

# ***Duke University Writing Studio E-News***

## ***Volume 2, Issue 10, November 2008***

The E-News is a monthly newsletter featuring writing-related questions and upcoming events at the Writing Studio. For more information about the Writing Studio, visit our website at <http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio/>. Appointments with writing tutors can be reserved in advance online.

---

In this issue:

- **Event of the Month: Find the Three Turkeys**
- **Steve Martin Weighs in on Writing**
- **Upcoming Workshops and Writing Groups**
- **Grammar Tip of the Month: Expletive Constructions and Floating Referents**
- **Quotation of the Month**

---

### ■ **Event of the Month: Find the Three Turkeys**



With Thanksgiving around the corner, are those tryptophan\* cravings starting to kick in? The Writing Studio is getting in the holiday mood early with our “Find the Three Turkeys” contest. Beginning Nov. 1, you can hunt for cleverly hidden images of these symbolic fowl on our “Resources for Writers” pages of the Duke Writing Studio website. (From <http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio/>, click the “Resources” link on the left, and happy hunting.) If you find all three birds, send us an email at [wstudio@aes.duke.edu](mailto:wstudio@aes.duke.edu) and you will be entered in our Thanksgiving drawing for “Snack Attack Exam Packs.” Winners will be announced via E-Blast after the holidays.

\* Tryptophan is the devious chemical in turkey that prompts uncontrollable napping.

### ■ **Steve Martin Weighs in on Writing**

Disclaimer: Writing (well) is really not so easy. This article is written by a professional comedian, and the advice it offers is a likely recipe for academic failure!

Writing is the most easy, pain-free, and happy way to pass the time of all the arts. As I write this, for example, I am sitting comfortably in my rose garden and typing on my new computer. Each rose represents a story, so I'm never at a loss for what to type. I just look deep into the heart of the rose, read its story, and then write it down. I could be typing kjfiu joew. mv jiw and enjoy it as much as typing words that actually make sense, because I simply relish the movements of my fingers on the keys. It is true that sometimes agony visits the head of a writer. At those moments, I stop writing and relax with a coffee at my favorite restaurant, knowing that words can be changed, rethought, fiddled with, and ultimately denied. Painters don't have that luxury.



If they go into a coffee shop, their paint dries into a hard mass... Writer recommends all writers live in California... Writer explains why 'Love in the Time of Cholera' is a bad title & suggests 'Love in the Time of the Blue, Blue, Bluebirds'... Writer takes a passage by Milan Kundera: 'Most people deceive themselves with a pair of faiths: they believe in eternal memory (of people, things, deeds, nations) and in redressibility (of deeds, mistakes, sins, wrongs). Both are false faiths. In reality the opposite is true: everything will be forgotten and nothing will be redressed.' Sitting in his garden, watching the bees glide from flower to flower, he lets the above passage filter through his mind. He then rewrites it under the sunny influence of California: 'I feel pretty, Oh so pretty, I feel pretty,

and witty, and bright.' Kundera was just too wordy. Sometimes the delete key is your best friend... Writer advises someone who doesn't know what sentence to type next to go to an already published novel and find a sentence that you absolutely adore. Copy it down in your manuscript. Usually, that sentence will lead you to another sentence, and pretty soon your own ideas will start to flow... This is an example of what writer calls 'pure' writing which occurs when there is no possibility of its becoming a screenplay. Pure writing is the most rewarding of all, because it is constantly accompanied by a voice that repeats, 'Why am I writing this?' Then, and only then, can the writer hope for his finest achievement: the voice of the reader uttering its complement, 'Why am I reading this?'

- Steve Martin, Shouts & Murmurs, "Writing is Easy!" *The New Yorker* June 24, 1996: p. 156.

## ■ Upcoming Workshops and Writing Group Schedule

### NOVEMBER WORKSHOPS

Editing for Clarity and Proofreading for Correctness  
(Thurs. Nov. 6, 2 pm, 112 Perkins Library)

Academic and Professional E-mail  
(Thurs. Nov. 13, 2 pm, 112 Perkins Library)

Improving Your Writing Style: 4 C's (Clarity, Conciseness, Cohesion, and Coherence)  
(Thurs. Nov. 20, 2 pm, 112 Perkins Library)

Check the website on the Workshop/Group Sign Up page for updated dates, times, and locations: <http://aaswebsv.aas.duke.edu/cgi-bin/calendar/writing.pl?option=4>.

### WRITING GROUPS

Send us an email to sign up for a group you're interested in. We will e-mail you and coordinate a possible date, time, and number of meetings with other interested students. Encourage your friends and classmates to sign up, as we need a minimum of three to schedule a writing group.

**CREATIVE WRITING:** Email us at [wstudio@aes.duke.edu](mailto:wstudio@aes.duke.edu).

A group for students interested in writing fiction, creative non-fiction, or poetry, sharing work with and receiving inspiration from others, and offering/receiving

constructive criticism in a friendly, supportive environment. Bring ideas, works in progress, and a readiness to both listen and talk.

**SCI-FI / FANTASY:** Email us at [wstudio@aes.duke.edu](mailto:wstudio@aes.duke.edu).

If you are interested in meeting on a weekly basis with other students who are also interested in writing science fiction and/or fantasy, this is the group for you.

### ■ Grammar Tip of the Month: Expletive Constructions and Floating Referents

What's wrong with the following sentences?

**It is the working class that suffers most when there is a recession.**

**This is a problem: the working class is the bedrock of the economy.**

If you didn't find any problems with these sentences, you're not alone. Many writers at all levels of proficiency frequently utilize "expletive constructions" and "floating referents." **An expletive construction uses a placeholder pronoun and a passive (to be) verb as the main subject and verb of the sentence.** Phrases such as "it is" and "there are" usually signal expletive constructions. So what's wrong with these phrases? For one thing, they replace the "real" action of the sentence (in the first example, the verb "suffers") with a passive verb ("is") and replace the "real" subject ("the working class") with a nondescript pronoun ("it"). This sentence actually includes two expletive constructions. "There is a recession" works the same way. If we reword this sentence without any expletive constructions, we might say that

**During any recession, the working class suffers most.**

The second sentence (above) is an example of a "floating referent." **Floating referents are words such as *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those* whose objects are not clearly defined.** In the phrase "this is a problem," what does "this" refer to? The working class? The suffering? Or the recession? Perhaps it points to all of the above. In order to avoid this type of ambiguity, practice asking yourself whenever you see words like this, that, these, and those: This / that / these / those what? If you have clearly answered the question in your sentence, then you have not created a "floating referent." For example, we might reword the second sentence as

**The working class is the bedrock of the economy,  
and its struggles affect the prosperity of all citizens.**

Avoiding expletive constructions and floating referents will help you write clearly and precisely.

### ■ Quotation of the Month:

"I almost always write—just as I almost always breathe."

- John Steinbeck

To unsubscribe from the DWS listserv, log into the Duke Mailing List Manager at <https://lists.duke.edu/sympa>, then select "Writing Studio" and "unsubscribe."