A Guide for Readers & Writers

THINKING STRAIGHT

BEARDSLEY

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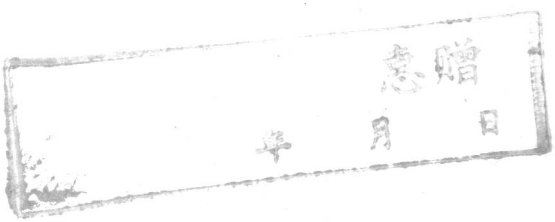
by Monroe C. Beardsley

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE



New York

PRENTICE-HALL, INC. · MCML

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK is a shorter version of *Practical Logic* (also published by Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1950). The first six chapters are taken over in exactly the same form, but Chapters 7 and 8 present a selection of the material in the last nine chapters of *Practical Logic*.

In writing this book I have received a considerable variety of assistance, which I am glad to acknowledge.

The idea of the book, and of what is most original in its purpose, came to me from Mr. William A. Pullin, Assistant Vice-President of Prentice-Hall, Inc., who has been constantly helpful, in a number of ways, at every stage of its composition. I thank Professor Maynard Mack, Department of English Literature, Yale University, for his guidance when the writing was just getting under way, and for many useful suggestions about the manuscript. I thank Professor Thomas C. Pollock, Dean of Washington Square College, New York University, for his patient and thorough editing of my various drafts, and for his valuable comments and corrections.

Other readers have improved the manuscript in many ways. I think they will recognize their contributions, and I am grateful to all of them. They are: Professor Ernest Nagel, Department of Philosophy, Columbia University; Professor Henry W. Sams, Chairman of the College English Staff, the University of Chicago; Professor Glenn Leggett, Department of English Literature, the Ohio State University; Professor John Gerber, Department of English Literature, the Iowa State University; Professor Bruce Dearing, Department of English Literature, Swarthmore College; and Professor Alburey Castell, Department of Philosophy, University of Minnesota.

I have learned a great deal that has helped me to write this book from discussions with my colleagues in the Department of Philosophy at Swarthmore College: Professor Richard B. Brandt, Professor Roderick Firth, and Mr. Sidney Morgenbesser.

Finally, I should like to record my indebtedness to two persons whose contributions, though deep and pervasive, are not so easy to

define. I owe much to my friend and former colleague, Professor William K. Wimsatt, Jr., Department of English Literature, Yale University. An important part of what I have put into this book derives from what he has taught me about rhetoric, and I should never have undertaken to write it without certain convictions that have grown out of our discussions. And I owe very much indeed to my wife, Elizabeth Lane Beardsley, Department of Philosophy, the University of Delaware. From her I learned some of the book's underlying and controlling principles of semiotic. Her encouragement carried me through several difficulties, and she clarified for me a number of philosophical and linguistic problems. In the fullest sense, she has been a help meet for me.

M. C. B.

PREVIEW

WHEN YOU REGISTER to be a voter, you usually have to pass a "literacy" test. An official points out, let us say, a paragraph from the state's fish and game laws, and asks you to read a few lines. If you can pronounce the words in some recognizable fashion, and if you give the impression of having a rough notion of what they are about, you are "literate." You can "read," and you can vote.

This is "reading," but it is reading only in a pretty bare and primitive sense. A person who can do this can presumably do the simplest reading jobs he meets in getting about in the world. He can find his way around a clover-leaf turn, because he can read "Left" and "Right." He can get something to eat, because he can tell the difference between "Lunch Room" and "Barber Shop." He knows what it means when a bottle says "Poison" or a newspaper says "Rain tomorrow." And this is, of course, useful.

Critical Reading

If political candidates came labeled "Poison" or "To be taken at the first sign of trouble," a first- or second-grader could read well enough to vote. If bills debated on the floor of Congress were marked with infallible signs reading "Right" or "Left," it would be easy to discern which way the government is moving politically, and to telegraph our Congressmen accordingly. But when we have to make up our minds, as citizens, on important questions, and when we have to find out what's going on by reading our newspapers and magazines and listening to our radios, the mere ability to read labels doesn't help us very much.

The problems we face as readers in the ordinary run of events are rather more complicated. We open a newspaper, and find:

> Senator William Langer, Republican, of North Dakota, introduced today a "civil rights" amendment to the bill repealing the excise tax on oleomargarine, which the Senate is considering.

