

The Art  
*of*  
Useful Writing

BY

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## *Preface*

Highest, hardest, and most important of the practical arts are those which occupy the serious domains of useful writing. And the masters of these difficult arts are needed today more than ever before. Why? Because their work is measured by its consequences. One profound argument by a Constitutional lawyer may change the lives of a hundred million people. One clear report on the effects of sulfanilamide may shift a scientist's thinking into fresh channels and lead to a revolutionary cure for a hitherto baffling disease. One terse magazine article on automobile accidents may move a score of government officials to brisk action and, in time, save ten thousand lives.

Useful writing deals ever with the realities. It aims to render some service to real people in their own world. In this larger meaning of the word, it is ever serious. But not necessarily solemn nor dull nor obscure. True, millions of words have been written about serious matters by people who have never mastered the art of useful writing; and those words are dismally solemn, depressingly dull, and obnoxiously obscure. But that only emphasizes the need of drill in the art.

It is an art for adults, seldom for the young. It cannot well be taught in high schools inasmuch as boys and girls of high school age know too little about the world, have no background, and are usually under compulsion to learn more elemental habits. A college which spends more time and money on education than on football and dances might well require a little drill in some branch of useful writing. It seems reasonable to ask young men and women close to

twenty to begin giving an hour or two every day to the real world and its problems, as these are approached through language.

But the great demand for the art arises after school. People find themselves obligated to prepare reports, to state opinions, to make suggestions about all sorts of matters from garbage dumps down to Hitler. The office, the mill, the factory, the club, and the political group all drive more and more people into clear, practical expression of their wishes, points of view, and special knowledge. Intelligent readers seek serious articles and books more and more. They seek information about every domain of the art of living—from the broadest to the most highly specialized. More and more they turn for guidance to the well-trained useful writer.

So this book seems timely. It appears at a time when millions of mature men and women are deeply perturbed by world affairs as well as over their own fortunes; when many of these people must write about their more urgent problems of home, school, business, and government; and when the well-written and well-spoken word influences more people than ever before in history. Few of the writers have grasped more than the rudiments of useful expression and communication. Because I am sure they would like to grasp more, I have prepared this volume.

It isn't easy. It does not hand anyone anything on a silver platter. It is for intelligent people who are in earnest, not for dreamers and dawdlers. It isn't like any other book you ever read on the subject. I hope its novelty may intrigue you as well as enlighten you.

WALTER B. PITKIN.

