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## **OH TO BE A WRITER**

*"In order to write factually, you have to tell it like it is."*

*"If a thought is about you, and it is written by you,  
then you write: 'I am.'"*

SO RESPOND MY students when asked to identify helpful writing paradigms. After listing these handy homilies, they confidently move to review their next writing assignment: a one page autobiography. Several brows furrow, and one student asks, "What do you mean, 'write this paper in E-Prime'?" "Ahh," I reply. "Good question."

Dr. Kenneth G. Johnson introduced me to E-Prime, the writings of D. David Bourland, Jr., and not coincidentally the E-Prime autobiography assignment, when I studied general semantics as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Bourland, a student of Korzybski, coined the term E-Prime to signify English minus the verb "to be" — *is, am, are, were, was, be, being, been*. Bourland suggests that writing and speaking without using any forms of the verb "to be" can assist the user in attaining a kind of vigorous clarity. More importantly, he notes that E-Prime functions as

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an additional extensional device as it provides a means for making more accurate mappings.

I offer this background information, along with a copy of Bourland's article, "To Be or Not To Be: E-Prime as a Tool for Critical Thinking," printed in *Et cetera* 46, no. 3, to my students. (1) Now, disarmed of their writing caveats and looking decidedly concerned, they take their assignments home.

The following week, before discussing their work, I ask the students to evaluate the exercise and then write their responses to the assignment.

1. Relate your experience in writing your autobiography in E-Prime. What proved most difficult? Easiest?

2. Bourland suggests that writing in E-Prime keeps you honest because you focus on the territory (what you do) rather than map (what you say you are.) After writing this autobiography, what do you think?

3. What if you could have used *to be* verbs in this exercise. Would the picture of you seem different if you had said "I am" or "I was"?

4. Will you use E-Prime in the future?

And what did they think, feel believe, sense, learn, identify, observe?

"It forced me to pay more attention to what I wanted to say. It's easy to say 'I am a mother,' but what does that really mean?"

"I might develop my work more if I had to fully explain myself. I know I should do this anyway, but if I write in E-Prime, I couldn't get around it."

"E-Prime forces you to follow some of the rules of general semantics — you become more conscious of maps and your extensional world."

"After writing this paper, I think of myself as having more confidence and strength. I made a clearer map of me and how I see the territory. I feel like I learned a lot about myself."

"The most difficult part was getting out of the habit of labeling myself as 'being' something. If I can eliminate some labeling, it will be easier for a reader to understand what I mean."

"Without E-Prime, I would have made more absolute statements about what are essentially self-perceptions."

"Even while writing this response, I've noticed how many times I've used 'to be' — it gets annoying."

"I don't think I would have sounded as creative if I had used 'to be' verbs. 'To be' verbs do not really describe anything accurately or interestingly. This assignment has made me more aware of how often I use 'to be' and the effect it has on my writing. I will try to cut down."

At the end of the semester, when asked to evaluate the most helpful or valuable assignments in class, many students named the E-Prime autobiography. Several noticed that they had learned how to talk more positively about themselves. Some suggested that using E-Prime helped clarify the meanings of intensional and extensional orientations for them. Others observed an improvement in their ability to write from a clearer analytical perspective.

One student said she liked the E-Prime exercise best because she had always wanted to be a writer and now, she happily proclaimed, "I am a writer!". A student who knew how to listen in E-Prime tactfully advised, "Maryanne, you probably learned how to write better." Yep.

## NOTE

1. Bourland's article also appears in *To Be or Not: An E-Prime Anthology*, edited by D. David Bourland, Jr., and Paul Dennithorne Johnston, available from the International Society for General Semantics. In slightly expanded form it also appears as a chapter in K. G. Johnson's *Thinking Creatically*, available from the Institute of General Semantics.