> Such maneuvers have in the past been used to kill a pending bill by forcing a filibuster on the part of Senators who will not risk a vote on the civil rights issue.
>
> The present bill is a substitute for the Administration's bill, differing from the latter in that it would repeal not only the excise oleomargarine tax, but also all wartime "luxury" taxes, and would prohibit the shipment of yellow oleomargarine in interstate commerce. "We shall insist upon this last provision," said a spokesman for the dairy farmers, "not out of selfish interests, but solely to prevent artificially colored margarine from being shipped to other states in order to be passed off on the unsuspecting housewife as genuine vitamin-rich butter."

A person who is merely "literate" could read through this and make something of it; if he were asked to say what it was about, he might reply, "Oh, there's some fight about oleo taxes." And perhaps he might add, "I'm against them," or "I'm for them."

But, clearly, if we are going to depend upon these two paragraphs, and others like them, as a basis for deciding whether or not taxes on oleomargarine ought to be repealed, we must read the paragraphs in a pretty serious way. We must read them critically. And this requires a good deal more than mere "literacy." We must understand exactly what the issue is about: what an "excise" tax is, what the "luxury" taxes are, which "civil rights" amendment has been proposed. We must *question* what we read. Why do some Senators want to repeal the taxes? Will a repeal decrease the cost of oleomargarine? Why is there objection to repealing them? What should we make of the claim that, unless interstate shipments of colored margarine are prohibited, there is danger that margarine will be sold as butter?

Critical reading—reading with our critical faculties wide awake—involves much more than merely getting a rough idea of a passage (say, the quotation from the "spokesman for the dairy farmers"), and then accepting it as true without stopping to think. Critical reading involves understanding clearly the meaning of the words—not only what they label, but the *full* sense of what they convey about the things they refer to and about the people who use them. For example, notice the damaging effect of the phrase "*artificially* colored margarine." Critical reading involves reading *between* the lines for the exact point of view, the underlying assumptions, the

full implications of what is said. For example, notice how the spokesman hints that margarine is *not* "vitamin-rich," like butter.

Critical reading involves making a patient effort to find out what *reasons* are given for any claims a passage makes. And it involves making a decision that the reasons are good enough to accept or so poor that they must be rejected. For example, is the fact that someone might misrepresent colored margarine as butter a good reason for prohibiting the shipment of colored margarine across state boundaries? If someone should point out that, after all, butter is artificially colored, too, would this be relevant to the question of taxing colored margarine?

In short, critical reading involves *thinking*.

Straight Thinking

A driver doesn't have to look at his road map once he starts on a highway, as long as he doesn't come to any intersections. He doesn't have to worry about which way to go if he has no choice about it. But when he comes to a crossroads, with signs pointing in various directions—then he can't just let the road decide where he is to go; he has to make up his mind. He has to stop and think.

The same thing is true in most departments of life. Generally speaking, we don't think unless we have to make a choice—unless we have a *problem*. To put it another way, thinking is something we do to answer a *question*. Shall I keep my job or look for a different one? Shall I buy a car now or wait? Shall I vote for the candidate who favors a Federal plan for health insurance or for the candidate who opposes it as "socialistic"? It is a *question,* more or less clearly grasped, that starts us thinking.

A problem arises out of a situation that puzzles us in some way but at the same time demands that we do something about it. There's no problem unless there is some sort of conflict, or apparent conflict, within the situation: some difficulty that we can't understand or get rid of. Suppose we want everyone in the country to have adequate medical care, but are afraid that if this is provided by a Federal health plan the government will have too much power over its citizens. Never mind the merits of this issue at the moment: the point is that it is the presence of conflicting aims that makes the problem. And this is where thinking comes in.

But there is thinking *and* thinking.

People with problems make up their minds in all sorts of ways. One man consults his astrologist before undertaking a big business deal. Another always votes for the candidate whose name seems most familiar. Another always buys the most expensively advertised goods, on the principle that these must be the best if so much is spent on advertising them. Maybe you think these are extreme examples of poor thinking. But they're not uncommon.

Of course, the man who can think well doesn't tackle his problems in any such hit-or-miss fashion. He begins by making sure he knows exactly what his problem *is:* he gets a good grip on the question he wants to answer. He doesn't go off half-cocked, but thinks of various possible ways of answering his question. He looks for reasons for or against each answer, and he picks the one that stands out as most promising in the light of all his relevant information. In short, he makes an effort to think straight about what he is doing. Straight thinking plunges to the heart of a problem, seizes upon the essentials of it, and comes up with an answer that stands a good chance of meeting the test of practice. No one can help making mistakes. But the straighter we think, the fewer, and the less costly, our mistakes.

So far we have been talking in a pretty broad way about straight thinking. The important thing is to bring this description down to brass tacks, by seeing exactly how, in specific cases, we can spot crooked thinking and straighten it out. That is what we are going to do in this book.

