

TURNER

**The Methods
of
English Prose**

Readings for Writing

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The Methods of English Prose

Readings for Writing

Teaching Objectives of This Book

PART ONE

The Paragraph

Unity and the topic sentence
Methods of development
Organization and coherence

The Whole Composition

Purpose
Explicit meaning
Unity and theme statement
Main divisions
Methods of development
Organization and outlining

The Sentence

Conciseness
Parallel structure
Some attention to balance and antithesis

Diction

Increase of vocabulary
Exactness of meaning
Distinction between concrete and abstract words and between
specific and general words

Preference for concrete and specific words
Connotation (introduced)

Ornament

Usefulness of simple metaphors and similes
Allusion and quotation (introduced)

PART TWO**The Whole Composition**

Purpose and its relation to method
Meaning: explicit, implicit, and inferential
The logical basis of proof and of discussion
Main divisions
Emphasis

The Sentence

Balance, antithesis, regression, and gradation
Euphony (all elements)
Emphasis

Diction

Increase of vocabulary
Exactness of meaning
Connotation

Ornament

Various figures of speech

Tone

Throughout the book, the exercises are designed to teach the careful observation of writing techniques and to promote close reading.

The materials and exercises in Part I progress from simple

problems of organization, theme type, and the accurate use of words to the more complicated problems involved in longer pieces developed by more than one method and in styles more effective than straightforward prose.

The materials and exercises in Part II continue the study of style as indicated in the outline above. As to form and content, the selections are more flexible than those in Part I and may be used in two main ways in the study of composition. They may simply serve to stimulate more advanced thinking and writing, for the later part of the course, of the same kinds practised during the first part. Or they may be used as three units in the study of logic, the long factual article or research paper, and the essay. Sections A and B provide a good study of logic and its practical application, both in diction and in the whole composition; most of the pieces in sections B and C demonstrate the use of information gained by research on a specific topic; sections D and E demonstrate the interpretation of knowledge already in the author's mind and can stimulate similar essays by the student. This progression from logic to research to the essay coincides with the pattern now given to the second half of many college composition courses.

In addition, these materials can be used for the study of intensive reading methods in those courses which combine the teaching of reading and composition.

W. A. T.

What Is Composition?

(A Talk with the Student)

Let me introduce to you some good writers from several periods. They have written with different purposes and used a variety of methods, but each in his own way has so pleased and educated his readers that he has been honored and sometimes even well paid. Primitive people have always, quite properly I think, regarded words as having mysterious power and good speakers as darlings of the gods. Writing, which embodies this mysterious power in permanent symbols, has always been honored as an art. Yet, like drawing or singing, it is an art which most intelligent people can practise. Though the finished composition has a total effect which can be felt but not fully explained, the methods of writing are clear enough. The best writers have always understood these methods.

This is not an "idea" book with a "new approach." In the decade and a half in which I have been teaching English, I have developed an aversion to such books. Books of essays organized only around such themes as modern problems or designs for living may be interesting to read, but they take the student by a long and roundabout path in his search for the principles of good writing. Similarly, books which "approach" composition through only one of its elements, such as logic, organization, or purpose, distort the problem and mislead the student. The expression of human experience in language is an almost universal human activity, like love, complicated and perhaps even mysterious, but eternal and subject to slight change if

any. One who thinks that the essential nature of love has changed during the last 2500 years, in any of its aspects, should read, for example, *The Song of Songs*, the Gospels, Plato, or Ovid. Writing, like love, has superficially responded to the fluctuations of taste, as you will see; but the essential process is unchanged. The speech of Odysseus as he roused the Greeks to battle or the funeral oration of Marcus Antonius in *Julius Caesar* could not be improved by anything we have learned since the time of Homer or of Shakespeare; indeed, Shakespeare learned from Homer. If this book offers anything new, it is a return to the basic methods of writing which have been employed since the time of the ancients. The student who has learned only such special skills as how to analyze a character or how to analyze a "social pattern" stands dumb before a machine or an emotion which he needs to explain. But the student who has gone to the bottom of the matter and learned the fundamentals of all prose composition can explain a character, a group, a machine, or anything else within his comprehension.

