

## English Is My First Language

When people ask me what I majored in at school, I'll often joke, "English, and it's come in handy because I still speak it." In fact, it has come in handy, although most people wouldn't consider English as the obvious major for a career in Design and Marketing. A career in Design and Marketing was also not an obvious choice while I was studying at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

A lot of memories fade over time, but even now, more than two decades after I attended UMass, I can clearly remember my fear of the future. I had majored in English because I enjoyed reading and I enjoyed writing.

Great, but how does that help me make a living? What does all that have to do with a career? A future? I was a married student. The "semester" I had taken off to travel through Europe had stretched to two years. I came back with a Dutch girl I was (and still am) madly in love with. We got married so she could get a green card and qualify for Financial Aid. We started a family and all of a sudden I was not just a student, I was an employee, working two jobs to feed the family. I was a husband and a father. But what was I really going to be? A journalist? It didn't appeal to me. A professor? How could I justify more years of studying with a family to support? A writer? I wanted to write, but who was going to pay me to go write a great novel?

The closer I got to graduation, the more I realized I didn't know what to do next. My future was a blank canvas on which I could paint my masterpiece. It was a blank page on which I could write my life's story. The problem was-- I had writer's block. All I saw was.... blank.

In hindsight, I can see that to get past writer's block you just start writing. You can always go back and edit, change, or even re-start the whole story.

Trying to work it all out wasn't getting me anywhere. My future actually started to get written by play instead of work. In whatever spare time I had, I enjoyed tinkering with games. I'd think, "Wouldn't this game be better if you could do this?" "Wouldn't that be more fun if you added that?" I probably got the game bug at an early age, when my father worked at Milton Bradley and occasionally brought a game home.

By the time I was at UMass, my father had started his own recruiting business specializing in the Toy Industry. One of my part-time jobs was helping with recruiting. I would call someone at Parker Bros. and say, "Hey, I have a great opportunity for you at Milton Bradley." Then I would add, "I have another opportunity for you. I'd love to come in and show you some of my game concepts...." Almost before I knew it, I had started my own little company designing games and toys.

What does all of this have to do with English? Two things come immediately to mind:

- 1) Creating a game is a lot like writing a story. What is the premise? Why will people care? Thinking things through... if this happens, then that will be the reaction, which will cause this, which will lead to the ending. The ending ties it all together and leaves people satisfied.
- 2) Writing game rules is an incredible challenge. You need to clearly and succinctly explain how to play and you need to do it so that any dummy can understand. If you take too long, or make it too complicated, people will give up and go back to whatever game they already know.

Inventing games is a little like playing the lottery. If your game is the one chosen from the thousands out there, it can pay big. Companies will pay you a royalty percentage on whatever sales they get. Second prize is getting an “advance”, where a company will pay you \$5,000, \$10,000... whatever... to hold your game while they decide if they will produce it or not.

To supplement my income, and feed the family, I also started consulting for companies. Some had a hot license, but no game to go with it. Others needed better game rules. I was spending most of my time writing rules and copy. Instead of writing novels, I was coming up with novel new game designs. Instead of writing plays, I was writing about play.

### The Name of the Game

Copy writing was a career path that had never occurred to me. Making a living by writing words for some corporation? I never thought about who wrote a company’s technical manuals, annual reports, press releases or packaging.

I expanded from writing rules inside the box to writing copy on the outside. The copy on the front of a box needs to be short and sweet. You need to grab consumers’ attention quickly while they’re walking down a store aisle. With just a few words, you need to intrigue them, give them a clear sense of what the product is, and compel them to pick up the box. My vocabulary, built up from lots of reading and writing, was a huge help.

The name of a product can be a key to success. It is usually important to be short, descriptive and compelling. Naming a radio controlled car that twists and turns might lead you to “*Twister*”. Unfortunately, *Twister* is a registered trademark of Hasbro for their game. Then you’ll need to think of synonyms like, Vortex, Whirlwind, Tornado... or think of other ways to describe the action, like Tantrum, Whipster or Rockin’ Roller.

