

One man's meat

One of our girls gave me a book for Christmas, “One Man’s Meat,” by E.B. White. We agreed to start a little book club, just the two of us — coffee once a month to talk about it.

The book is a collection of monthly columns White wrote for Harper’s after leaving Manhattan to take up farming in Maine. That was the appeal for our daughter, who spent one summer on a farm in Maine and loves revisiting it in her imagination.

For me, the attraction was White’s prose. Adults identify him with *The New Yorker*, where he wrote for almost 60 years. Our children know him as the author of “Charlotte’s Web” and “Stuart Little.” Grammar enthusiasts associate him with “The Elements of Style,” which he wrote with his old English professor from Cornell, William Strunk Jr.

In all of these works, White’s writing is clean, brief and engaging, a conversation with the reader. Here he is talking about his new brooder stove for keeping his chicks warm: “The thermometer now registers 68 degrees and the chicks are standing round with their collars turned up, blowing on their hands and looking like a snow-removal gang under the El on a bitter winter’s midnight.”

Compare that with a passage from another of our presents, the GE Universal Remote instruction manual: “Sometimes the first code that ‘works’ with your device may operate only a few functions of your device. There may be another code in the code list that performs more functions. Continue the auto code search as directed above until the best code is found.”

The contrast between these two accounts tells us something useful about what college students should study. STEM majors (science, technology, engineering and math) are increasingly popular, as are pre-professional tracks like nursing and business. The humanities (philosophy, history, English, languages, arts) now account for only 11 percent of degrees at elite research universities.

This is a bad trend, and not just for the faculties who teach students how to write. When I was a young man representing the government in the Supreme Court, I

noticed that the surest test of a good lawyer was the ability to explain really complicated laws (ERISA, Medicare and Medicaid, energy regulation) in language my mom could understand. The most persuasive arguments are also the plain and simple ones.

Clear expression isn't just essential for getting one's point across. When I am teaching a class I find that if I can't translate my ideas about the law into another idiom, I don't really understand it myself.

Part of my job, now that I am president of Catholic University, is getting reports and reviewing the work of finance and accounting professionals — the university's audited financial statements, the judgments of credit rating agencies, the recommendations of our board and professional advisers about the allocation of our investment portfolio. I am no expert in these matters, but I am responsible for how they are managed. For that reason, I prefer to hire people who can express themselves in words I can understand.

It's the same in science and medicine. People like Carlo Rovelli and Atul Gawande are influential in large part because they can make themselves understood in clear prose. And when I go to the doctor, I like to know what he is going to do to me and why.

This is not to say that everyone should major in English. It is to say, though, that learning to speak and write clearly is essential to success in all the disciplines that young people are flocking to these days. As White and his old professor put it, "Although there is no substitute for merit in writing, clarity comes closest to being one."

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