



Write  
Company  
Plus

Dr. Kathleen A. Begley  
The Write Woman  
KBegley@writecompanyplus.com  
610-429-1562

# How to Re-Educate Yourself

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

**Note to Readers:** Here's another offbeat blogletter on business communication and current events from Write Company Plus, a corporate communications training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

Michelle Obama has well-toned arms. I have skinny arms. Michelle Obama is close to 6 feet tall. I'm closer to 5 feet tall, Michelle Obama is the mother of two daughters. I am the mother of three dogs. But Obama, wife of President Barack Obama, and I do have one important thing in common. We both are the first women in our families to graduate from college.

During the Obamas' recent trip to Europe, the First Lady gave a motivational talk at a school for underprivileged girls in London. She pointed out that there was little in her childhood from a Chicago family of modest means that would have predicted her place on the world stage. She attributed her current fame and fortune to one thing: education. Wow, was she speaking my language.

As the daughter of Irish immigrants, I was in no way groomed to get a higher education. Because of strong scores on standardized tests and with the lobbying of several godsend teachers, I won a scholarship to Duquesne University. At the time, my parents didn't even know what a college was. After receiving my bachelor's degree, I worked my way through graduate school at Villanova University. Then, in the 1990s, I returned to the classroom to get my doctorate from a brand new program at Wilmington University.

While in no way in the same league as Michelle Obama, who has degrees from the prestigious Brown and Yale Universities, I, too, am a walking testimony to value of education. I have the kind of life, including a small business, a beautiful home, and a lovely family, that everyone dreams of. Often, while sitting out on a spacious deck watching my three fur balls rumble and tumble their way to canine exhaustion, I often think: what's not to like?

In my work as a corporate communications trainer, participants in their 20s and 30s often ask my opinion about their applying to graduate school. Here's my stock answer: "In life, you can lose your house and your spouse and your computer mouse, but nobody ever shows up and asks you to return your education. It's forever. So, apply to school, go to school, stay in school – learning is never wasted."

I bring up this topic at this time because, according to numerous sources, millions of Americans working in dying industries are reevaluating their careers in the wake of the economic meltdown. Many are planning to go back to school to qualify for jobs in hot fields such as education, health care, and energy. I believe it's a perfectly wonderful time to beef up your brainpower. Here are some thoughts about proceeding:

**Consider online education.** Years ago, I attended a year at the University of San Francisco Law School. Young and foolish at the time, I abandoned the pursuit for a man. As you know, California is still there. The man isn't. To this day, it bugs me that I threw away my law degree at a period in life when I had little to do but go to school. Today I travel almost every week on business and am unable to attend classes. But guess what? One of the Washington Post's many subsidiaries



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recently launched the first online law school, which makes it feasible for me to finish. Now I must decide if I want to add frequent studier to my existing title of frequent flyer.

**Think certification.** Degree programs are wonderful. But, if you already have one or want to focus on a single topic, consider getting certified in a field such as multimedia or project management. Many colleges and organizations offer short-term programs giving you a fast and marketable credential.

**Research financial help.** I recently received a beautiful brochure from my regional community college in eastern Pennsylvania. The marketing piece contains a full page urging everyone to apply for scholarships and loans. Under the federal stimulus package, billions of dollars are being earmarked for community colleges. You deserve some of them.

**Enroll in a preparatory course.** If you have to take admissions tests such as the graduate record or law school exams to get into full-time study, you should consider taking a course to familiarize yourself with the process. Unknown in my day, these classes give people a definite test-taking advantage.

**Line up recommendations.** I recently wrote a graduate school recommendation for two people. They both got into the colleges of their choice, and attributed their success to my letter. They're wrong, but references do count.

**Build a team.** Taking classes as an adult is difficult. For one thing, you don't have a dormitory of friends in the same tedious boat. So, before you enroll, ask a few friends to act as your study buddies, and keep you on track.

**Keep your eye on the end game.** Inevitably, in any long-term educational pursuit, you'll occasionally wonder why you're putting yourself through such an ordeal. Two words: Michelle Obama.

*Dr. Kathleen Begley owns and operates Write Company Plus communications training outside Philadelphia. She has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at [KBegley@writecompanyplus.com](mailto:KBegley@writecompanyplus.com). She responds to everybody*