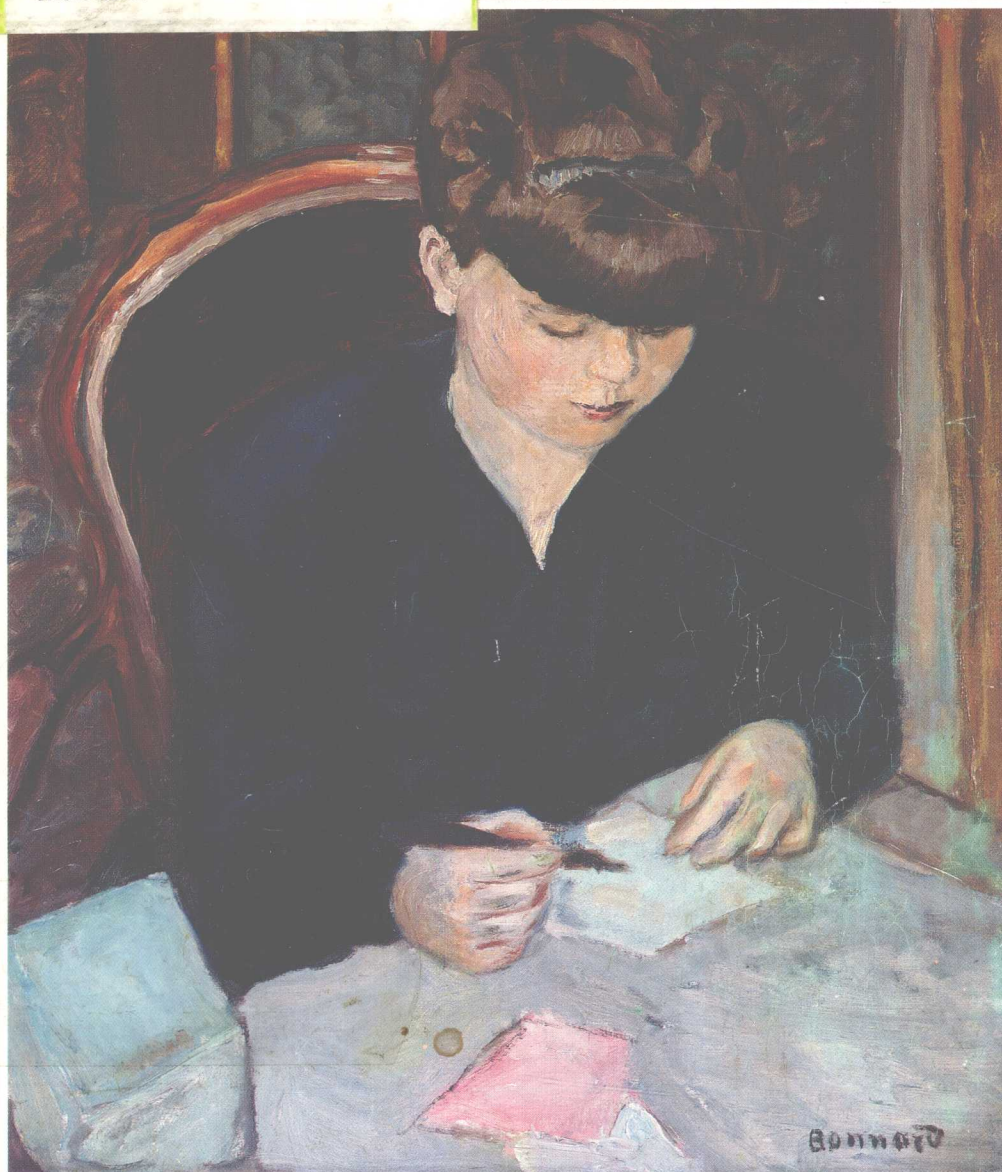


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STILE WRITER

C. Stewart



THE VERSATILE WRITER

DONALD C. STEWART

Kansas State University



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PREFACE

Harold, the son of rancher Spangler Tinkle in Robert Day's *The Last Cattle Drive*, has this observation on living the full life: "You only go around once. . . . Give it all you got. Take your very best shot." Punning on the name of an instructor, Buddy Jenkins, he comes up with this "original" observation: "When you've said Bud, you've said a lot." Aside from the fact that the young man is the obvious jerk his creator intended him to be, what specifically are his difficulties? He thinks and speaks in the language of TV beer commercials. As a speaker (and, we may assume, a writer), he has two serious deficiencies: he lacks versatility and authenticity.