Reading for Information

There are many purposes we may have in mind when we read. We may read to keep unpleasant thoughts out of our mind, to learn something, to show people that we are acquainted with a fashionable novel, out of sheer habit, or just for the fun of it. But two of these purposes perhaps loom larger than the others, at least for most of us.

First, we read for *enjoyment.* Usually when we read a story, or listen to a play on the radio, and sometimes when we read history or biography, we have no aim beyond the pleasure of reading. We may be seeking a certain kind of experience, the nature of which

is very difficult to describe, but of which we say that it is "valuable in itself." Whether it is because the experience is one of a heightened sense of awareness, or because it is qualified by new and subtle emotion, or because it is an unusually unified and integrated experience, such as we seldom have in the ordinary course of events —in any case, it is an experience to be enjoyed for its own sake. The book or the play becomes an object to be cherished just because it affords such an experience.

But there is another powerful motive that enters and becomes dominant at other times: as when we look a number up in the telephone directory, study a textbook on cost accounting, or read an editorial on international affairs. We can enjoy these things, too, but we read primarily because we want to *know* something we don't already know. We want to get at the *truth* about business conditions, the prospects for peaceful change in Southeastern Asia, or the qualifications of a political candidate. In the broadest sense, we are reading for *information.*

The newsstands, of course, are cluttered with books and newspapers and magazines, and the air-waves with reports and speeches, that claim to give us information. More than ever before we are bombarded by a stream of assertions and denials, claims and counter-claims, rumors and accusations, commands and prohibitions. And that is just where our problem lies. For the amount of "information" constantly pouring forth from all of the great "mass media" of communication is paralyzing. The more we improve our means of communication, the more difficult it is to escape the commentator, the ad-man, the public-relations expert, the special correspondent, the roving editor. We all belong to what the broadcasters call a "captive audience." We are asked to believe that British socialism is flourishing, and that it is on the rocks; that Representative So-and-so is brilliant, and that he is incompetent; that huge aluminum companies and huge chain-stores are beneficial to the consumer, and that they are a menace. And so it goes: there is always someone warning, cajoling, wheedling, threatening, pleading. We are asked, not only to believe, but to act upon the belief: to pull the second lever, to sign the petition, to go to the nearest drugstore, to buy or sell, hire or fire, eat or not eat.

We know that much of what we read or hear is not information

at all, but rank *misinformation*. But we are indifferently successful at separating the truths from the falsehoods. Even when we are pretty sure that a report is reliable, we still may not be able to sort out what is significant in it from what is trivial; and a newspaper that gives the same size headlines to lost dogs and to decisions made by the United Nations doesn't help us much.

Reading for information, then, is not an easy job. But it is clearly a job we are all called upon to do the moment we accept the responsibilities of citizenship. If we are willing to live under a government that claims to be guided by the judgments of its citizens instead of by the infallible principles of dialectical materialism or by the infallible "intuitions" of a man on horseback, then we must be willing to make those judgments as reasonable as we can. And especially if we want to see our government move toward a more complete democracy, despite all the hazards of twentieth-century life, if we want it to become a more sensitive and effective instrument of the popular will, then we must ensure that everyone who has a hand in government—not only the politicians themselves—acts, as far as possible, in a rational way. And to act rationally is, at least in part, to take account of what can be reliably known about the conditions and the consequences of acting.

Reading for information is a skill that can be improved by practice, if practice is guided by the right method. To do it well, we must first know something about the way language works: how it is used, and how it is misused. We need some rules that we can apply to the interpretation of what we read or hear, to find out exactly what it *means*. Then we must know something about logic and the principles of correct reasoning. For we have to compare, analyze, weigh what is said, to find out whether it is *true*.

This book supplies in an elementary form the outline of such a method of critical reading. We shall not attempt to deal with the pure theory of language and logic. We shall select, from what is known of these subjects, certain general and very useful practical rules. We shall make a number of distinctions that are a powerful aid to clear thinking. It will be necessary to introduce a limited number of unfamiliar technical terms, because our ordinary language is not equipped to make certain distinctions as clear as we shall want them to be. Some of the differences that ordinary

language overlooks are of the greatest importance for clear thinking. But every technical term will be carefully defined and its meaning clarified by examples. And no words will be used except those that are necessary for the main purpose of the book, which is to explain the logical points to bear in mind whenever we face the problem of making up our minds about what we read in the course of everyday life.

How to Use This Book

The aim of this book is, then, a practical one. It is to help you read more critically—that is, with more understanding and with better judgment—and write more accurately. At bottom, the problem for both the reader and the writer is to make words behave as tools of straight thinking rather than as stumbling-blocks for it.

