

Play-by-Play: Literate Activity On and Off the Football Field

Annie Hackett

Wes Gaddis, Little League Youth Football coach for the Junior Varsity division of the Bloomington Cardinals, engages with writing in a variety of ways every time he coaches his team. *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* intern Annie Hackett and Illinois State University Writing Program Coordinator Maegan Gaddis (who is married to Wes) sat down with Wes to learn all about how his football-related research and writing strategies have evolved over the years.

ANNIE: So we want to start the interview by asking you about any and all kinds of writing that you might do as part of your work as a football coach. This doesn't just have to include text with words, it can also include visuals, layouts, maps, pictures—anything, any type of communication.

WES: Playbooks are basically the beginning of the circle, I guess. Then from there, it goes to installs, schedules, and how to implement the playbook, and writing out the progression of how we're going to do that so your coaches know exactly what they need to know. Then you get into practice plans . . . these are the goals that we're trying to achieve, what's helping us get there, how much time are we spending on this, that, and the other, and that's a constant thing. Scouting reports—so when we play teams, we will watch film and do a lot of data entry on the film. And that's another thing: just the data entry in labeling film. With every play you have to go through and label and define basically what is going on in that play. That basically helps you spit out your scouting reports to figure out what this team does, what their tendencies are, those sorts of things. That would be pretty much the writing standpoint. There is a lot of communication that involves kind of making our own language. And there's a lot of communication via hand signals. So we do, in essence, out of the English

language, make our own language. We can sit there and talk right in front of people and they have no idea what we're talking about, but we all know what we're doing. But that's never written. Those calls can be named whatever—we let kids name them so they remember them. We let them actually make the hand signals a lot of times because they remember them. For whatever reason, my brain doesn't work like that. My idea of what is obvious isn't always obvious to them. It's usually easier to leave it up to them if you can. That's pretty much the communication process that goes on throughout the whole thing.

ANNIE: Tell us a little bit about, if you can remember, how you learned these types of communications. Did you learn them at school, did you learn them by doing them, did somebody else teach you how to do them?

WES: Right, a lot of it's through experience, playing football when I was younger, and even as a young football player, I knew I wanted to coach, and I got in and started drawing plays, started trying to figure out what I was doing, you know, based on what I'd seen in my own experience. For playbooks, I'd seen and been given those kinds of things, so you start trying to develop a playbook at a young age. It's trial and error, you know, there is no standard in coaching football for a playbook or communication or terms, so there are a lot of different ways to skin the cat. You kind of try ways that you see, that you've learned from other people. I did a lot of research. Before the Internet it was, man, any kind of book you could find, any magazine article you could find, you'd find pamphlets sometimes that some guy got at a clinic and gave you. I mean, you'd read anything. The Internet has made the information so much more readily available that you get a lot of other exposures to the ways other people are doing it. Before the Internet, no one really knew how other people were doing them, and once people start seeing it, now you see this integration of different systems that are coming together and making new systems and there's just a lot of different ways to do it. It's just based on the individual guy and how he wants to develop it. And then through coaching—I've coached for fifteen, sixteen years, I've worked with a lot of good coaches and basically got the experience and learned how they write their playbook. I had to learn their playbook, their terminology, their communication system, their practice plans. So a lot of it's just been experience and just researching what you could do on your own and trying to find new ideas.

ANNIE: So you're talking about researching ways to do things. Is there a particular moment when you realized, "I figured it out?"

WES: Every six months, every year. *laughs* No seriously, you have that moment where you're like, "Oh I should have been doing this!" and it might be a slight change, but it helps. And this is the way most coaches go: as you're younger, you want all these options and to be able to do all these different things and you want to have these things readily available to you so you try to make your system and playbook. It becomes pretty complex. And as you get older, most coaches do less.

The next best development was Excel spreadsheets. We started putting these things in Excel spreadsheets and making these different formats and trying to create this spreadsheet that you could then make filters for, and the filters would then help you see what they're doing more, how many of this or how many of that, to the right, to the left, those kinds of things. They helped. But they were very hard to maintain, very hard to develop. If anything ever got weird, somebody had to go back and go do all this back work and see . . .

MAEGAN: Where'd that formula get messed up?

WES: Well, a company called Hudl came out probably eight years ago and they basically had a system that they made available to high schools where you could get your film, watch it on the computer, label it on the computer, put your playbook on it. It gave you playwriting tools, it does its own scouting reports, it's amazing. You just do all the data entry and say, "Here, collect me out a bunch of scouting reports" and it'll give you more stuff than you could ever even digest. So that's been the greatest, newest, latest development, and it's a hundred times better than anything we've tried to do or had before. It actually gets us on the level of college football teams and pro football teams in what we actually have the power to do. And it's great because you can communicate instantly with the kids from these things. They have access to them, we can send messages to them, you can monitor if they're watching the film that you're asking them to, you can monitor if they're looking at their playbook. It's just, it's an unbelievable tool and that's where we are today.

