

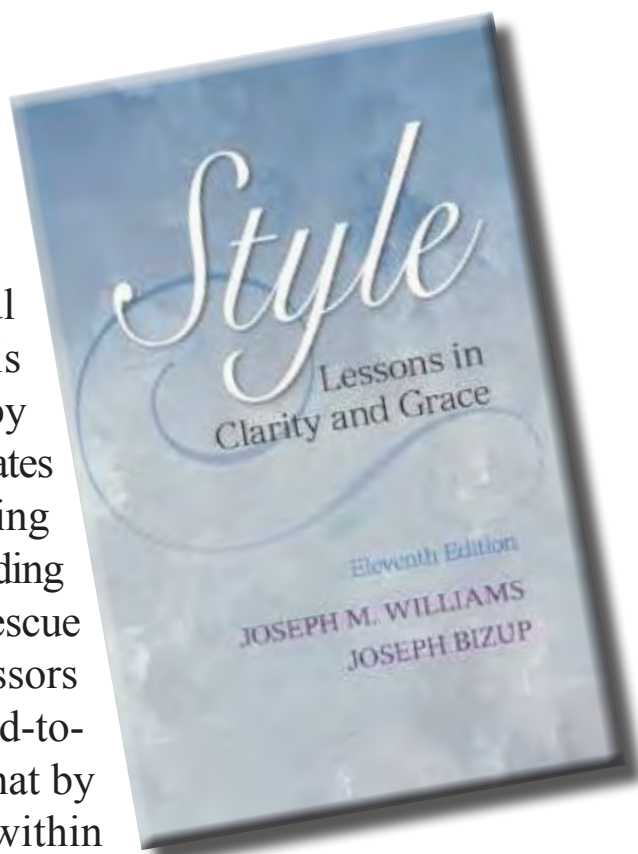


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Joseph Williams: *A Reader's Writer*

Williams' book, *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, is one of the very best resources you can have in your library. It will help you write simple, clear, powerful prose. Joe died in 2008, and this piece, published at his passing by The University of Chicago, celebrates his life's work. But beyond honoring Williams, it reveals the seminal finding that made it possible for him to rescue thousands of students and professors from the quicksand of thick, hard-to-interpret prose. He discovered that by framing even abstract subjects within the structure of a story, the indecipherable becomes clear, and the inaccessible is put within reach. Williams' focus was always on *the reader*. The practical how-to lessons in *Style* will help *your reader* know what you're saying, and feel why what you're saying matters.



Insights on adding life to writing from an obituary.

Joseph M. Williams, Professor Emeritus of English and Linguistics, 1933 - 2008

University of Chicago Professor Emeritus Joseph M. Williams, author of one of the most influential books on the teaching of writing and a co-creator of the University's pioneering writing program, died Friday, Feb. 22 at his home in South Haven, Mich.

An English professor and linguist at the University for more than three decades, Williams wrote or edited more than 10 books, including a sweeping history of the English language, but he is perhaps best-known for the 1981 book, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. The book, in its ninth edition, introduced an entirely new approach to writing pedagogy.

What distinguished *Style* from other writing how-to books — from H.W. Fowler's *The King's English* to Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* — was that it focused on writers at a different stage in their lives, and it approached writers' challenges from a different perspective.

"Joe was interested in the reader's perspective — what writing would do to a reader," said Gregory Colomb, a Professor of English at the University of Virginia and Williams' longtime collaborator.

Williams and Colomb pored through cognitive science research, decision theory, risk theory, attribution theory — all to gain insight into the reader. "Joe believed that if you understood how readers would predictably respond to particular features of a text, you could then help writers achieve their goals. He was committed to using his research to teach better writing."

Lawrence McEnerney, Director of the University's Writing Program, said that a revolutionary contribution of Williams was "teaching writing to experts."

"Previously, writing was seen as something that you should have mastered when you were in school. Once you were beyond school, especially if you had professional expertise, then to think about writing felt remedial. But Joe changed the way we saw the problem. Experts face writing challenges that are created by their expertise. Helping them can't be a matter of repeating what they heard in school. Joe taught us to understand the problems of writing about expert knowledge."

In addition to his books on writing, Williams helped create the University's writing program known as "The Little Red Schoolhouse," as well as a communications consulting firm, Clearlines, which worked with non-academics, such as law firms, government agencies, foundations and major corporations.

Williams' maverick approach to writing pedagogy wasn't without its critics. Some people, even University of Chicago colleagues, criticized his formal approach for imposing structural straitjackets that devalued creativity. But Williams believed his formal approach freed, rather than constrained writers, and that it enabled genuine creativity. "Our response," Williams told *The University of Chicago Chronicle*, "is that formal patterns characterize all good writing. And, in fact, formal patterns generate thought."

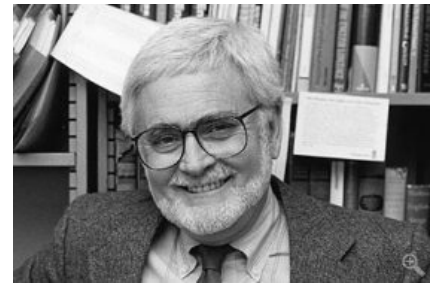
Williams was also bold in pinpointing the possible sources of bad writing. In 1981, he and co-researcher Rosemary Hake published a survey that found teachers of English at some high schools and colleges consistently preferred verbose, turgid writing to tight writing — in effect, rewarding bad, convoluted writers with better grades. Of this, he told the *Chronicle*, "Most college writing instructors have never had to write for a living, they base their values on extensively edited, belletristic or literary prose."

