“Everyone’s a writer now and words matter more than ever.”

According to communication researcher Associate Professor Roslyn Petelin from the School of Communication and Arts, founder of UQ’s highly successful writing, editing and publishing suite of programs, writing is at the centre of our social, academic and professional spheres.

And, as part of her research to ensure students know how to use words to do what they want them to do, she has observed that reputations can be made or slayed simply by the way writers present their words to the world.

Sometimes at huge cost.

“Several court cases revolving around grammatical issues have hit the news of late,” she says.

“For example, in the recently settled Taylor and Sons case in the UK, a multimillion-pound legal battle was waged over a mistake involving a single missing letter; and an absent serial comma led to a US$5 million underpayment to dairy-truck drivers in the US.”

But on a more personal level, bad grammar can halt a career before it even begins.

“Nothing can make you lose credibility (or seem uneducated) more quickly than a spelling mistake, and that includes apostrophes – especially when writing job applications. Even small typographical errors may determine whether or not a person is invited in for an interview, no matter what their other achievements,” Associate Professor Petelin says.

“Young people coming out of university may have all the right interpersonal skills, but if they can’t write coherently, they will find this to be a big disadvantage in their job search. I discovered this when I was a consultant for several major employers, including the Australian Taxation Office, Westpac Bank and the Queensland Treasury Corporation.”

Associate Professor Petelin’s career has been dedicated to the written word and her research has impacted many organisations that have designed and initiated corporate communication manuals under her guidance. As a life member of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association, she particularly champions plain English in the workplace – despite discovering in her ARC Linkage Project, Plain language practices in an Australian local government organisation (2011–2012) that this can often be very difficult to achieve in real life.

“My research at Brisbane City Council, for example, has demonstrated that using plain language in government can improve public understanding of and increase compliance with regulations, and save time and resources, thereby delivering economic benefits. However, plain language has proven far more difficult to implement than to mandate in government, leaving governments endorsing plain language, but seemingly unable to compel their employees to use it,” she says.

Hence the use of corporate communication manuals.

Associate Professor Petelin also regularly presents at industry conferences where she spreads the word about good grammar and correct style, and ensures she finds time to continue being a self-proclaimed “voracious reader of novels and magazines (online and in print), an unrepentant and unscientific consumer of entertainment media, and an inveterate collector of words.”

All grist to the communication research mill.

The pen is mightier than the sword

The old adage, suggesting that written communication is a more damaging weapon than direct violence, is probably more relevant today than when first coined for the play Richelieu by English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839, according to Associate Professor Petelin.

Except that the pen (slash keystroke) may now hurt the writer more than the foe originally intended. Think covfefe (for ‘coverage’), the media attack that backfired on US President Donald Trump in mid-2017, which immediately launched a series of Internet memes, comedy sketches and articles of ridicule. If Trump’s intention was to enhance his reputation, it certainly missed the mark.

Associate Professor Petelin’s analysis of popular literature has revealed that, with the rise of social media and the internet, and with everyone writing more than ever, situations like this will inevitably become more commonplace, eroding personal credibility in the process.

 Cue public scorn on a massive scale.

And when the written word is spoken aloud – also on social media or as the butt of jokes in comedy performances – problems compound.

“Think ‘anything’ (‘anythink’), ‘ask’ (‘arks’), ‘espresso’ (‘expresso’), ‘deteriorate’ (‘deteriate’) and ‘et cetera’ (‘ecksetra’),” says Associate Professor Petelin.

“When added to misused words, like ‘suppository’ for ‘repository’, it’s a wonder like this will inevitably become more commonplace, eroding personal credibility in the process.

WRITE FOR RIGHT’S SAKE

In this age of online personal branding, how we communicate may be even more important than what we communicate, according to Associate Professor Roslyn Petelin’s research.
become mainstream as the English language continuously evolves. Some cases in point: ‘affluenza’, ‘carbon footprint’, ‘bromance’, ‘tweet’ and ‘fracking’, which have all been added to the vernacular in the last decade.

Wright writes rites right

As someone whose lifelong research interest is to create or make something (wright) to express or communicate in writing (writes) any customary observance or practice (rites) in the correct way (right), Associate Professor Petelin’s work has struck a chord around the world.

Of particular note are her articles published in The Conversation and on abc.net.au, which have garnered more than 420,000 and 300,000 readers respectively, also being republished on sites such as Intellectual Takeout and Flipboard. One of her articles was also chosen (from the 6500 published during the year) for inclusion in The Conversation’s 2017 Yearbook.