I seriously doubt that there are very many Harolds among today's college students, but I know from experience that there are many who have Harold's language problems. They have not been taught how to respond to a wide variety of composing occasions, and their written work lacks an authentic voice. *The Versatile Writer* was created to help these students. The book is grounded in two fundamental precepts: (1) good writers have the ability to respond to a wide variety of contexts effectively and imaginatively; (2) good writers have authentic voices. The obvious question follows: how does one develop this kind of versatility and authenticity? The answer: by acquiring control of a number of techniques for discovering material to write about, by mastering several patterns of organization, and by developing a variety of stylistic options. One acquires an authentic voice by learning to recognize and avoid stale and clichéd uses of language and then by developing and trusting one's own writing voice.

One will find in this book what I perceive to be the most significant trends in the teaching of writing over the past twenty years. I have repeatedly asked myself these questions: in helping students to become versatile and authentic writers, what use can be made of "prewriting," as Rohman and Wlecke presented it twenty years ago; of Young, Becker, and Pike's work on tagmemics; of Burke's pentad and the highly sophisticated *Grammar of Motives* which lies behind it; of those aspects of classical rhetoric which have undergone mutations but still surface in contemporary composition theory; of new work in arrangement and style, in the study of the composing process, in revision? A great deal, I believe, even in our world of computer programs, artificial intelligence, and a technology that is rapidly developing beyond our abilities to use it, because both what is good in the tradition of rhetoric and what is emerging from new research con-

tribute directly to our abilities to respond effectively and sincerely in the many contexts in which we write.

In Part I, "Prewriting and Invention," students learn some important things about the habits of professional writers who are, by nature, both versatile and authentic: (1) they *think* like writers; (2) they are keenly observant of the world around them; (3) they keep good journals; (4) they command a variety of techniques for discovering and developing material about subjects on which they wish to write. Chapter four, specifically on invention, contains my own syntheses of three different discovery procedures: those developed by Young, Becker, and Pike; Burke's pentad; and some of the topics of classical rhetoric. These are less certain than rule-governed procedures such as those employed in solving mathematical equations, but they are much more orderly and much less haphazard than simple inspiration. They give *direction* to a student's search for a subject about which he or she can write authentically and informatively.

Part II continues the emphasis on versatility and authenticity. The basic premise of the entire section is that expository writers should be thinking about a variety of ways in which to present their material. The section begins with a familiar pattern, the five-part organizational scheme developed by the classical rhetoricians, continues with some discussion of the familiar modes of discourse which became popular in the nineteenth century, and moves on through the meditation, the analogy, and Winston Weathers' Grammar B. In all of these chapters, I have encouraged students to ask themselves repeatedly, what is my purpose? what is my context? which of these organizational patterns will help me to realize these objectives while at the same time permitting me to use the voice which characterizes all of my work, from the most to the least formal?

Part III contains headings which are familiar—words, sentences, and paragraphs—but the basic questions of the text persist. Which words, which sentence patterns, which kinds of paragraphs work best in this context? Which best represent *me*, not some cosmetic personality I have learned to put on when I begin to write. The chapter on words takes up denotation and connotation, use of synonyms, malapropisms, figurative language, and correctness, the latter defined in a non-traditional way. Chapter 11, "Style in Sentences," reiterates the importance of context, reviews basic sentence structure, and then offers several types of sentence-combining operations. Nothing, I believe, has yet been developed which helps students to acquire syntactic fluency to the degree that thoughtful sentence-combining practice does. The chapter also takes up periodic, loose, and cumulative sentences; sentence length; sentence rhythm; parallelism; and use of print space. Chapter 12, "Style in Paragraphs," is brief

because it contains some basic rules for developing logical expository paragraphs and then suggests that because professional writers are writing a great variety of paragraphs these days, we do not have a really comprehensive theory of the paragraph.

Concluding the rhetoric of the text, Parts I, II, and III, is a chapter on revision, again brief but to the point in its discussion of the basic activities that constitute revision: amplification, elimination, relocation, and rephrasing. Several versions of one student's paper are offered so that students can get practice in analyzing the revisions of one of their peers.

Parts IV and V of *The Versatile Writer* are conventional in that they represent sections, the research paper and a handbook of copyreading skills, commonly found in most rhetorics. But Part IV, in addition to providing the student with information about research materials and the mechanics of writing the research paper, walks the student through part of a research problem, from conception of a subject about which to write, through various invention procedures intended to help the student develop material on the subject, up to the moment when the student would be ready to make some organizational and stylistic choices.

Part V presents those copyreading problems which I find repeated most often in the work of students: difficulties with spelling, punctuation, word choice, and sentence structure. There is enough information here to help, not to overpower, the student. But I avoid dogmatic pronouncements on these matters, and I emphasize the fact that mastery of copyreading skills, while important, is less significant than mastery of invention, arrangement, and style.

Prefaces are the places to pay one's intellectual debts. First, to Paul Smith and Holt Johnson of D. C. Heath and Co.—to Paul a special thanks for showing interest in this book and a willingness to consider its substance and methods and the degree to which they depart from those of most texts now in the market; to Holt much appreciation for putting up with an abrasive author and saving him from stylistic embarrassments.