The Process of Expression

The writer, a human being who wants to tell something to other human beings, puts his experiences, feelings, and thoughts into language and puts the language on paper. His experiences with life come from participation in and observation of the world about him and from reading. He responds to many experiences with emotions, such as love, fear, or hate. To others he makes intellectual reactions, such as approval, respect, disbelief, or merely understanding. If he is given to reflection, he relates one experience to another and arrives at new meanings; he "has an idea." If he thinks that one of his experiences is so vivid and unusual or one of his ideas so worthwhile that other people might like to share it, he makes a series of statements which he hopes will convey his experience or explain his idea. These statements he puts on paper according to certain conventions. Several parts of this whole process are beyond explanation, even by psychologists; but the main steps—*experience to language to paper*—must be clear to anyone who thinks about

them. The reader then reverses the process. From the printed page he takes the language into his own mind and tries to re-create there the experience or idea exactly as it was in the mind of the writer. Obvious as they seem, it is well to keep these processes in mind when we read or write.

The Subject

Nearly everyone is potentially the writer of at least a few good pieces; for the subject matter of writing is infinite, and each human being is unique. In composition classes we speak of *primary* sources and *secondary* sources of subject matter. Primary sources are personal experiences and observations; secondary sources are books, magazines, newspapers, documents, and oral reports—all information which we receive at second hand. Ordinarily college composition classes depend upon primary sources during the first part of the course and reserve the treatment of secondary material for the second part of the course, when the fundamental skills of writing have been mastered. The course usually leads up to the research paper, which allows the student to demonstrate all his skills by finding suitable material on a given subject and then composing a paper by whatever methods are appropriate to the subject.

The Four Forms

Most pieces of writing can be classified as description, narration, exposition, or argument—the four forms of discourse. Description conveys the appearance of a place, object, or person; narration relates an action or a series of actions; exposition explains; and argument attempts to gain the reader's assent to an idea or a plan of action. Because most college students need skill in exposition more than in any other form, the major emphasis of this book is on exposition. But the other three forms are often useful in exposition or are mingled with it, and they are therefore studied as adjuncts.

Unity, Purpose, and Worth

Every composition, like every paragraph, must have unity of subject and a clear central purpose. That is, its statements must not only be restricted to a single subject but they must also say something definite about that subject. And both subject and purpose must be worth the reader's time. An article on the general subject "automobile accidents" might be very dull and pointless. What *about* the accidents? An article which presented a sure way of preventing even one kind of accident would have millions of grateful readers.

Methods of Development

When a writer has carefully stated his purpose to himself, what then? If he wants to describe a scene, relate an adventure, or explain an idea, how does he begin? Where does he find statements to put together, one after another, to make his meaning clear? *Development*, the process of unfolding or revealing the central idea, is one of the major concerns of composition. The basic methods of development are (1) by analysis, or giving details, (2) by giving examples, (3) by comparison, and (4) by definition. The selections in Part I of this book demonstrate these methods separately. When you have studied each group of models until you can, in your own writing, use the methods employed in them, you will have mastered the principles of development. You will be able to develop an idea either in a single paragraph or in a whole composition. The longer selections in Part II use combinations of methods and therefore show how a writer turns naturally from one method to another, according to the requirements of his subject and of his purpose. They also illustrate the larger principles of organization and expression.

Organization

And how does one arrange his material into a clear, coherent pattern? Again, a few simple and fairly obvious orders of arrange-

ment serve nearly all needs; and, again, the writer follows the order which best suits his subject and his purpose.