It can also be helpful to play on words or use a phrase similar to one consumers already know. For example, you might have a skill and action game, like *Operation* with a pirate theme and a skeleton. The phrase “Shiver me timbers” is associated with pirates, so “*Rattle Me Bones*” could be a name that says “pirates” and also describes the action of the game.

Another key communicator can be a tagline or descriptor that can go underneath the name to help reinforce what the product is. The *Rattle Me Bones* game might be “*The*

*game of pirates' treasure and scary skeleton's*". Another standard feature is a picture showing the key action of the game with description above or below it. The picture might show fingers trying to grab gold from underneath a shaking skeleton. The line of copy underneath might say, "*Can you grab the gold without shaking and waking the pirate's skeleton?*"

The communication on the front needs to be interesting enough that people will pick up the box. You can then use the back of the box to tell them more about how to play, what is inside the box, cross sell other games, etc. Of course, if the front doesn't intrigue them enough to pick it up, the copy on the back doesn't matter.

Writing package copy was similar to writing assignments at UMass. I had to ask myself questions that professors had posed to me. Who is the audience? What are you trying to communicate? Why will they care? How can you make your words compelling or intriguing?

My little company, and family, had developed for about four years. I had more contacts and clients to consult with, but still hadn't hit the big inventor pay day. I also now had a little son and a baby daughter. When Coleco, the home of Cabbage Patch Kids, asked me to join them as their Principle Game Designer, I decided a steady pay check and a corporate career were worth a try.

I clearly remember one of my first days on the job. I was doing some paperwork when the Vice President of Design stopped by my desk. "Mark", he said, "put that aside for now. I need you to work on something important here. We need to play this game all afternoon and decide whether we like it or not." I was getting paid to do what I really enjoyed.

I designed word games to go in the Scrabble line, trivia games to go with Trivial Pursuit, card games, entertainment licensed games and had a great time thinking along with the my bosses on how we should communicate it all to consumers and be successful.

### Making a Mark in Marketing

At one point, the head of Marketing came to me and said, "Your design work is great, but you really see the whole picture. You enjoy the Sales part, the business part, figuring out what to say to consumers. You should move to Marketing." My experience has been that there is usually a little friction between Design and Marketing. Design thinks they come up with wonderful ideas that Marketing gets credit for. Marketing usually does presentations to executives. They usually present the product to retailers and often represent the company in Public Relations.

My initial reaction to moving to Marketing was, "Marketing? Those people are all talk. They don't put anything concrete on the table that you can criticize. They just try and talk you into believing they're right...." Then I thought, "Yeah. I can do that."

I had already been focusing on how to communicate to consumers with words and pictures. What I wasn't ready for was how to communicate ideas inside an organization.

I've had bosses who are big picture people. They see the forest. I've also had bosses who relish the details and focus on the trees. My first real Marketing boss was a woman who focused on the bark. In one particular case, it served me well. I clearly remember the pain and frustration of mastering the art of the internal memo. I would send her a memo on what I thought we needed to do, and it would come back corrected and edited in red pencil. I often had to re-write the same memo to her several times—even though she knew what I was communicating and what we should do! This seemed outrageous. Didn't she know I was an English major? I knew how to write. I could write a short story. I could write an essay. I could write a poem... a freakin' haiku for crying out loud!

It became obvious that memos were not novels or short stories. People don't have time to read a short story at work. You can call upon those exercises of compare and contrast. You can call upon those essays to prove to a professor why you had the correct answer, but you have to do it all so it can be read, absorbed and reacted to in a minute or two. If the memo is too long, there's a good chance it will be set aside. If a paragraph is too long, people won't be able to skim it and they'll skip it instead. Finally, painfully, I mastered the art of the memo and speaking in bullet points.... Here is the situation. We could do A, B or C. Doing "C" is best because X, Y and Z. The next steps are 1, 2, 3.

Of course today, in a world of e-mails and Blackberries, memos are a luxury. Today's equivalent is, "Phil, Have an issue with X. Suggest Y. Let's talk." Complete sentences are too time consuming. In the case of text messaging, complete words are too time consuming. "Phil, R U here? C me."