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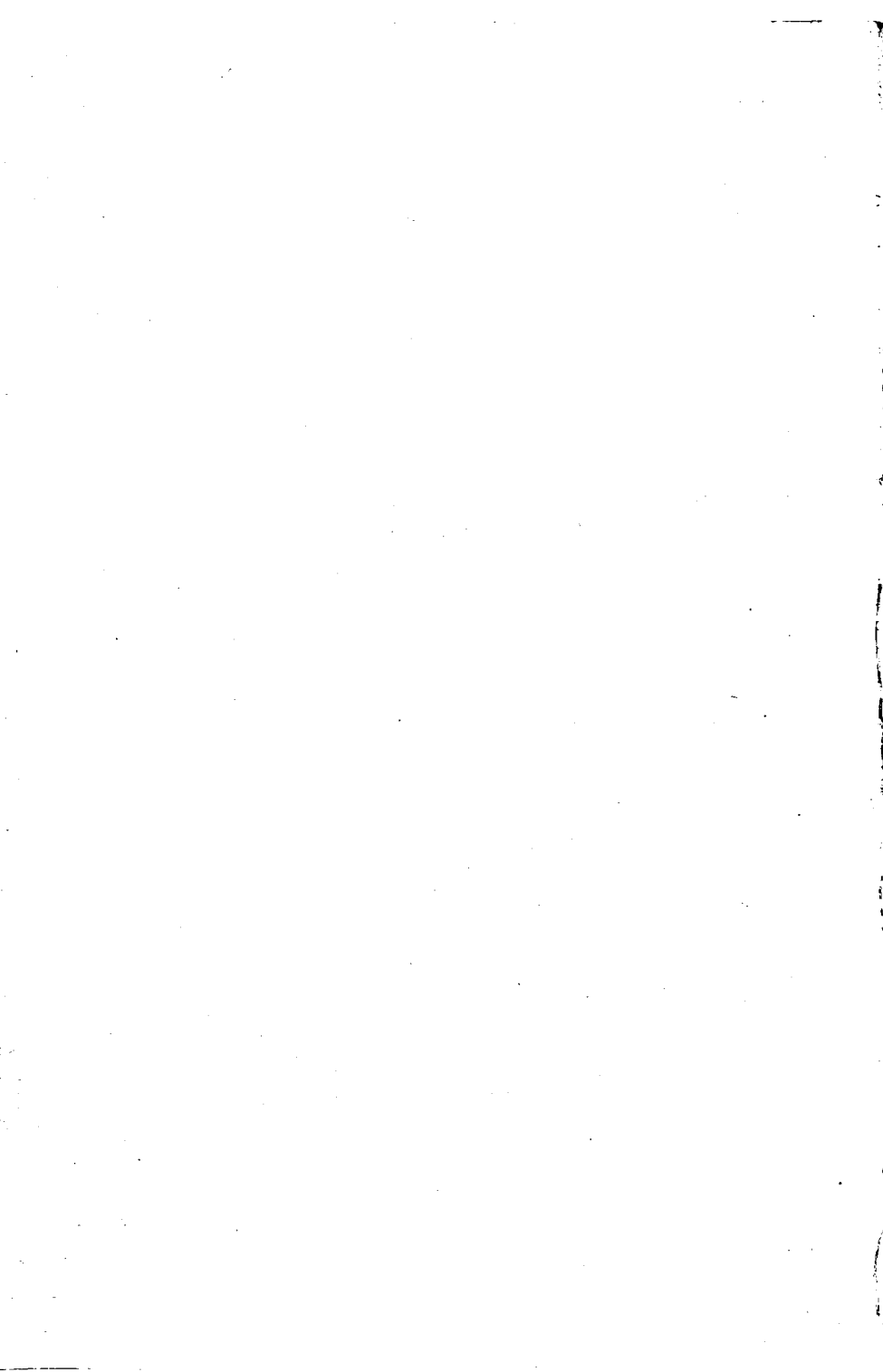
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*The Art of Useful Writing*





## BOOK I

### YOU

#### *Who Are You?*

I wonder who you are. Here I write a book for you. But I haven't the faintest notion who you are or where you live or why you want to read these pages.

You may be twenty or fifty years old; eager to teach or in quest of a newspaper job; well informed about publishing affairs or entirely innocent of such lore. You may be determined to work through every exercise I suggest, or you may merely wish to read this book casually.

Among all readers, there are probably some of almost every kind. And that makes my task still harder. So I must make certain assumptions about you. If they do not fit your case, I'm sorry.

I assume that you are serious in your desire to master the art of writing. I assume that you have considerable time to work at it. I assume that you also have energy enough to make good use of that free time. But I hesitate to assume anything about your age or your background. That's my bad luck, of course.

This is a workbook. It couldn't be anything else, without becoming flubdub. Nobody masters an art by cramming facts into his head. Nobody masters it by drinking in lovely quotations and inspirational phrases. Long, severe drill wins. All else is loss.

Can you work? Will you? If so, this book is for you.

But even if you can and will work, I wish I knew you better. Above all I wish your attitudes and intentions were an open book beneath my eyes. For on such depend your

direction of work and your probable success. On such also depends the best method of your own work as a learner.

You may have a strong urge to write. You may buy this book because you like to report news or prepare articles for magazines or write essays to be read before a club. And you may long ago have determined to attain the highest skill as a writer. If so, you will have fun with this book.

But possibly you attack it as a duty, dully, drudgingly. You may be a lawyer or an engineer or a director in a business which requires you to prepare clear reports or briefs now and then. Your central urge is toward designing soup kettles or microscopes or city housing programs or underwear for debutantes, not toward writing. Yet writing falls upon you as a task not to be evaded without penalty. Your associates and superiors may judge your work largely through your reports about it. So you mutter, as you gnash a tooth or two: "Oh, well. If I must. I must. But how I hate Writing!"

Yes, yes, I know. I'm sorry. I'll make the toil as pleasant as possible—the way a good dentist pulls teeth painlessly. But I simply cannot promise quick success. Your heart isn't in writing. Only your feet are. You come in with pedestrian stride and you plop through as Pilgrim wallowed through the Slough of Despond. Too bad!

Again, if I could know your vocation and avocation, I might adjust the exercises to them. You'd then feel more at home here, and you'd also work over topics of deep concern. Are you a golfer? Then write a dozen articles around clubs and greens and bogey. Are you a mathematician? Then become the world's cleverest translator of statistics.

