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# Lessons from the Classroom, the Writing Center—and the Track: Coaching Attorneys to Be Exceptional Writers

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I've been an educator and a coach for most of my life, starting as a middle school special education teacher. While earning my Ph.D. in English, I directed a university writing center and served as a head high school track coach. After that, I directed another university writing center and briefly coached track on the collegiate level. As writing center director, I was a writing tutor and trained both faculty and students to become writing tutors. During this time in academia, I taught writing and rhetoric. For the past six years, though, I've coached attorneys to become better writers.

As you can see, for a while I spent my days teaching and coaching writers, and my evenings and weekends coaching runners. The transition between these worlds was relatively seamless, though, whether I was coaching a pen-wielding writer or a baton-carrying runner. Running and writing are both solitary endeavors, so many coaching principles apply to both. The goal in each is the same: make the coachee a skilled practitioner. All of these pedagogical experiences inform my coaching philosophy when I work with attorneys.

## Everyone needs coaching.

You need coaching. I need coaching. T.S. Eliot had a coach in Ezra Pound, who also coached William Butler Yeats. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth coached each other. Even violinist Itzhak Perlman has a coach. Did you watch the London Olympics? Usain Bolt—the fastest runner ever—has a coach. And swimmer Michael Phelps has a coach.

Coaching is for everyone. That's why I say "everyone *needs* coaching," not "everyone *can benefit* from coaching." It's not just for weak writers or those who get dinged on annual reviews. All writers—even the best in their field—can use it. Unfortunately, the "coach as remediation" model persists, and it often creates a corporate culture that discourages people from seeking help for fear of being stigmatized. Some of the most valuable coaching sessions I've ever had have been with partners because of the message this sends to associates: none of us is above coaching.

## It's about better writers, not just better writing.

This is the old adage in university writing center theory, but it applies to law firms as well. Writing coaching is about better *writers*, not just better *writing*. Sure, you want to improve the writing in front of you, but you also want to improve the skill of the writer over the long term. That's why cosmetic fixes to the work product do little to help the writer because they don't always improve skill. Think long term: as a coach, what can you offer that will make the writer stronger in six months? The hour you spend now will save you hours later because you're helping a writer master a skill and eliminate patterns of error.

## Learn from the best.

Good writers read good writing. It's not something they do only when they have the time. Instead, it's part of their professional development. I was reminded of this recently in a business publication's column about concise writing. The author said that "the more you write, the better your writing will become." What he should have said was that "the more you *read*, the better your writing will become."

If you don't read, you won't know what good writing looks like. And, if you don't know what good writing looks like, you'll have no frame of reference. Weak writers develop bad habits because they don't have this frame of reference. If they expect to get better just by writing a lot, the outcome is predictable: a lot of bad writing. I've always been skeptical of the idea that you'll become a better writer as long as you keep on writing. That's a convenient bit of advice in an "eight minute abs" sort of way because it sounds so straightforward and pre-packaged, but becoming a good writer isn't that simple. It takes a lot more work: writers need exposure to good writing and feedback on their own writing.

When I was a track coach, each year I took my athletes to Penn Relays in Philadelphia to compete. It's a multi-day meet filled not just with high school competitors but also with the top collegiate and professional runners. I made sure they watched the Olympic-caliber runners compete, and I sat with them during these races so that we could evaluate the runners' tactical decisions. Armed with this information, my runners became smarter runners. To be sure, this applies to any age: when I coached my mother in 2009 to a top five finish in the 5k at the U.S. Senior Games, we watched road races on television so that I could point out smart racing strategies.

The same works with writing coaching. If you want to be a good writer, read good writing. And if you want your coachee to be a better writer, expose him to good writing. Send him something you read recently. Read publications outside of legal writing that are written for an educated, but broad, audience, magazines like *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Economist*. The role of a coach or mentor at a firm doesn't end when the coaching session ends. The best coaches send models of writing excellence to their coachees *and explain why they liked it.*

It's not enough just to read good writing. You have to do a close reading: ask yourself why it's good, why it's effective. What techniques does the writer use to convey a point? It's only when writers answer these questions that they can begin to imitate these techniques in their own writing.

This lesson applies to any skill. If you want to be a better guitar player, you'll listen to Eric Clapton or some other guitar great. If you want to be a better tennis player, you'll watch Roger Federer. You need models.

## Create the right environment.

When you coach, no one else matters. The only person in your world is the writer. Shut your door, take no calls, and stay away from

your computer. As a track coach, I had a rule: short of a medical emergency, I was not to be interrupted when I was working with an athlete in individual instruction.

