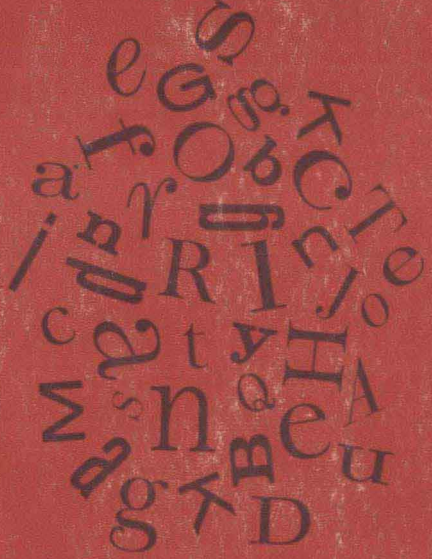
writing college themes



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WRITING
College Themes

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New York 

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 1960

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 60-5102

Printed in the United States of America

AN INTRODUCTION

Writing College Themes is a how-to-do-it book aimed directly at the student. It tells him what to write, shows him how to go about writing it, and in the process gives him a comprehensive course in what is generally called "rhetoric."

Each of the thirty lessons states an assignment for a theme, and then discusses efficient methods of getting started, avoiding pitfalls, and making the most of opportunities. The earlier lessons, in deference to the inexperience which the average college freshman brings to writing, deal with the more elementary problems of selection and structure that are appropriate to the relatively uncomplicated nature of these assignments. As the student progresses from simple narration, through the autobiographical essay, to the sterner challenges of description, exposition, and argument, the discussions introduce more and more sophisticated concepts of style, arrangement, and purpose. By the end of the book, an attentive student has had a great deal of practical advice, a thorough introduction to the basic principles underlying various types of writing, and a generous amount of guided experience in trying out both practical advice and basic principles in his own written work.

Since the usual college year of two semesters or three quarters has approximately thirty weeks of usable class time, the thirty assignments of this volume furnish ample material for a year's course in composition. They have been planned coherently to allow discussion of all important rhetorical topics in an appropriate order. It is seldom recorded in academic annals, however, that an instructor uses a text precisely according to the author's plan. While this book is designed to aid the teacher by giving the student materials with which he can largely help himself, the instructor is not thereby completely deprived

of the pleasure of modifying the text to suit his particular needs and preferences. Although students can never have too much practice in writing, college budgets do not always allow teachers enough time for reading what the students write, and some instructors will of necessity decide to skip assignments judiciously, perhaps omitting one or two under each of the various types of writing indicated by the main divisions of the book, but asking the students to read the discussions accompanying the omitted assignments for the sake of the good advice they may obtain. A few instructors may also want to make minor modifications in the order of the lessons. For those wishing to plan arrangements other than that suggested by the author, the Summary of Contents affords a convenient survey of the topics discussed under each theme assignment, and the analytical index at the end of the book allows either instructor or student to discover readily where the discussion (or discussions) of any particular topic may be found.

Yet it is suggested that the instructor not stray too far from the basic plan of the text, for it rests on two fundamental premises. The first is that the student needs practical help, and that the scheme of this book represents a good way to give it to him. Told to write a theme, the average freshman either starts rapidly filling up several pages of his scratch pad without realizing the difficulties involved, or is all too conscious of the difficulties and sits staring helplessly at the paper. He needs to be at once warned of the complexities of this problem and given some down-to-earth advice on how to solve it: how to formulate a subject, how to select details, how to arrange them effectively. This can best be done by a carefully planned series of assignments and discussions, such as those here presented, which lead the student firmly and surely from the simpler problems to the more complex, yet always encourage confidence by showing him how to meet a specific challenge with a specific response. When he has reached the end of the book, he need not be frightened by any compositional challenge.

The book's second premise is that, besides having practical advice of this sort, the student ought to explore with some thoroughness the

principles of effective writing, and the enormous richness and variety of structure and style available to the skilled user of language; but that here again he can do this most efficiently while solving particular problems. Good writing is never done in a vacuum. It is done for a purpose, and aimed at a reader. This the student must learn at first hand. Crisp wording, emphatic order, logical structure, the vivid detail —such elements as these are all useful stylistic tools; but they are tools more apt to be wielded skillfully when the apprentice writer does not merely read *about* them, or admire their effectiveness in the hands of others, but takes them into his own hand and tries them out himself. It is essential that he discover not only what they can do in general, but what they can do for him. The assignments and discussion of this text are designed, by their nature and sequence, to give the apprentice writer a wide and fruitful experience in learning how to use his stylistic tools.