The principles we shall study apply to all reading and writing, no matter what it is about, that has to do with the communication of knowledge. You can apply these principles to any book or article that you may read to find out what you should believe; you can apply them to any project, or proposal, or report that you may be writing in order to show someone else what he should believe. The principles apply to the most difficult books as well as to the simplest. But we shall be especially concerned with the everyday sort of reading and writing that most of us have to do in the ordinary course of events.

This practical purpose prescribes the contents of this book, and also the order in which the contents are presented. There are eight chapters. The first deals with the basic distinctions that we must take into account when we approach any piece of writing or speech. The next four chapters deal with language: with the confusions arising from the fact that words have many meanings (Chapter 2), with the kinds of meaning and the connotations of words (Chapter 3), with special problems involved in interpreting figurative language (Chapter 4) and emotive language (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 deals with the problem of definition. And the last two chapters deal with simple, useful principles of deductive logic (Chapter 7) and inductive logic (Chapter 8).

Thus the chapters follow a certain order: roughly the order in

which you should ask the right questions about what you read when you want to know whether it is true. But the book is nevertheless flexible. The chapters, and even, for the most part, the individual sections, are quite independent of one another, so that if your time is limited you can find what you want without delay. The only difficulty in skipping is that some technical terms, once they are introduced, are used throughout the book. However, the index will enable you to look up the definition of any special term, and the outline-summary at the end of each chapter will give you the main ideas of a chapter, if you have to skip it.

This is above all a practical book, and as you read it you will be constantly invited to put its principles to work. At the end of each of the first four sections of a chapter, there is a "check-up quiz," a quick exercise to make sure you understand the main points of that section. The exercises at the end of each chapter, of which there is a considerable variety, are generally harder and more searching. They test various skills: to do some of them, you need only perceive a distinction clearly; to do others, you need to write a short essay. Every principle of logic that is explained in the text is amply covered in the exercises.

The exercises will present you with problems like those which are bound to arise in the course of your ordinary reading and writing. But since they are selected to illustrate particular points, they generally do not approach the complexity or the perplexity of problems that arise in many situations. Therefore, to make the most of this book, you will find it helpful to be on the look-out for examples of confused and crooked thinking, and to collect them from your own reading. If you read with some care you will not have much difficulty in finding examples of most of the mistakes discussed in this book.

Since *Thinking Straight* is only a beginning to the study of logic, there is a great deal more to know about the subject. Books recommended for further reading are listed at the end of most sections, and whenever you wish to pursue a problem beyond the point at which we must leave it, you can follow up those recommendations.

You will get the most out of this book if you know something of what you are looking for as you study it, and if you know whether

you are finding what you are looking for. If you know, at the beginning, what kinds of mistakes in thinking you make most easily, you can decide what sections of the book you especially need to study. A good way to begin, then, is to try the following:

DIAGNOSTIC TEST. How good is the thinking in the passages below? Read each passage carefully. If you find that the thinking is confused or crooked, mark it "O." If it seems satisfactory, mark it "+."

A. IS THE PRESS FREE?

In the United States few people deny that there *ought* to be freedom of the press. But many people have doubted that there actually is freedom of the press. This controversy is fairly constant, and it seems to become particularly sharp around election time. In the Presidential election of 1948, a very large majority of the nation's newspapers supported the Republican candidate (as in previous elections), and yet the Democratic candidate (as in previous elections) won the election. Once again the question was raised, and actively discussed: Do the newspapers, by and large, express the opinions of the "people" or of "special interests"? Here are some remarks made in a radio discussion of this question.

1. The newspapers represent the people they belong to, naturally. But practically everyone buys newspapers—and so they belong to practically everyone. How can you deny that they represent public opinion?

2. By and large, the newspapers in this country make a strenuous effort to present the truth honestly, fairly, and objectively. The evidence for this statement may be found in an interesting article in last Sunday's *New York Courant.*

3. Look at the nasty and scurrilous stuff some columnists write and hundreds of papers print. The editors, of course, say that the columnists don't express the opinion of the newspaper, and they call that "freedom of the press." In other words, to be free, according to those editors, a newspaper has to print garbage.

4. Freedom of the press? Freedom from *what?* Freedom for *whom?* In some countries you can't criticize the people

running the government. In other countries you can't criticize the *form* of government. In our country you can't criticize the advertiser—not severely, anyway. It's all a matter of degree. There's no real difference between the American press and any totalitarian press.

5. The newspapers ought to be our best means of public education in politics and economics. But how useful are they? Pick up the first dozen newspapers you see thrown away on the street, in subways or buses. Their most prominent stories will be about crime, sex, and sport. Obviously, most newspapers are of no educational value whatever.