You can do other things to create the ideal coaching environment. For one, set an agenda. No matter where we are, we always like to know what we're going to be doing later, which is why schedules are so appealing. A schedule of any sort—especially for someone who has never been coached before—lessens the anxiety of the writer who has no idea how a coaching session works. A brief outline of the issues you'll be going over gives the writer context and helps to get rid of any apprehension. I've coached hundreds of writers, so *I* know how a session goes. But a first-time coachee who walks into the conference room has no idea what's going to transpire, no matter how wide my smile or welcoming my handshake.

And despite my wide smile, not everyone is open to constructive feedback. Some people approach their session on the defensive. I recognize these people because of the two most common responses when I suggest a revision: either "I'll give you that" or "fair enough," responses that belong in a negotiation. There are a few ways to make the resistant coachee feel more comfortable. One, point out the good in the writing (more on that later). Two, let the writer help set the agenda for the session by asking him what aspects of his writing he'd like to discuss. Giving him a measure of control over the session strengthens the spirit of collaboration, lessens his anxiety, and lets his guard down.

Finally, pick a neutral space to ensure this collaborative environment. Feedback from a superior can be daunting (even terrifying). This means getting out from behind your desk. A round table works best so that you can sit next to the writer. Often this means moving to a conference room. If you coach in your office, the writer can feel intimidated; if you move to her office, she can feel threatened.

## We learn by doing: the writer does the work.

A coaching session must involve dialogue. More specifically, it must involve the writer as an active participant in conversation and the writer as, well, a writer: she must write during the session. It could be a revision of a paragraph or just a rewrite of a few sentences. But it's useless when a coach merely points out errors—or even worse, corrects the errors. Learning doesn't happen when the writer passively watches the coach do the work. The writer must learn a skill, a technique, a tip—anything big or small—that he can apply to his writing when he's at his desk.

One year, I coached the top-ranked female high jumper and second-ranked male triple jumper in the nation on a team that eventually won the state championship. Why were these athletes so good? Natural talent played a role, of course. But they became outstanding because *they* practiced, not because they watched *me* practice. For example, when Tuan and I went to the pit for triple jump practice, he didn't sit in the grass and watch me practice. Instead, I'd model the behavior, then facilitate guided practice. Remember, this is collaboration. But it's not collaboration in the sense that you are helping the writer do the work. They do the work, but you see them through the process.

A good coach models behavior, and a good writing coach doesn't do the work for the writer. Regardless of the error—let's say a lack of transitions—modeling the correct behavior is easy:

1. Point out the error and indicate how it interferes with reader comprehension.
2. Make a sample correction or two to ensure that she knows what the correct version looks like.
3. Pick a sample section and let her make the corrections.

Once you've done this, you've accomplished the goal of a coaching session. The writer has done the work. Like I said earlier,

writers become better by reading good writing. That's what's happening: the writer is making her own writing better, and she now has her own writing as a model.

But sometimes it's tempting to make that tiny correction for the writer. So here's a tip: if you're left handed—as I am—sit on the writer's left. When I do this, I have to bring my left arm over my body to write, which is awkward. But if I'm on the writer's right side, my left hand is close to that draft, and it's much easier—and more tempting—to write on it. Of course, you can resist the temptation by not holding a pen in the first place. Also, sharing a draft demonstrates that you're working together; it's more difficult to write on the draft when the only copy is in front of the writer.

## Have a conversation.

Besides actual writing, though, the other imperative part of the coaching process is conversation. The more a writer articulates his process, the more he'll learn as he considers his words and talks about his writing issues. And the best way to do this is by, ironically, embracing silence.

People talk when you ask the right questions—and when you give them enough time to answer. Since my days as a middle school teacher, I've used wait time as a questioning technique. It involves appreciating the silence of your audience.

Unfortunately, some coaches, teachers, and presenters see audience silence as problematic. They're uncomfortable with pauses and assume this silence means the audience is confused or bored. The best environment, they believe, involves rapid fire questioning and answering. We've seen people like this: if they don't get an answer immediately, they either repeat the question (often more loudly) or just restate it differently.

In reality, though, the audience heard the question perfectly. What they're doing is thinking about their response. That's where wait time comes in. After you ask a question, stop. Don't talk. Don't rephrase, and don't repeat. Just wait for a response. When you interrupt this silence, you slam the door on the critical thinking process. An old trick I learned when I was getting my Master of Arts in Teaching is to put a hand behind my back and count to five with my fingers, slowly. If I still don't have a response after five, I'll see if my question needs clarifying.

## Ask open-ended questions.

These questions don't get a *yes* or *no* response. A question that invites a *yes* or *no* response is a closed question, and it's often just a test of comprehension that requires little thinking. Even worse, a closed question kills momentum in a conversation because, once it's answered, the topic is finished. Furthermore, a closed question can make a writer feel tested because it's often loaded: questions like *Does this make sense, Is this a good example to use,* or *Do you think this is a good place for this argument* are not helpful questions because there's only one answer: No.

