
- 16 http://orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e_wiw
- 17 http://www2.stjohnsprep.org/teachers/mm_english/lee_mockingbird/chapter13.html

Webwords 34 is at <http://speech-language-therapy.com/webwords34.htm> with live links to featured and additional resources.

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