6. Of course a newspaper should mean something—it should take a stand on important issues, and it should express the will of its readers. But a newspaper cannot be *truly* free, as it should be, if it represents a special pressure group, and becomes a propaganda organ for some limited body of people.

7. A democracy will always have a responsible government, provided its press is free. For only a nation in which people are well informed can have a responsible government, and only in a nation with a free press can the people be well informed.

8. Controversies about "freedom of the press" are futile unless this term is carefully defined. Now, *one* of the things meant by this term is, I believe, "definite limitation of governmental control over what the newspapers print." If this sense, which I think is the usual sense, is reasonably clear, it seems convenient to see the term *only* in this sense. In that case, we must say that the American press is free.

9. I think it's just terrible for people to say such things about the newspapers! If people go around undermining confidence in the printed word, and throwing open the flood-gates of skepticism and cynicism and atheism, there is no telling what may happen! Why, how can we pretend to be a great nation if we admit that our newspapers are full of lies and can't be trusted?

10. The American press is in a vigorous and healthy state. For example, according to *Editor and Publisher,* only 40 per cent of the daily press supported Roosevelt in 1932, 36 per cent in

1936, and 23 per cent in 1940—despite his overwhelming victories. This is very significant, for it indicates that, on the whole, the press has striven to be fair and objective. When the tide of public opinion was moving one way, publishers bent over backwards to present the other side of the picture, with no thought to the unpopularity of their stand.

11. "Short headlines," concedes a recent defender of the press, "occasionally do distort the facts presented in a newspaper column." In plain English, short headlines are lies to take in the morons who don't read, or don't believe, anything unless it's in large print.

12. As far as is consistent with public welfare, any enterprise ought to be left to the free decisions of its management. Granted. But we do not permit a public utility, say an electric power company, to decide how and when and to whom it shall deliver electricity, or to change its voltage at its own whim. Now, newspapers exist to sell information, just as a power company sells electricity—and they are equally vital to our welfare. Therefore, the government has a right to exercise whatever control is necessary to secure a minimum standard of quality—that is, truthfulness—in the press.

B. SHOULD LITERATURE BE CENSORED?

On one day in March, a few years ago, the "vice squad" in one of America's largest cities raided fifty-four bookstores and newsstands and carried off over two thousand copies of eighteen different novels. The inspector in charge had been receiving complaints that "lewd" and "improper" literature was being sold in that city. The list of books which he had compiled and which he ordered his clerk to read and report on before he sent his squad to bring them in included some books by Thorne Smith and Tiffany Thayer; it also included the following books: *Sanctuary,* by William Faulkner; *Raintree County,* by Ross Lockridge, Jr.; *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre,* by Erskine Caldwell; and the *Studs Lonigan* series, by James T. Farrell.

The action aroused a good deal of controversy; scores of letters were printed in newspapers, protesting or defending the seizure. Here are some excerpts from those letters:

13. I say we should ban all proletarian novels, whether old or

new, which are underhanded attacks on the American Way of life.

14. The whole question is quite simple, and it boils down to this: Could any radio station broadcast the dialogue of *Studs Lonigan* to every home in the nation? That's the test. If not, it shouldn't be printed or sold.

15. All great literature is a sincere attempt to picture life as the writer sees it. These books are sincere, and they are therefore great literature.

16. Everyone must admit that calling a spade a spade is not enough to condemn a book. I don't see how anyone could be consistent if he wouldn't let people read these fine examples of modern realistic prose and yet allowed people to read the story of Lot's daughters (Genesis, ch. 19) or of Onan (Genesis, ch. 38).

17. *Really* great literature, according to my definition, is literature that strives to ennoble and inspire the reader to the best of which human nature is capable. Therefore, William Faulkner's novels are not great literature.

18. I suppose we have to put up with this sort of thing. A man writes a frank and honest story about the troubles of real-life people, and along comes some queasy bureaucrat, probably looking for a quick promotion, to smirch the purity of Art with his official paws.

19. Books are the currency of the human spirit. Now, in economics there is a law called "Gresham's Law," according to which cheap money always drives good money out of circulation. This proves that cheap books will drive out the good books, if we let them be sold willy-nilly.

20. If the question is whether the novels of Caldwell and Faulkner and Farrell are good literature or not, we can settle this question by asking the proper authorities: experts on American literature. Such professors have testified to their merit, and the police ought to accept their judgment.

21. I have called the books "indecent," and I have been accused of not knowing what I am talking about. When I say the books are "indecent," I have a clear meaning in mind. A book is indecent if its language, general atmosphere, and presentation do not correspond favorably to that which a