A second set of personal debts: to Robert Connors, University of New Hampshire; John Ruszkiewicz, University of Texas at Austin; and Robert A. Schwegler, University of Rhode Island, for candid, intelligent appraisals of earlier versions of this book. They told me what I was doing right and where I was going badly astray. *The Versatile Writer* has benefited tremendously from their criticisms.

A third personal debt is to Richard McGhee, former Head of the Department of English at Kansas State University, who continually supported

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A fourth debt is to many fine students, both at Kansas State University and the University of Illinois, who have graciously consented to allow me to reproduce their work in several of the chapters of this text. They are: Steven Brown, Charles Clack, Nancy Driscoll, Lisa Foster, Michael Gianturco, Jan Wear Hastings, Susan Graber, Linda Gramly, Lyle Heldenbrand, Timothy Kite, Michael Kremer, Julie Lingenfelter, Danton McDiffett, Suzanne Bartlett McKaig, Kathleen O'Fallon, Jeffrey Reh, Marilyn Schmitz, Jeff Stevenson, Lynn Teaford, and Kathy Todd Wooton.

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Finally, to my companion of thirty years, who has read this manuscript with the sensitivity and keen perception of the teacher who will use it and the student who will try to understand it, I give the most thanks of all. It would be impossible to measure the full extent of her contribution to this effort.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a modern textbook for freshman composition, encompassing both theory and practice. Its emphases are consistently on the most important aspects of the writing process. Good writing is writing that is effectively adapted to its context. Because we all write in a variety of contexts, it is obvious that we need to be able to recognize the particular demands of a specific context and to possess options (or strategies) to adapt each piece of writing to the context in which it appears. Good writing is further characterized by the presence of an authentic voice. Let us look at these concepts more closely.

For example, suppose I ask you to go to the store for me and hand you the following list:

- Apples
- Bread
- Butter
- Orange oatmeal
- Mary's breakfast meat
- Milk
- Bananas

Unless you are psychic, there is no way you could come back from the store with the correct items on that list. How would you know that "apples"

means the small bag of Delicious apples? Or that "bread" means Roman Meal whole-wheat bread? Or that "butter" means a particular store brand of margarine in a one-pound round container? Or that "orange oatmeal" is a particular brand of pre-cooked oatmeal in an orange box? Or that "Mary's breakfast meat" refers to a particular brand of wafer-thin ham slices my daughter eats for breakfast? Or that "milk" means a particular dairy's half gallon of homogenized milk? Or that "bananas" means *green* bananas, which we hope will ripen at about the time that we eat them and not spoil too soon?

There are only four persons in the world who could correctly interpret that list: my wife, my two daughters, and myself. In other words, that is the limit of the context in which the list would be useful. Therefore, if I really did send you to the store to get those items, I would have to give you a much more detailed list with a succinct but accurate description of each item on it. I could assume that a great many persons, all unfamiliar with the peculiar eating habits of my family, could interpret the second list with no difficulty. When the context changes, the writing has to change.

Let us consider another example, a ridiculous one, just to make the point. You are about to graduate from college with a degree in biology and are seeking a teaching position in a large suburban high school. You compose the following letter to the personnel director:

Dear PD,

Our college listed that awesome job in biology at your place. Listen, I am just about to break out of this hole with a biology degree, and I can hack that job. Teachers here say I am the best. I know the stuff and I am in touch with kids. If you need somebody to coach the girls' tennis or golf teams, too, I am your person. Could we make a deal? I think your job's cool; I'm cool. Let's work something out? Okay?

Yours,

Mary Harper

Of course you would never be so naïve as to write that kind of job application letter. You know that the context calls for something much different. *If* you really want the job, *if* you are qualified, and *if* you have your wits about you, you will know that your letter should be formal, brief, sincere without being phony, and to the point. And you will also know that you must find some way to get the personnel director's attention without annoying or offending her. Let us suppose that the school is Bluemont East in Metropolitan City, and that the personnel director is Linda Hayes. Let us assume, further, that the man who taught you biology

in your freshman year in high school and who talked you into going into biology has been on the staff of Bluemont East for four years now (he moved from your former high school to this one) and just last year received the school's award for outstanding teaching. Here is the letter you might write:

Ms. Linda Hayes
Personnel Director
Bluemont East High School
Metropolitan City, Illinois 62710

Dear Ms. Hayes:

I am applying for the position on your science staff advertised with our university's placement bureau. I will receive my B.S. degree in biological sciences, with honors, this spring from All American University. My transcripts and letters of recommendation are on file with the university's placement bureau, which will send them to you upon request. The address is

All American University Placement Bureau
102 Success Hall
All American University
Centerville, Colorado 80302

If you want further specific information about my qualifications and abilities, Mr. Alan Durbin of your staff can give that to you. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Joy Thompson
2307 Heven St.
Paradise, Colorado 81301

This letter is brief, but it provides the reader with all the information she needs at this point, and it gives her one small unexpected bit of information—the fact that her school's outstanding teacher knows you. You have not said that Mr. Durbin will tell the world how great you are. *He* will do that when asked. You have just offered the suggestion that he could give information about you that no transcript or letter of recommendation can provide. This is a letter skillfully tailored to the context in which it must be effective.