ANNIE: Yeah, it involves everything.

WES: And actually I have a couple different teams that I have Hudl for. I was doing high school the last few years, and I have Downs' Tri-Valley's Hudl. And this year the little league organization that I came to coach for, we got them to actually start using Hudl.

ANNIE: I'm sure they love that!

WES: Everyone loves it because it gives everyone access to watch films. Before we didn't even film these kids, these games never even got filmed, so the kids didn't get to watch themselves play. If a parent couldn't make it, you didn't get to watch them play. Grandparents never got to watch them play. Now everybody can have access to it, so from that standpoint, that's really great. In high school and stuff, no one else had access to it besides us. We're a little more lenient here. That is the one thing, the privacy. Who has access to your account? If someone got in your account, they could get all your information and use it against you. I've never heard of it, never known of it happening, but everybody worries about it. But that's kind of the progression. There were some playwriting programs, something called "Playmaker Pro" I used for a

few years, and it was just a program on your computer. It would help you draw plays and label players, write notes and stuff, but it had nothing to do with the film. With Hudl you can attach film to plays, you can do all these things.

ANNIE: So how do you write your playbooks now? Is it on the computer?

WES: Yes, I do everything through Hudl now because it gives everyone access to it. I'm actually pulling plays out of old playbooks and re-entering these things (Figure 2).

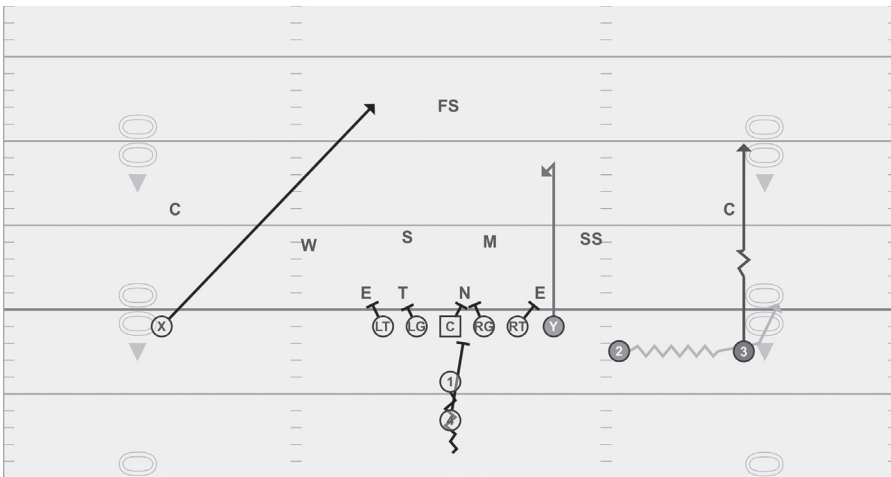


Figure 2: A computer-generated play created by Wes Gaddis.

MAEGAN: Today's technology.

ANNIE: Yeah, that's crazy.

WES: And again, I've always said the same thing on these plays, but my wording changes all the time to try to simplify it, to make it better defined, easier to understand.

ANNIE: Have you ever had to, or ever tried to, teach anybody how to do the kind of work you do?

WES: Yes.

ANNIE: How'd that go?

WES: Never very successfully. Things have changed and developed so much and at such a fast rate that I felt like I've always been trying to stay on par with it, but to teach someone when I have all these experiences built up as I've done this for years . . . you can give them advice but, again, it's your own individual thing. It has to work in your brain. My system might not work in your brain, so don't use my system if it doesn't perfectly work in your brain,

you know what I mean? What I've had trouble with is actually having people help me with things like doing data entry into Hudl. They don't see things the way I see them, so sometimes they label them differently or they use different terminology than what I use and so then you have to define all the terminology. It's so experience-based that it's very hard to teach. I've never had very much time, where I could sit down for an hour a day for two weeks with someone. It's been trying to teach someone to do something in ten or fifteen minutes and see if they can help lighten the load on my shoulders and take some work off my table. So when I say it's unsuccessful, I've never invested much in it either, so it could be done, but I've never really, really taught anybody.

ANNIE: Can you think of any types of writing you did learn in school that help you write what you write now?

WES: Basic third and fourth grade English: how to write a sentence, how to use correct grammar. You have a misspelling or you have a word you mistyped that it autocorrects to something else. Everybody gets a big laugh out of that and to save yourself that, that is like the biggest driver to actually have correct grammar and sentence structure and all that kind of thing. I'm not a very good writer, I don't claim to be at all, but I have become proficient at communicating through writing to players. And most of that has been writing less and trying to simplify what I'm saying to them. We want to tell them too much, we want to do too much, we want the whole world open to us, and by having all that open to us, we really never get good at anything. We're kind of OK at a bunch of things.

ANNIE: Can you talk a little bit about the big picture of your writing? Who's affected by it? Is it just your players, other coaches you work with?

