

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

## ***Volume 2, Issue 9, October 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 should be reserved in advance online.

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### ■ **Event of the Month: Halloween Haiku Contest**

Whether you call it haiga, hokku, or haiku, this Japanese poem traditionally consists of three lines: five morae, seven morae, and five morae. (In English, the mora is generally translated as a syllable, although they are not exactly the same.) In February 1904, Yone Noguchi implored, “Pray, you try Japanese Hokku, my American poets!” Since then, many Westerners have tried their hands at the simple yet elegant form.

This Halloween, the Duke Writing Studio is paying homage to the “smallest literary form” with our second annual haiku contest! Submit up to three of your spookiest triplets via email to [wstudio@aas.duke.edu](mailto:wstudio@aas.duke.edu) by midnight on Tuesday, Oct 28. Winners will be sent out to the Writing Studio listserv and posted on our website. Good luck, and happy haunting!

An old silent pond...  
A frog jumps into the pond,  
splash! Silence again.

– Basho (1644–1694)

### ■ **Who Cares About an Oxford Comma?**

Popular nerd-punk rockers Vampire Weekend recently broke into the Top 40 by posing this cryptic question (using slightly more explicit language) in their hit song “Oxford Comma.” Their clever question, however, begs another: who even knows what an Oxford comma is? The song has already inspired detailed blogger debates with various, creative, and sometimes amusing explanations of these lyrics. One post even asserted that Vampire Weekend’s chorus “contains the meaning of life.”

In fact, an Oxford comma (also known as a “Harvard” or “serial” comma) refers to the final comma in a series. For example, in the list “X, Y, and Z” the Oxford comma comes after “Y.” Influenced by the minimalist punctuation of character-stingy newspaper editors, many writers began to omit this comma, listing items in a series as “X, Y and Z.” The designation of this punctuation point as an “Oxford” standard suggests that only academic sticklers would note or lament its absence—although the phrase originated because this comma is required in publications by Oxford University Press.

One rationale for retaining the Oxford comma is that the absence of this punctuation mark might confuse readers into associating the final two items in a list. Consider the following:

**I have 100 pounds of iron, 50 pounds of steel, and coal.**

If the Oxford comma in this sentence were omitted, the reader might assume that the writer had “50 pounds of steel and coal” combined, rather than 50 pounds of steel and an unspecified amount of coal. However, this example prompted Vampire Weekend’s songwriter to quip, “Why would you lie about how much coal you had? Why would you lie about something dumb like that?”

Yet another reason to preserve the Oxford comma is that the elements it separates are not always single words. Series of independent clauses are also punctuated with this mark, such as the following sentence:

**Tom cleared the table, Dick washed the dishes, and Harry swept the floor.**

In this example, omitting the Oxford comma might lead a hasty reader to misread the middle clause as “Dick washed the dishes and Harry.”

Most American style guides disagree with the pop song, proving that at least a few grammar sticklers out there still care about the Oxford comma. Whether or not you use them in your own writing, the song illustrates the curious intersection of popular culture and English grammar.

### ■ **Upcoming Workshops and Writing Groups**

#### **OCTOBER WORKSHOPS**

Getting In: Application Essays for Graduate Schools, Internships, and Special Programs  
(Thurs. Oct 2, 2 p.m., 112 Perkins Library)

U.S. Academic Writing: Considerations for Non-Native English Speakers  
(Thurs. Oct 16, 2 p.m., 112 Perkins Library)

Improving Your Writing Style: Clarity  
(Thurs. Oct 23, 2 p.m., 112 Perkins Library)

Improving Your Writing Process: Conciseness, Cohesion, and Coherence  
(Thurs. Oct 30, 2 p.m., 112 Perkins Library)

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

## **WRITING GROUPS**

Send us an email for a group you're interested in, and we will e-mail you date, time, and we will email you with the meeting time and place.

**CREATIVE WRITING:** Email us at [wstudio@duke.edu](mailto:wstudio@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@duke.edu](mailto:wstudio@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: Using the First Person in Academic Writing**

Like many American students, you may have been told to avoid the first person in academic papers. When can academic writers use "I," and what are the implications of this writerly perspective? The answer is neither clear nor agreed upon, but for a variety of reasons, many scholars of rhetoric and composition are urging their students to use "I" more frequently and more deliberately. Feminist scholar Gesa Kirsch, for example, argues that "the uses of an authorial *I* (or lack thereof) have social, moral, and political consequences for which authors bear responsibility." An overreliance on the first person can result in writing that sounds confessional or self-absorbed, but avoiding the first person altogether obscures the writer's point of view and may potentially confuse the reader.

Have you ever wondered when an authorial "I" is warranted? If so, you may want to consult our new handout on the subject, which is available on the Writing Studio website: [http://uwp.duke.edu/wstudio/resources/documents/first\\_person.pdf](http://uwp.duke.edu/wstudio/resources/documents/first_person.pdf).

### ■ **Quotation of the Month**

"Writing is not like painting where you add. It is not what you put on the canvas that the reader sees. Writing is more like a sculpture where you remove. You eliminate in order to make the work visible. Even those pages you remove somehow remain."

- Elie Wiesel

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