### Playing Games and Telling Stories

I relate to much of life as games and stories. Business is a game. There is a goal, there is strategy, competition and a winner. You keep score by market share, profits, etc. I have played the game well enough to raise to the tops in the business, working for the biggest Toy company, Mattel, running about \$1.5 billion in business on brands like *Hot Wheels*, *Matchbox*, *Uno*, *Pictionary*, *Harry Potter*, *Yugioh*, *Batman* and *Superman*.

Within the game of business there are stories. A commercial is a type of story for a consumer. There is a situation/premise, some action or conflict and a resolution. Most have an overt or subliminal happy ending. Usually, Product X is key to the happy ending.

Mattel's *Uno Attack* game is a good example. The game is a bit of a cross between Uno and Russian Roulette. Instead of giving your neighbor a card to "Take 2 (extra cards)" You might give a card that says "Hit 3". That means you have to hit the machine 3 times. Each time, the machine randomly may not shoot out any cards, it might shoot one or two, or the player could get stuck with several cards that it shoots out.

In the commercial, a family (Mom, Dad, Son, Daughter) is having fun around the table. Dad gets a smug look on his face while he holds up one card and says, “Uno”. The little daughter hands him a “Take 3” card and we watch the drama unfold. Dad, with much fear and trepidation, pushes the button. Eight cards fly out. Dad loses. Daughter wins. Family laughs and has fun. The happy ending for Mom is her whole family sitting down together and having fun – thanks to *Uno Attack*. The happy ending for kids, who generally don’t have that much power in their world, is that they can be a winner. They can even beat adults – again, thanks to *Uno Attack*. The happy ending for Dad.... well, Dad’s generally don’t buy games anyway.

Creating commercials and telling stories has been a key to success in my career.

Selling to retailers is another form of story telling. I don’t mean fictionalizing the facts, I mean weaving the facts that lead them to the happy ending they are looking for. Retailers buy toys because they can either a) make money and/or b) drive consumers into their stores to find the hot Holiday items.

Crafting a retail presentation is just telling another story. It might sound something like... Once upon a time (last year) you had product A, B and C and you sold X in volume. Might be good, might be bad, but the point is, it could always be better. Now, along come our protagonists, new products 1, 2 and 3. Wow, 1 does this. Hey, look at 2... could it possibly do that? Yes! Number 3 is the real wonder... there has never been a product that does this AND that before. It looks like the future is sales of X+++ , a happy ending for all concerned.

### Speaking English

I started out by joking about “speaking English.” In fact, I credit my ability to communicate verbally on my English background. At the core of many of my English classes was the challenge of analyzing something, forming thoughts and opinions and then clearly communicating what those thoughts and opinions were. Being able to tell a story, or come up with the dialogue that fits the character and situation were key to most of my writing classes.

If you can analyze and express opinions in written form, or write words that tell stories and communicate ideas, you can also speak those words, stories and opinions. For some people it may take a little practice, especially if you are speaking on camera or in front of large groups, but if you train your brain to come up with the right words, there isn’t much difference between writing them down or speaking them.

Forming the right words and speaking them has been a core reason for my success so far. I have analyzed situations and expressed opinions. I have created and communicated a clear vision for the future so that employees know where we are going and want to help us get there. I have also communicated on camera on shows like *Good Morning America*, and *Nightline*. One of my most fun PR assignments was being Mattel’s judge on *The Apprentice*. It was my job to review the toy concepts created by two teams, chose the winner and communicate to Donald Trump, to the two teams and 20 million people

watching who won and why. It called for analysis along with comparing and contrasting. At the same time, was also conscious of the role I was playing in a drama. I was delivering the climax to Act II. My character was supposed let the drama build and then deliver clear resolution. The viewers didn't just need an answer, they needed to see why the winners won and the losers lost.

English has been my first language. Although I didn't see it at the time, the tasks the University and my professors gave me have helped provide a career I never imagined. Skills I developed in studying and utilizing English have been core to success in Design, Marketing, communicating to consumers, retailers, employees, partners and the public, and to becoming a leader in business.

Thanks for providing that and for the opportunity to relive some almost ancient history.