If only I could know your age! Are you fifteen? Then I can teach you at a dizzy speed. Twenty? You'll move fast. Thirty? Much now depends upon your training and background. I cannot fight them, if they are bad. Forty? You must be exceptional if you are to work your way through

my pages. Most men and women at forty slow down, not because they must but just because they grow lazy and complacent. Could they rid themselves of the imbecile superstition that we can't teach old dogs new tricks, I'd teach them the art of writing at a good speed.

Most of all, though, I wish I knew how you've been educated. I'd help you most if you'd never seen the inside of a high school or college. To master this art of writing, most of our supposedly educated ladies and gentlemen must first purge themselves of their academic defects. Few can work. Few do not expect me to hand them the secrets of the art on a silver platter. Few can think straight about today's affairs, problems, and people. Their pitiful minds have been cluttered up with nonsense.

Finally I wish I knew why you want to write something useful. For, in a sense, there are as many arts of useful writing as there are combinations of main subjects and main classes of readers. Note that I speak of combinations. Each age group demands its own special attitude, approach, and vocabulary. So does each cultural group. You cannot write usefully for unschooled readers as you write for college graduates. Then, too, the specific purpose of each task of writing influences the order of ideas and the most minute shade of phrasing. If you wish to save people trapped in a burning building, you don't write them letters by special delivery, do you? You yell "Fire!" until rescuers arrive to help drag the imperilled forth from the flames. Well, every other aim colors language in much the same way. So I would gain—and so would you—if I only knew your aims.

Not knowing them, I must assume certain common purposes. If you have an uncommon one, please bear in mind that my statements may have to be altered somewhat to satisfy your special techniques.

Now, all this is a way of saying that topic, purpose, and reader combine variously in moulding the language tech-

niques. Hence the latter are infinitely complex. Whoever would simplify them does so at a grave risk. The task is as mutable and subtle as the task of getting along with all sorts of people. Indeed, it is a special manner of just that. You get along with editors and readers, for better or for worse, whenever you try useful writing. You please or vex or soothe or confound people with your thoughts and your phrasing.

This brings me to an observation of the highest importance. Useful writing, by and large, is much harder than ornamental. It is more complex. Whoever seeks only to express himself need consider merely what he has to say and then say it. He may scorn editors and readers. He is a free spirit. His but to feel and think and speak as he likes. So his technique is a problem of one body—that body being himself. But useful writing is always a problem of two, three, four or even more bodies. These are editors, publishers, readers, influential business friends, enemies—the list cannot be defined, for it varies according to the writer's task. Your task is no longer to speak your mind and lay bare your heart. It is "How To Win Friends and Influence People" through language set down on paper.

### *How to Get the Most out of This Book.*

Have writing materials at hand, as you read this page. I hope you use a typewriter. You'll cover more ground than with pen or pencil.

Read this book as if it were a novel. Pay no attention to any exercises during the first reading. Whenever an idea strikes you, stop reading. Write down your thought. Then back to the book.

At the end of a day's perusal, run through the notes you have written. Can you find a point that deserves fuller treatment? Then expand it at once. *Under no circumstances put off this task until tomorrow.* To do that is to start yourself on the Road to Ruin.

Ponder well all that you have read and written. Do doubts or questions arise about statements I've made here? If so, write them down. No matter how trivial or ragged they seem, down with them!

At the close of each day's reading, think over all that you've read up to that time. Review all your notes. Add whatever occurs to you.

Now you've read this book through. Time to start over again! Complete every exercise, no matter how hard. Write your own reflections about it. Do you think you've done a good job? If not, what's wrong? Become your own critic. This is of great importance.

Save all your exercises. Once a week review them. If you have time, do the worst all over again, in the light of your self-criticisms. Compare the first and second exercises. Write your own comments on your improvement or lack of it.

Meanwhile, find as many hours as you can in which to write whatever you wish. It may be reports on events you've witnessed, or editorial comments on them, or summaries of problems you've been working over on your job or in school. For the present pay scant attention to the quality of this casual writing. Write, write, and write! Turn out pages, reams, tons of words! Drive yourself to produce copy by the square mile. In later years you may be amazed to find how much quality results from sheer bulk.

