

UNWRITTEN RULES

Some Guidelines For A First Paper

Rev November 10, 2010

Thank you so very much for turning out for this second-ever session on first papers for new members. Our first of these workshops last year was well received, and we have incorporated this year some improvements that were suggested a year ago. We hope this session proves worthwhile and will appreciate your feedback later on...

For an organization that is over 150 years old, we have accumulated very few hard and fast rules – and many of those are unwritten (which is something of a challenge for newcomers). None of these appear in our constitution, which is our only rule book: they are, rather, matters of custom and tradition. Our intention this evening is to share these do's and don'ts, and to try to give you a little perspective on how they got that way. For most of our rules there have been some notably successful exceptions over time, and we will mention some of those, too. There have also emerged over the years several long-lived myths which are simply untrue, but which refuse to go away: we'll discuss them, as well.

It's worth bearing in mind that, for many, your Literary Club papers will be a different kind of writing for a different kind of audience. Don't think of it as a scholarly paper for an academic audience. While a few academic groundrules do apply, the primary purpose of your paper is not to display scholastic skill, but to entertain and inform an audience for whom your paper will probably address subject matter that is new and – hopefully – interesting.

1. For openers, the Club expects that your papers will be your original work, not previously published or presented elsewhere. There was once an awkward incident involving a local CEO who read a first paper he had had written for him to deliver. It was quickly apparent, when he attempted to deliver it, that he had not seen the paper before. He was not seen at the L. C. again.

2. Much advice has been given about subject matter for Literary Club papers. There are no hard rules: you may write about virtually any subject. You may want to consider the wise counsel of the late Bob Hilton: write about some aspect of your self, your life, your experiences, and the world you live in. (A word about Bob Hilton: the Club never had a more devoted member. At one point about twenty years ago, almost half the membership had been recruited by Bob. He worked ceaselessly to attract interesting and literate men, and to promote good papers. He was the driving force behind several fine anthologies of “best papers” which you can find in the library and consult, if you choose: they make good reading and are fine examples for emulation. Bob believed strongly that the best papers draw on personal experience, and for some years he used to give new members a brilliant little book by Louis Auchincloss on this theme, called A Writer’s Capital.)

3. There has long been a myth suggesting a prohibition against writing about your professional field. This is totally untrue. I have been unable to track down the source of this one. Men of the cloth should feel free to write on faith and religion... doctors on the wonders of medicine and healing... lawyers on interesting or arcane legal matters. The world of business is a fertile field: I wrote some years ago a paper on Procter & Gamble that was very well received. Kingston Fletcher has written fine papers on P&G and on the Baldwin United bankruptcy. But you should avoid papers that are too technical or esoteric to be of general interest. This means that papers written for a professional society will almost certainly be too arcane for Monday nights at the L.C.

4. There is another colorful antique myth that, in the years following wars, you can only read a paper on your wartime experiences for two years following the end of hostilities. This seems to trace to the post - Civil War, Spanish American War, and First World War eras... and suggests the membership quickly wearied of postwar recollections of military adventures. I don’t know how true this is or ever was – it’s not in writing anywhere that I can find. We have had, in recent years, some positively brilliant papers on World War II memories that were a full fifty years old. (Examples: Lee Davis, Morse Johnson, Lou Prince). Feel free to write about your time in

uniform! Attention younger members: I can't recall ever hearing a paper on Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War...

5. You should avoid travelogues ("On Tuesday our cruise ship dropped anchor in Naples harbor"). Our members include many seasoned travelers who know the world pretty well. It is hard to hold their interest with descriptions of your cruise up the Nile. But it is entirely acceptable to write about foreign places as a setting for a story, or papers dealing with history, art, architecture or archaeology, for instance.

6. It is generally prudent to avoid current politics, unless you are adept at such commentary, or have special knowledge or experience. Many feel that it is best to avoid highly controversial political issues in L.C. papers. Politics past seem to be safe territory, but be cautious about present divisive issues, parties or candidates. There have been, however, some splendid papers on municipal and County chicanery. There was a memorable expose of behind the scenes dealings involving the Bengals' new stadium. And the late Bishop Herb Thompson regularly brought papers advancing extremely liberal views: but the papers were well written and well read, and they were received thoughtfully by the membership.

7. From time to time a member may write a paper that is an appreciation of another author's work... or one based on interesting letters or an exchange of correspondence by third parties, often from times past. These can be entirely appropriate subjects, and have resulted in some fine papers, but a "watchout" comes with them. Remember that your papers are meant to be primarily your own work. Avoid quoting so extensively from another author's work, or correspondence, that you wind up reading a paper that is more the writing of someone else than your own.

8. A very important word on documentation. It is essential that all quotations and citations from any source other than your own writings be fully attributed. It is not necessary to read footnotes or attributions aloud as you deliver your paper: this could be quite interruptive to the flow of your presentation. Neither is it required that there be footnotes executed in the precise form directed by the MLA Style Book. But attributions should be present in the text of your paper. If your paper has been importantly

influenced by another source, it is advisable to cite that source even though there are no direct quotations.

9. Avoid the use of illustrations, graphics, handouts, power point etc. (An exception that worked – The Rev. Paul Long’s paper on participating in a 1960’s freedom march in the deep South made telling use of racist hatred leaflets: his experiences were so daunting that there was not the slightest murmur or grumbling about his handouts!) The L.C. has a long tradition discouraging anything like an audio-visual presentation. It’s all about the writing!

10. As a general guideline, your paper should be at least thirty minutes long, “but no more than forty-five unless it’s very, very good!” – (a Bob Hilton quote that has stood the test of time). This translates to a word count of about 6,000 to 7,000. Budget papers are generally no more than fifteen minutes long, or about 2,000 to 3,000 words.

Papers that are too short can be as unwelcome as those that are too long. In recent years we have had a paper that took only seven minutes, and left the members wondering. Another ran to fifty-five minutes and might have been taken from a doctoral dissertation: few of the survivors understood a word of it!

11. And here is a cardinal rule: it is always a good idea to read your paper aloud to someone, and time it. This is an essential rule of preparation. I emphasize the value of reading it aloud: do this more than once! You will find errors, repetitions, inconsistencies, or awkward phrasing that simply aren’t apparent in reading a paper to yourself. Ignore this rule at your peril...

12. Adjust the microphone to the proper height, so that it is just below your mouth, and speak just over it.

13. It is very important that you read slowly, and clearly. One of our better writers is also one of our fastest readers... and the excellence of his papers is sometimes lost on the aging listeners. The reading room is a large area, and the average hearing level of our members is in steep decline. Slow and

loud is good! Never lower your voice for dramatic effect: the effect you achieve will likely be inaudibility!

14. Have with you a copy of your paper, signed and dated, to leave with the Secretary of the Club. He will also appreciate your sending him an electronic copy for the Club website.

And finally, If you have any questions regarding your paper, feel free to consult with any senior member, or with any member of the Board of Management, or with those who sponsored your membership application.

With regard to the delivery of your paper, you may also want to seek advice from Kingston Fletcher who has offered to work with any new member who would like suggestions on how best to present his paper. For more on the delivery of your paper, over to Kingston...