As you well know, however, there are many other contexts in which we all write, and for that reason we need many options for coping with them. Consider a typical Monday. You spend the morning writing a clinical

report for a beginning family and child development class. The instructor wants nothing but an objective, succinct case study. She does not want your opinion on or emotional response to the case. She just wants the facts. That's one kind of writing. After finishing that report, you dash off a quick letter to your parents. They *do* want to know not only what you are doing but also who your friends are, where they are from and what they are like, and what you think of your classes and college life in general. Later in the day, after eating lunch and attending classes, you find yourself in a meeting of those on the floor of your dorm who are planning the first social event of the fall. You are selected to prepare the first draft of a poster which will tell everyone on the floor what the occasion is, when and where it will be held, and why it will be a lot of fun. In one day, you see, you find yourself writing in three distinct contexts for three very different audiences.

There is one other context in which you may find yourself. Sometimes you become the speaker *and* the audience as you try to solve some problem, either academic or personal. At such times you may carry on a rather lively dialogue in your mind, one part of you talking to the other as you debate the subject. So far, you probably have not carried on these conversations out loud and attracted the attention of the men in the white jackets. But I suspect that most people mean, by "thinking about something," that they are carrying on this kind of internal dialogue. As I intend to point out frequently, however, there is a central *you* in all these contexts. The roles are different; the language each calls for varies considerably. But under the surface, an essential *you* is doing all this talking and writing.

The general point is this. If, at some point in working your way through this text, you feel that you have lost your sense of its structure and principal ideas, step back and ask yourself this question: What aspect of a context are we talking about: a writer and his or her particular problems, the subject, the audience, the language? Everything in this text refers in some way to these factors.

By now you should be getting some sense of the priorities in this book. First, *what* you say and how *well* you communicate it to your reader are *the most important aspects* of your writing. Finding something substantial to say and getting it across to a reader can take place in a number of different situations, but we will consider just two here: writing for yourself or for someone else. Now you may think it strange to worry about getting your point across to yourself (how could you possibly fail to do that?), but, as I have already suggested, writing often serves that function.

There are many occasions on which you will write for yourself. Diaries, journals, reminders (often decipherable only by you), letters written in

anger and then torn up and thrown away—are all examples of the kinds of writing that we do primarily as a form of talking to ourselves to clarify the ways we think or feel on a certain subject. If we do it well, we may find our psychological equilibrium restored simply because we have made some sense out of a confusing experience. If we do it poorly, we find ourselves still in a muddle.

Most of the writing we do, of course, is for someone else. We write letters asking for products; complaining about governmental services; asking our political representatives to help us; requesting information about jobs, colleges, vacation spots, and missing persons. We write reports, some technical and some more informal, about research or activities of the organizations with which we are most closely associated, to those persons most interested in our information. Students are always writing exams, term papers, reports, short papers—anything a teacher can think of for them to do. When you get out of school, you will write job applications, memos to secretaries or other employees, reports of all kinds, personal and business letters, perhaps even some stories or expository essays on subjects with which you are familiar. (And now we are even learning how to talk to—program—machines in such a way as to make them do certain jobs with the data we give them.) In all of these writing activities, your primary concern will be that the people reading what you have written get the point, whether you are writing in a straightforward manner or with irony for special effects. The test of such writing is always the degree to which the reader comprehends it.

A second priority involves the means for getting one's point across. Concern with means draws our attention to arrangement and style. Close observation of the practice of professional writers reveals that they use a great variety of patterns to accomplish their purposes. It has always been puzzling to me why students get locked into a single pattern, such as introduction, three points, and conclusion, to organize what they have to say on every subject they write about. I once had a student so insecure with any pattern but this one that he would take any subject matter he was given and present it with an introduction, three points, and a conclusion. I attempted to force him out of this pattern once by assigning him, and the rest of the class, a descriptive exercise. Among the topics I suggested was a description of a sunset over Lake Mendota on the University of Wisconsin campus. His paper came back complete with a topic sentence and five-paragraph organization. "A sunset over Lake Mendota has three qualities: color, intensity, and duration." He wrote one paragraph on color, one on intensity, and one on duration. His concluding paragraph summarized what he had already said. Getting that student to try a different