“Although the articles may seem like ephemeral journalism, they draw on my long-term research on language, and are particularly relevant in this era of mass multimedia when the internet both amplifies a writer’s potential reach and increases the pool of others doing the same,” she says.

So, does Associate Professor Petelin have any quick solutions to help interested writers improve their skills so they stand out against the noise?

Yes, avoid the ‘hateful eight’, or enrol in some online training.

Words worth watching

Associate Professor Petelin is highly cognisant of the impact of poor writing and has developed a free, eight-week online course offered through the edX platform to help address the problem. First launched in 2014, WRITE101x English Grammar and Style has already had more than 540,000 enrolments from people in 200+ countries and territories – from Brazil and Bangladesh to Kyrgyzstan and Korea – anxious to improve both their written communication skills and personal brand/reputation.

Focusing on grammatical principles, word usage, writing style, sentence and paragraph structure, and punctuation, the latest course – its eighth run – began on 19 February 2018 and explores writing for social media, online publication, university, and the workplace. Internationally renowned experts are featured in interviews that Associate Professor Petelin conducted in London, Edinburgh, Oxford, and Cambridge. UQ’s Professor Fred D’Agostino’s video has already been accessed 58,000 times on YouTube.

Because English is a global language, the course resonates with people such as Giovanna, who said as she signed off on her last assessment, “I can affirm that as an Italian native and French writer, I am very grateful [for this course] and I will use – in one hour – at work all your recommendations about grammar and style”; or Peepal, who said, “As a learner whose first language is not English, I found this course amazing. The combination of videos, coursework, the literature, the grammarians we were exposed to, and the learning of grammar itself was heady, exhilarating.” And Jeanne from Portugal commented, “I will always remember Roslyn’s counsel: ‘read, read and read’.”

In the meantime, Associate Professor Petelin will continue with her teaching, analysing, consuming, collecting, conferencing, referencing, reading, reviewing and researching about writing and how to ‘right’ it.

“I want the learnings from my research to help everyone respond confidently to the unprecedented and accelerating demand of writing in the 21st digital century,” she says.

“A knowledge of grammar will provide you with a wonderful toolkit that will give you greater confidence and greater power over your writing.”

The hateful eight

You can instantly improve your writing by not:
1. using archaic language – ‘amongst’, ‘whilst’ instead of ‘among’, ‘while’
2. Saying ‘his/her’, instead of ‘they’
3. using modifiers in wrong spot – I only have eyes for you. I have eyes only for you. Only I have eyes for you.
4. using incorrect pronouns – “They asked Malcolm and myself, ‘to dinner’” (use me)
5. being ambiguous – Look at her duck
6. using the wrong preposition – The rich are different to you and me (use from)
7. using the wrong word – practice/practise, led/lead, principle/principal
8. using worryingly equivocal language – “We always respond conservatively to safety issues”

Zombie rules

Ignore the following rules – they are wrong!
1. Never start a sentence with ‘and’, ‘but’ or ‘because’
2. Don’t split infinitives, e.g. to boldly go
3. Never end a sentence with a preposition, e.g. Does this fit in?
4. Don’t use double negatives, e.g. I can’t get no satisfaction
5. Don’t say ‘try and’

A lifetime of words:

1992: The professional writing guide: writing well and knowing why, written with Marsha Durham, is published by Longman Professional

1996: Professional communication: principles and applications, written with Peter Putnis, is published by Pearson Education

2001: Writing, Editing and Publishing (WEP) suite of programs is launched at UQ

2006–2007: Associate Professor Petelin receives funding from UQ FirstLink Scheme for research project, Mapping Australian workplace writing culture: an examination of writing practices in Australian organisations

2009: WEP program wins a UQ Teaching and Learning Week award for Programs that Enhance Student Learning

2009–2010: Associate Professor Petelin receives funding from UQ FirstLink Scheme for research project, Reducing bureaucratese: workplace writers and the struggle for plain language

2011: Associate Professor Petelin receives a citation from the Australian Awards for University Teaching for her Contributions to Student Learning

2011–2012: Associate Professor Petelin receives ARC Linkage Project funding for project, Plain language practices in an Australian local government organisation

2014: WRITE101x English Grammar and Style MOOC is launched

2015: Associate Professor Petelin is a finalist for UQ Award for Teaching Excellence

2016: ‘Cofeve’ furore erupts on Twitter

2016: How writing works: a field guide to effective writing is published by Allen & Unwin

2017: ‘Milkshake duck’ is Macquarie Dictionary’s word of the year

2017: Associate Professor Petelin is one of only 10 edX prize finalists worldwide for her grammar MOOC

uq.edu.au/research/impact

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