Do not be troubled over your slowness at first. Keep tab on the time it takes you to finish a certain number of words of plain reporting or comment. Notice your improvement in the course of six months.

Don't misunderstand this advice. I am opposed to your writing of careless, slovenly copy. I shall say so often, too. When, therefore, I urge you to turn out vast quantities of copy, you may draw the wrong conclusion that I want you to rush the job—and so end up with a sea of trash. Well, I don't. Whatever you do, don't rush work, if rushing means

sloppy sentences, lax logic, poor figures of speech, and inaccuracies. Maintain quality—not polish—throughout the quantity.

*This Will Keep You Away from the Movies for a Long Time.*

I urge you to complete this exercise down to the smallest detail. What if it takes six months?

As you reread each chapter of this book, write its contents in one-half the number of words I have used. Strive to preserve the larger meanings. Cut out only the minor shades.

Study this condensing well. Then try something hard. Cut your own revision in half, still preserving the most important points.

When you have finished, you will have three books, mine, your half-cut and your quarter-cut. What are the advantages of each one? Think well.

*How to Be Your Own Critic and Teacher.*

Can you write better by studying this book? Or would you do better to work under a teacher? It all depends on you. Maybe the best way of all would be to study the book and then work under a competent instructor. But I assume you want to know how useful self-study, such as this book offers, may be. Here's the answer.

Self-study is just as good as the self which studies. How about your self? Is it lusty and determined? Or flabby and unsure? Expect little from my pages if you expect little from yourself. I guarantee that this book will be of no earthly use to an unambitious and lazy learner. He is of no earthly use to himself, to begin with. Starting there, he can advance to no higher point.

Whoever has resolved to work hard at writing and has enough energy to perform the work can gain much from this book. His hardest task is to appraise his own exercises, of

course. A good teacher proves his worth best by his criticisms and constructive suggestions about the learner's manuscript. True, a certain quality of comment and individual guidance can never be transmitted through the printed word. But an astonishingly large fraction of help can be.

To gain most, you must play the game according to the rule. Here's how.

Read each chapter as if it were a novel you wished to enjoy. Make no effort to learn anything at first perusal. Get the feel of the text before you knuckle down to tasks.

When you are ready to work at an exercise, read it carefully. Think it over for several minutes. Let the problems it raises take form in your mind.

When you feel that you grasp both the problem and its general method of solution, turn to the section where you will find a sample solution of the exercise (unless the latter happens to be very easy, in which case I offer no samples). Study this sample solution with the utmost care. Take your time! Better slow mastery than quick pottering.

Now close the book and start at your own work on the exercise. When you have finished, compare the sample in the illustration with your version. Ask yourself about each difference.

Is your manner of handling it better or worse than the manner used in the sample?

Now let me warn you. The samples are by no means models. They are genuine samples, written by able learners. I did not write them. I could improve upon many of them, I'm sure. So be boldly critical. Maybe your version surpasses the sample. But if it does, you must be able to state how and why it does. Once you can do that, you are on your way.

If you are convinced that your version is considerably poorer than the sample, write another text. Improve it in the light of your observations. *And keep on writing new*



*texts until you feel that you cannot improve much upon the last one.*

Now for a rule which only the best learners follow. Practise at the more important exercises precisely as a pianist practises his concertos. Do something every day, without fail. Let no intruder dissuade you. This is the only way toward high achievement. For writing is an art whose techniques are harder than music or painting or singing—Much harder. He who fancies the art easy foredooms himself.

When have you mastered language and its writing? Only when you say what you have to say without ever thinking of words, phrases, sentences, or punctuation. The physical marks of language must all drop out from consciousness.

Thus in every art. As long as a pianist has to attend to the printed notes on the page before him, or to the position of his fingers on the keyboard, or to the timing and succession of finger movements, he is a learner only. He does not become a master until his mind attends only to the esthetic effects he seeks to produce and forgets utterly the medium and the mechanism.

Naturally one must advance far before such high mastery is attained. One must have worked innumerable hours to beat a habit clean through one's brain and out of it on the further side. No habit is perfect until wholly automatic. When automatic, it works outside of mind. It is a function of the body on some animal level. It is, we may guess, a homemade instinct.

So once again we come back to the harsh old rule: "Practise, practise, and then practise!"

### *In Praise of Sweat.*

Sweat wins. Never rely on inspiration. Never put your trust in bright ideas. Never sink into deep thought, hoping that at the bottom of the well you'll find treasure.