WES: Yeah, definitely the other coaches you work with and the players. Generally always on a football team, there's an offensive coordinator and a defensive coordinator and they ultimately make the plan of schematically what the team is going to do. They write the playbook and then from there that's how they communicate to their assistant coaches, "Okay, this is what I need you to teach this year. This is what your players, the positions that you're going to teach, need to be proficient at." So yeah, all coaches and players. Outside of that I can't imagine it affecting anybody besides the other team.

If you're not the head coach and you're the defensive coordinator—I've been in that position the last few years (Figure 3)—[the head coach] will let you draw it all up and do it all and then you've got to show them and they'll tell you what they don't like. They'll tell you what they want changed and then either you have to fight for what you want or concede to what they want changed. So, yeah, you can definitely have outside forces that influence what you write and how you write it and what you're responsible for.



Figure 3: Wes Gaddis is congratulated by his team after his defense keeps the opposing team from scoring.

MAEGAN: And that even goes into your defensive coordinating. You kind of are dictated somewhat by what you know the other team is going to do, right, based on the film that you’ve watched?

WES: Sure, you’re not dictated necessarily, but—

MAEGAN: It influences.

WES: Yeah, it better influence! We sit there and watch it all and study it all and figure it all out. I mean, there are a lot of decisions based on that, but it doesn’t necessarily . . . they don’t control what we do. They influence us. They put constraints on what you can and can’t do, what you should or should not do, I guess, because you can do anything, but you’re going to have consequences for whatever you do.

MAEGAN: I’ve watched every week, you’re changing little things based on the team information that you’ve got. So they do influence your writing on a weekly basis based in that aspect.

WES: Oh definitely.

ANNIE: We did already talk a little bit about how you feel about grammar and writing correctly, as well as simplifying and making things easy, but is there ever a “just right?”

WES: No, I don’t believe there’s ever a “just right,” there’s always a better way and I seemingly find myself always striving to find the better way and adapting.

ANNIE: Every time you write?

WES: Right, I could write the same playbook ten years ago, five years ago, and today and it'll be the exact same thing but it will be written and drawn in a different format, a different way to say the same thing. So yeah, I've never found the "just right." In fact, trying to write a kid's job in football is darn near impossible in the small space that you need to be able to get it in because you don't know what the other team is going to do and, therefore, you have to have either a rule that covers every situation in the world, which there isn't one, or thirty rules that cover thirty situations—and you can't cover it all.

ANNIE: Okay, for our last question, do you feel like you know anything, either important or something new, about the writing that you do in your work that you want to tell students who are still in school?

WES: Get on Hudl. Find a way to get some exposure to Hudl. If students want to get into coaching and contact a high school team around here and offer to help break down film for them, I bet you they'd be more than willing to say, "Oh yeah, no problem, we'll kind of walk you through it." I would get exposure to Hudl or a program like Hudl.

MAEGAN: Can we elaborate on that one a little more? So as you've reflected on all of the writing that you actually do for football, is there anything that you would tell readers about what you've learned about writing? Maybe when you were in Little League and you wanted to be a football coach and had no idea the amount of writing that you'd be doing?

WES: Oh, I got you. Define things, simplify things, and—

ANNIE: Make things as clear as possible?

WES: As clear as possible in the fewest words that you can use. The longer the sentence, the less it's going to be read, the less it's going to be remembered. If it's over ten words, they don't comprehend past word eight, I don't think. I don't know why that is. But . . . what I'm telling you might not be the right answer for you. Maybe you can do it in three sentences and I'm terrible at it. I don't necessarily know that my way is always the best way. I've exposed myself to as many experiences that I could get. So if could you do Hudl for one team one year and go do Hudl for another team the next year, that would be outstanding for you to see how two different people develop their systems differently. Once you understand two different systems, then you have a better idea of what you want to do. I've never come across somebody's system and went, "Oh that is exactly how I want to do it." I came out of it saying, "I really like that, I want to implement a lot of this, but I really like the way I do this." It becomes a mix. Another thing is to just research. Get

out and find a way to do it. Go look online. The resources are unbelievable. Free sources out the wazoo and guys that will take your money all day long to show you stuff. It's amazing, if you want the information, it's available for you nowadays. There is no "this is the way to do it," even at the pro level. There's not a school to go to, there's not someone who wrote a book that everybody goes, "That's the Bible on how to write a playbook and practice playing." Guys have written books, there's hundreds of them out there too, exactly labeled like that. I've read a bunch of them, parts of them. The key if you want to get into coaching is just find a way to expose yourself to it.

ANNIE: Cool, I think that's it. Thank you so much.



Annie Hackett is a senior publishing major at Illinois State University and a *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* intern. When she's not spending time with friends and family or singing with her a cappella group, you can find her at Chipotle. She's not exactly sure what to do with her English major, but she aspires to become a writer for the Chicago Blackhawks.