Some kinds of material easily fall into patterns inherent within their very nature. A description of a candy shop might begin with the outside appearance, move on to the inside walls and decoration, then to the display cases, and finally to the sales counter; this would be a space arrangement. An account of a day in the life of a doctor would surely follow a time arrangement. It would not necessarily proceed directly from morning to evening; it might begin with the doctor's afternoon office hours, then relate his account of his morning's work to his assistant as they pause for coffee, then follow him on his final round of house calls. Directions for changing a tire would unavoidably follow a functional order; functional order is only incidentally chronological, for its time sequence is decided by the necessary order of the steps in a process and rearrangement is seldom possible. These three natural or *inherent orders*, based on (1) space, (2) time, and (3) function, provide the basic organization of a large portion of all writing. But the writer can never disregard organization, even when he can follow an inherent order; for the order is inherent in the subject, not in his pen. He needs to arrange his statements so that the subject will seem to have the same order in his theme which it has in actuality.

Material which a writer collects to illustrate a discussion or to support an assertion must usually have some order imposed upon it. Such an order is therefore *attributed*, or *rational*. Most attributed orders are based upon one of four sets of relationships: (1) the general and the specific, (2) the familiar and the unfamiliar, (3) climax (small to large, least important to most important, etc.), or, (4) cause and effect.

Style

Finally, each composition has a certain style in its language, as unavoidably as its writer has a certain style in his dress. It may be as unconscious, incorrect, and sloppy as the rags of a tramp; or as studied, correct, and pleasing as the attire of a Brooks Brothers cus-

tomers. The writer cannot choose whether he will have style or not; he can only choose between good and bad style.

Style in writing is a complex quality which has never been very well defined because it is intangible in nature and infinite in variety. We can say here that a good style has four main sets of qualities: (1) clear, economical, and rhythmical sentences; (2) accurate, concrete, and appropriate diction; (3) appropriate ornament used to promote clarity and vividness; and (4) tone appropriate to the subject and the purpose. But only through careful study can you actually come to know what style is. Consequently most sets of exercises in this book will call your attention to some aspect of style.

Learning the basic principles of composition so well that they become an active part of your consciousness, guiding all your writing, may appear difficult. Yet you must learn them, and you may take some comfort from other apprentices. The unfledged pilot's first glimpse of the instrument panel almost makes him long for a horse and buggy. Such an array of dials and pointers! Before he wins his wings he must learn them all—air temperature, oil temperature (in each engine), air speed, motor speed (in each engine), altitude, drift, bank, and so on—and keep them all in mind at once. He does learn, though. He studies intensively every aspect of airplane design, construction, and operation, and the main principles of flight. Of equal importance, he watches and admires expert pilots. Under their guidance he learns to imitate every motion they make, every trick of maneuvering. Finally, one good day, his teacher claps him on the back and says, "Today you're on your own. Take 'er up!"

You are going to be a writer. Perhaps you did not have that intention uppermost in your mind when you enrolled in college. But all college students and college graduates are writers. It is true that they are not all good writers; they are not all equally successful, either. Since I believe so strongly in good writing, I should try to persuade you to learn your lesson well while you have the best

chance in the world; and I could find many arguments. Do you want money? The Human Engineering Laboratory has shown that skill in the use of language is essential to business success. Do you want fame and power? Julius Caesar, Queen Elizabeth I, Benjamin Franklin, and Winston Churchill all owed much to their mastery of language. Do you want what is better than either fame or money—an effective and loved character? One of the gentlest of human documents went from the pen of Abraham Lincoln, the most beloved President, to a mother whose son had been killed in battle. But these good examples will not necessarily move you. You will decide for yourself whether any private motive impels you to learn composition. It is a matter which you must decide for yourself because, quite simply, it is your own business and no one can push you.

You will find the models of writing in this book as useful for your purposes as demonstrations by Heifetz or other great violinists would be to a young student of the violin. Study them carefully. The exercises will direct your attention to the significant principles to be observed. Your teacher will check your observations and understanding, teach you the fundamentals of writing, and assign themes—and grade them patiently far into the night.

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