It may be useful to point out here a few other features of this book. First, it has been planned to be both self-sufficient in the material it covers, yet compatible with a wide variety of companion texts. Most instructors will of course use it in conjunction with a handbook or grammar (and possibly an accompanying workbook). The typical college writer needs detailed instruction in the intricacies of linguistic convention and the enormously varied resources of English sentence structure, as found in handbook or workbook, along with the instruction and practice in actual writing, on a scale larger than the sentence or paragraph, which can best be provided through regular theme assignments and compositional advice of the kind here presented. Handbooks on the American market today vary considerably in their approach to the language, from the more conservative texts written in prescriptive terms to those in a newer style based on functional or linguistic principles. *Writing College Themes* can be used harmoniously with almost any of these handbooks, for it emphasizes the need of thorough competence in the conventions of language without prescribing the particular approach by which such competence is reached, and it constantly stresses the positive aspect of language as something to be used with precision, variety, and imaginative craftsmanship in

order to achieve a desired end. *Writing College Themes* may likewise be used harmoniously with any of the forms of reading material commonly assigned in composition courses—magazines, paperbacks, or anthologies of various pedagogic flavors and theories—for it is not dependent on being accompanied by some one particular type of material and yet is so designed that the student's writing experience will be enriched by almost any form of well-chosen parallel reading.

Writing College Themes speaks directly, clearly, and thoroughly to the student, and is thus in large degree self-teaching. This does not mean that the skilled attention of a classroom instructor is not necessary and desirable; it simply means that the book is designed to allow the greatest amount of useful writing experience in proportion to the investment of energy and time by both student and teacher. For one learns to write only by writing; but the act can be ill directed and useless, or well directed and profitable. If writing a college theme is to be of most profit for the student, the process must include three steps: first, presentation of a judiciously defined writing problem, chosen for its instructional value, and accompanied or preceded by discussion of the principles likely to be involved in its solution; second, the attempt at a solution itself; and third, a critical review of how good the solution really is. During the second part of this process, the student is essentially on his own—no one else can do his writing for him. In steps one and three, he works in partnership with teacher and text. The potential usefulness of this particular text in defining the writing problem and discussing the underlying principles has already been suggested; a good teacher will of course wish to reinforce and enrich what is said in the book, but he has had part of the load taken off his shoulders. Critical review of the accomplishment—not only the instructor's annotation of each theme but class discussion of selected samples—is also a crucial part of the learning process; and here again the text can be of great help, because its very specific directions and advice will serve as a convenient checklist or standard against which both teacher and pupil may conveniently judge the latter's accomplishment.

The practicality of this text has been emphasized. But writing is of course more than just a practical skill. Underlying the discussions of this book is the concept that writing is also a reflection of the life of the individual and his society, and an expression of his own creative mind. Conscious pride of craftsmanship is suggested to the student as a worthy end in itself. Because this book is meant for the inexperienced college writer, it does not deal directly with what is generally called "creative writing"; but in such assignments as those on description, or those involving the analysis of cities and people, there is obvious need for the discerning eye and the imaginative mind; and the student is reminded more than once that in such apparently workaday exercises as those in exposition, argument, and research, he is in a very real sense drawing upon his own personal resources and developing his own powers of personal expression.

To write well, or to teach writing well, is at once a baffling frustration and an invigorating challenge. The aim of this book is to provide assistance for both teacher and pupil in decreasing the bafflement and increasing the invigoration.

An Acknowledgment

No man fully knows the sources of his own ideas. Certainly they do not all rise spontaneously out of himself, and Swift's well-known figure of the spider and the honeybee in *The Battle of the Books,* though comforting, is perhaps all too appropriate for an author acknowledging the aid and influences of others. The following pages represent my own convictions, and bear the stamp of my own mind; yet whatever they may contain of sweetness and light (in the Swiftian, and Arnoldian, rather than the vulgarly sentimental sense) comes in large part from the intellectual stimulation and improvement I have for many years undergone, sometimes unwillingly, at the hands of teachers, colleagues, and students, as well as the prophets of the printed page. My debt to such sources of wisdom is so large, pervasive,

and indefinable that I can acknowledge it only by a general expression of gratitude.