Born on Aug. 18, 1933 in Cleveland, Ohio, Williams received a bachelor's degree in 1955 and a master's degree in 1960 from Miami University in Ohio. He earned his Ph.D. in English and Linguistics

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Joe Williams was "Strunk and White on Steroids." He wrote the Bible on clear, powerful writing.

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from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1966. There, he worked on a massive project to compile an encyclopedia of dialectology, Colomb said.

Williams joined the Chicago faculty in 1965 as an assistant professor. He remained at Chicago until his retirement in 1999. He began his career as researcher of the English language. His interest in studying the close connection between grammar and rhetoric resulted in his first book, *The New English*, in 1970. His next book, *The Origins of the English Language*, was a sweeping history of the English language from the evolution of man through to modern English.

He maintained an interest in linguistic research throughout his career, but it was in the 1970s that his interests increasingly focused on what would become his best-known work. According to a story in the *Chronicle*, Williams traced his interest in developing a how-to book for expert writers to a seminar he gave for the American Medical Association. After being asked to develop a writing program for doctors, he pored through medical journals and discovered what he called “medicalese.”

“It was a baffling text. It would be for anyone not in the field,” recalled Colomb. “But what was critical was the question Joe asked: Not *What’s wrong with these writers?* but *What would I need to see in this writing to understand it?* It was a question about being a reader.”

Williams tried to figure out the underlying principles of the medical texts, and his conclusion became the cornerstone of his pedagogical approach. “What I discovered was the importance of story,” Williams told the *Chronicle*. Williams believed that even abstract prose about highly scientific, medical or intellectual concepts could move towards story.

“Even prose that may seem wholly discursive and abstract usually has behind it the two central components of the story — characters and their actions.” Even “social mobility,” he said, “can become a character in an abstract social science story.”

In the late 1970s, Williams and English department colleagues Colomb and Frank Kinahan offered a series of ad-hoc lectures on writing for graduate students and advanced undergrads. The lectures were enormously popular, said McEnerney, a graduate student at the time.

The surprising success of the lecture series spurred Colomb, Kinahan and Williams to create a writing class specifically geared to juniors and seniors. Titled the “Little Red Schoolhouse,” it debuted in 1981, and once again, the faculty was shocked by its enthusiastic response. The class required a completed paper once a week, yet it was packed. Clearly, Williams and his colleagues had uncovered an interest in learning to write, which was shared by many of the university’s best and most advanced students.

The class was eventually renamed “Advanced Academic and Professional Writing,” though it’s still known on campus as the “Little Red Schoolhouse.” Since 1981, more than 10,000 Chicago students have taken the Schoolhouse course as it expanded beyond the College to include graduate students, students in the Graduate School of Business and Law School at Chicago. Thousands more have felt the influence of the Schoolhouse through writing workshops developed for individual University programs, McEnerney said.

the influence of the Schoolhouse through writing workshops developed for individual University programs, McEnerney said.

The “Schoolhouse approach” has several distinctive features, according to Colomb and McEnerney. Its curriculum blends a “process” approach, which emphasizes the stages that good writers typically follow, with its unique formal approach, which emphasizes how particular features on the page will evoke predictable responses from readers. It teaches “top down”— centering the program on the upper-level course that focuses on the writing students will do after they leave the University. And it mixes large lectures with small writing studios, in a way few writing programs do.

The “Little Red Schoolhouse,” Colomb said, is now widely known and used at colleges and universities throughout the world.

In addition to *Style*, Williams wrote several other books aimed at helping writers. *The Craft of Research*, written with two longtime colleagues, Colomb and Wayne C. Booth, helps advanced students plan, carry out and report on research in any field. In *The Craft of Argument*, Williams and Colomb examined written arguments in general. Most recently, Booth, Colomb, and Williams rewrote the book that for a half-century had been the Bible for dissertations, Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*.

Williams received many awards throughout his career, including the University’s Quantrell Award for undergraduate teaching excellence, and the Golden Pen Award in 2006 for lifetime contributions to legal writing from The Institute of Legal Writing.

“Joe’s truest aim was always to help writers. We would publish our new research first for writers to use and only then for our colleagues to study,” said Colomb. “Joe wanted people to use what he knew. His most satisfying moments were when he received out-of-the-blue messages thanking him for helping a stranger: ‘You helped me get through my dissertation.’”

A longtime resident of Chicago’s Hyde Park neighborhood, he is survived by his wife, Joan Steck (nee Paddock); children Joseph (Christine) Williams, Dave (Patty) Steck, Megan (Phil) Beckert, Christopher Williams and Oliver Steck; and grandchildren, Katherine and Nicholas Williams, Lily and Calvin Beckert, Owen and Matilde Steck, and Eleanor Steck. He is also survived by his first wife Carol Williams, his brother James (Jackie) Williams, and his nieces and nephews.

Memorial services will be held at 3 p.m. Tuesday, March 11 at The First Unitarian Church of Chicago, 5650 S. Woodlawn Ave.



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