Open-ended questions, on the other hand, invite thoughtful discussion. They initiate the critical thinking process by beginning with words like *why, what, how, tell, where,* and *when*. But be careful: an open-ended question like *Why did you use this example* or *Why did you put that comma there* sounds threatening. (Think about when your parents asked you a question that began with *why*. It never ended well.) Adding a word or two to the question, however, changes the tone: *Let's talk about why you used that word* or *I'm wondering why you used this example* sound much less intimidating. More important, open-ended questions invoke the spirit of collaboration and spur sharper critical thinking because they force the writer to explain her stylistic choices. And they

combine the traits a writer needs to become a good attorney by honing analytic skills: thinking, reading, talking, and writing.

The benefits of the open-ended question are many: it develops trust in the relationship and lets down the guard of the tentative writer. Writers reflect on their writing and think independently. A coach who asks the right questions can uncover where faulty thinking begins and can help the writer prevent the faulty thinking and the errors that arise from it. And open-ended questions almost always serve as a springboard for discussion by clarifying a writer's struggles. Let's rephrase a few closed questions as open ones:

- *Does this make sense?* becomes *I'm having trouble understanding this sentence.*
- *Is this a good example to use?* becomes *What's a better example?*
- *Do you think this is a good place for this argument?* becomes *Where is a better place for this argument?*

## You're the audience. React like one.

When you're reading a draft, react as a reader. This sounds obvious—how else would you react, anyway?—but it means telling the writer how a sentence or a phrase sounds when you read it. It's easy to miss your own clunky writing, even though someone else can spot it easily. That's why telling the writer how you reacted to a section is important. Phrases like *I don't know what this means* or *I'm having trouble following your words* show how the writing affects you, the audience, when you read. You can even communicate these sentences on the draft: my comments on a piece of writing usually sound like what I might say to the person in a conversation.

## Point out the good.

When I point out something that a writer is doing well—and tell her, of course, *why* it's good—I'm often met with disbelief. *I didn't even know I was doing that!* is a common response. In other words, good writing is sometimes unintentional. If coaches can tell people to stop doing things that confuse the reader, they should also tell them to keep doing things that the reader likes. So send them off with a piece of good writing. If it's not something that you've watched them revise during the session, point out existing sections that are good.

Most of the time, however, I don't need to point out rough patches in an associate's writing. He does it himself through one simple method: reading the draft aloud. That's because good writing is euphonic. It sounds good. You'll catch awkwardly phrased sentences and unintended repetition, for example, when you read a draft aloud. When I see a paragraph that needs revision, I ask the associate to read it to me. Within seconds, he stops, stumbling over the troublesome section and recognizing the need for revision.

## Specific is terrific.

This is what my fifth grade teacher Ms. Oleksy told me, and it's stuck with me ever since. Good feedback is specific. Don't just say that something is good; instead, explain why it's good. Or, if you're confronted with a series of long sentences, explain how they drain your concentration. Specific feedback tells the writer how you react when you read something, and it gives the writer something upon which he can build. Vague feedback, on the other hand, offers little guidance.

## Be a storyteller.

Tell stories. If someone comes to you for guidance, tell her how *you* do it. I tell writers about my own writing process, warts and all. Of interest to them is how to write well under deadline, a particular source of angst for young attorneys. As a freelance music critic for the *Washington Post*, I'm faced with deadlines, so I share my tips. When I was a track coach, I was not far removed from my own days as a collegiate 400m runner, so I always offered my own racing strategies borne from experience.

It's important for a writer to know that coaches also struggle. For example, people with writer's block often think that everyone else writes faster and that ideas flow effortlessly from the pens of great writers. But this is largely a myth: E.B. White, Joseph Conrad, and Ernest Hemingway all went through long bouts of writer's block.

## Inspire.

Improvement starts with confidence. A writer should leave a coaching session energized. Make sure that the writer accomplishes something during the session. It doesn't matter what skill you're trying to hone—it can be writing, running, or quilting. If he learns a new skill or improves his writing, he'll be in a much better position to tackle his next writing assignment.

I'll close with a couple of examples from my own experience, one from the classroom and one from the track. When I was in high school, I was an average writer. I was never an A writer, so I never wrote like one. But when I got to college, I earned an A on my first paper. My professor saw something in my writing that no one else had seen. Once I knew I could write an A paper, I became an A writer. Twenty-five years later, that essay is still in my desk, the faded marks of her felt-tipped comments still readable.

Ten years later, as a high school track coach, I was with my team on the eve of the Maryland state championships. We had won the regional championship the week before, a meet that got us to the state championships. "Last week," I told them, "We were running *to be* champions. And today, we are running *as* champions." Armed with that confidence, we won the final race of the day, the 4x400m relay, by twelve one-hundredths of a second—and won the team state championship by one point.

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