

“Found in the Great Lakes to the Acadian forests...”

The Cranky Professor

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The quality of public writing at Saint Mary's is dismally low. Should we care? If we should care, what can we do about it?

Let's begin with a few examples. Plaques in the classrooms instruct us what to do “In case of an emergency,” rather than simply in an emergency. For about a year, a sign in the McNally Building advertised “accessible access” to the science building. Take a look at any of the plaques in front of the trees on campus. I haven't read one that wasn't incomprehensible, ungrammatical, or uproarious. (The title of this article is taken from the plaque describing an Ironwood tree.)

“Please note that the names of graduates listed in this program are subject to revision.” That's from the Fall Convocation booklet. (I suspect it's the list that's subject to revision.)

Writing is bad just about everywhere on campus. It's not just signs and plaques. We can find bad writing in campus publications and university memos. Professors and administrators contribute more of it than do students.

Now of course not all public writing at Saint Mary's is flat, insipid, or ungrammatical. “This Week at Saint Mary's,” for instance, is usually clear, direct, and easy to read. Our Academic Calendar is better written than one might expect, though it wouldn't hurt to turn it over to a good copy editor for a final revision. Nonetheless, one cannot spend a day on campus without encountering writing that is poor or worse.

It's not hard to write well, especially when you are writing just to convey directions or information. There are easy rules to follow that almost ensure that one's writing will be easy to read and that it will mean (only) what one wants it to mean. Write simply and directly. Pay attention to the most literal meanings of one's words. Use the active voice. (The first two sentences of this paragraph violate this rule.) No more than one adjective or adverb per sentence. That's about it.

Should we care about bad public writing? That is, should we care to complain about it, and should writers and administrators, whoever is responsible for campus signs, memos, and publications, heed our complaints?

As writers, we care to write well because we want to be understood and enjoyed. As readers, we want to understand what we read and we want not to be pained while reading it. Of course, we like also to be entertained, and this creates a dilemma for us. The plaques in front of the trees are certainly amusing. Yet those who wrote and erected

them meant to inform us about the trees. If our amusement distracts us from learning, the writers failed to do what they wanted.

What to do about bad public writing? We don't want to be nags, and, anyway, complaining won't work unless the people we complain to care. They might not care. That they don't care is evinced simply by the extent of the problem. If bad public writing on campus doesn't matter to editors and administrators, then we might as well give up and get used to it.

But it's possible that it does matter to them, or, at least, that it would matter to them if we complained, louder and more often.

Here's my suggestion. Take a photo of a sign or plaque you'd be embarrassed to have written. Send it by email to the president, to the academic vice-president, to a dean or two, and maybe to some other senior administrators. Simply ask that they replace that sign or plaque with a well-written one.

When it comes to memos and campus publications, the matter is a bit trickier. We don't want to favour style over content, we don't want to be pedantic, we don't want to rag on people for their innocent mistakes, and we certainly don't want to foist our preferences on others. (We're happy, of course, to discuss the merits and demerits of our different preferences. This should be done in the spirit of creating and refining our particular voices, not in the spirit of correction.)

So stick to obvious problems in syntax and clarity. Direct your comment to the editor of the publication rather than to the author. Send it privately. Don't expect a response, but send a thank you should you receive one.

Let's see what happens.