It is, however, a pleasure to record here, more specifically and personally, my especial indebtedness to a Wisconsin friend and colleague, Professor Robert C. Pooley, from whose wise suggestions this volume first grew.

R. B. D.

Madison, Wisconsin
November 1959

A WORD TO THE STUDENT ABOUT WRITING

Writing is a skill. It is one of the most widely useful skills in the world, for it is the means by which the knowledge, the impressions, and the ideas of one mind can be recorded or transmitted for the information, the entertainment, or the persuasion of other minds. Writing can also be an art, in the sense that both writer and reader feel emotional satisfaction when it is well done. But for most of us, perhaps, it is less formidable to think of it simply as a skill, like playing good football or driving a car, only more complicated, and usable for a greater number of different purposes.

One of the difficulties in developing any complicated skill is that it requires the combination and simultaneous mastery of a lot of subskills. The novice driver could steer much better if he didn't have to think at the same time of the brake, the gas pedal, and the turn indicator; the novice writer might concentrate on smoothness and variety if he did not have to keep in mind the often conflicting claims of clarity, emphasis, and logical structure. To some extent this difficulty can be minimized. The driver can practice on a quiet country road where he can steer without needing very often to signal turns or slow down. The student writer is in this book asked to begin with simple narrative and description, where problems of clarity and structure, though always present, are less complex than in advanced exposition or argument.

A second difficulty in developing writing skill is one shared only by other such skills—or arts—as painting and music, which, like writing, demand excellence in both form and content. Before a student can decide *how* to say something on paper he has to decide *what* to say. If we define writing as a form of communication, then certainly the writer must have something to communicate. The man who has

no ideas of his own can hardly pass them on to others. Learning to write, then, is partly a process of learning to think and observe; to increase one's experience, knowledge, and sensitivity; to explore and clarify the resources of one's own mind in order to inform, entertain, or persuade the minds of others.

This takes time to learn, however, and the student needs something to write about right away. What can he find to say? Since most people already have a greater fund of personal experience than they realize, the material closest at hand for a student's writing comes from his own life. The theme assignments in this book therefore begin with narratives and sketches from personal experience. From these the topics broaden out to description, the direct observation of things and people in the external world; then to exposition, the explanation and presentation of facts and ideas; then to argument, the attempt to persuade or convince other people; and finally to the research paper, the most elaborate of all the assignments, a process of gathering information or opinion, sorting and sifting it, and finally synthesizing it into something that has structure, style, and force as the product of the student's own mind. Thus *what* the writer is expected to say expands during these lessons from a report of simple events in his own life to material reflecting his command over objective ideas and that ability to think and write about the external world which is expected of an educated man or woman.

Such an ability is indeed one which the educated man must have; he must be able to transmit the force of his own mind to others by means of the written word. Yet for most of us this is not an easy accomplishment. We had better admit that. Few skills worth acquiring *are* easy. A man cannot learn to write, any more than he can learn to play a guitar or design a house, by simply memorizing rules or following a formula. Nor will very many of us ever be first-rank writers. We had better admit that, too. But very few college writers have even approached the limit of their potential skill, and most of them can get a tremendous amount of satisfaction from pushing themselves closer and closer to their limit.

The satisfaction comes from the fact that writing is more than a

useful tool; it is an opportunity for creation. To construct a pattern of words that will have a foreseen and desired effect on the reader; that will transmit to him, selected, clarified, and judiciously arranged, the experiences, ideas, and emotions of the writer—this can be a deeply satisfying accomplishment. For it appeals to the sense of craftsmanship and the joy of creation which nearly all of us share. Most men and women are happier to know they have done a job *well,* even if it is only painting an old kitchen stool, or mowing a lawn without scraping the trees or running over into the flower beds. In writing, the pride of the craftsman in his creation can be many times greater, because the challenges are so much greater, and because writing—if it is good—draws on all the resources of a man's life, mind, and heart.

Writing done without a sense of craftsmanship is apt to be a chore to the author and a weariness to the reader. Writing done *with* a sense of craftsmanship, even if it is only a textbook exercise undertaken for the development of a useful skill, can be a pleasure to both.

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