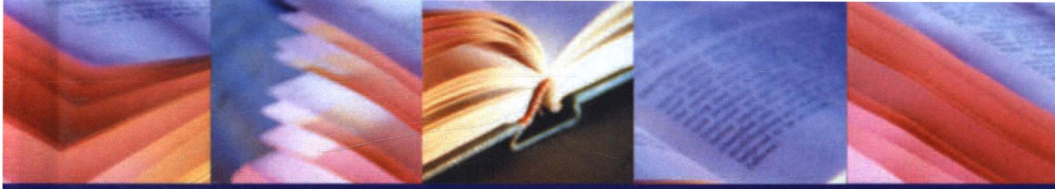

Creating Texts

An Introduction to the Study of Composition

Walter Nash and David Stacey

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WALTER NASH and DAVID STACEY

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Preface

This book has a simple brief: to be of practical value to anyone faced with the task once called 'putting pen to paper', latterly recognised as 'typing a document' and possibly to be known in future as 'uploading a text'. Its subject is the technique of what the British call *composition* and the Americans *rhetoric*. It dwells on the writing of sentences, considers the structure of paragraphs, and invites reflection on broader questions of composition – in personal correspondence, journals, essays, academic articles, fictions.

In describing these matters, it draws variously upon concepts of traditional grammar and rhetoric and the modern conventions of the Internet. At one point, lost for an adequately descriptive title, one of us had a humorous impulse to imitate TV kitchenspeak or handymantalk and call the work 'Here's one we made earlier: how to cook up a style' or 'Build your own text: a Do-It-Yourself guide'. These formulations, however ineligible as titles, do in fact express quite well what is going on in the book. Our view is that you can learn something about writing by studying closely how other people have done it; further, that writing is *societal*, its stylistic varieties depending on contexts, communities and relationships. You build as those skilled in the craft have built; you cook for your invited guests.

In much of the book, the reader is treated as a member of the college class, a more or less passive observer of what is demonstrated, although there are many useful and entertaining projects to be derived from the first eight chapters. It is in the final section,

called 'Projects, Themes and Diversions' that readers are invited to come into their own as writers. These exercises, we would insist, are no more than indications of what might be done.

Books are seldom written without a great deal of auxiliary support and nurturing. In this connection our warmest thanks are due to Dakota Hamilton and Helen Hunter, to which *blest pair of Sirens* the book is dedicated; and thanks also to Neomi Lugmayer, for her timely loan, in a far country and a remote place, of the typewriter Samsung Agonistes, without which we would have missed deadlines. On this occasion the keyboard proved to be mightier than the ballpoint.

WN DES

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For Cody and Taff
who keep us in touch with the context

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One

Beginning at some beginnings

Let us suppose that you are about to write, at the request of your insurance company (Brightside Brokers), a brief factual description of what happened when your motor vehicle was rear-ended at the intersection of Rollinghome Road and Wanderlust Way, one fine afternoon in July. You are of course wholly innocent of any responsibility for this deplorable event, which occurred while you were singing along to some old Leonard Cohen tapes and patiently waiting for the traffic lights to change. All you know is that a big car came up behind you and removed your rear bumper, your stop lights, and most of your baggage compartment, including your fairly usable spare tyre and those pretty flowering baskets you were carrying home from the garden centre. It is a miracle that you are not going round in an orthopaedic collar. As you recall the event your grief and rage are truly indescribable, but never mind, if a description is what they want at Brightside Brokers Inc., a description is what they are going to get. So you describe:

> I'm sitting at a stop light on Rollinghome Road, doing no harm to anyone, when suddenly BANG this mindless oaf or to put it more accurately this lobotomized gorilla chooses to ram his BMW up my tailpipe. Right there in broad daylight, visibility perfect, the street empty. He demolishes my back end, this yuppie hooligan. *Totals* my fuchsias, he does, and has the gall to ask me what of it? Then, would you believe it, he accuses me of *rolling back*, the unprincipled hound, yes, *rolling back* – at 20 m.p.h.! – into his squeaky-clean corporate sales-chariot. Can

> you believe that? Do I have witnesses, you ask – well, yes, I have a witness, I have a myopic pensioner being taken for a walk by his long-haired dachshund, which, I am happy to say, paused to lift its little leg against the BMW, proving beyond a doubt the intelligence and discriminatory powers of this breed of animal. That man, or possibly that dog, could if invited testify to the accuracy of my narrative.

Now having at this point experienced the first fiery outbreak of the compositional impulse – the *calor cogitationis* as Quintilian calls it – you stop to read over your work, with a possible view to improving a turn of phrase here, sharpening a point there, even, it may be, adding one or two tasty insults to what is already a reeking dish of contumely. You are quite pleased with it. You consider it not half bad. You show it, looking for approval, to your spouse, or your partner, or your sibling, or your best friend, and you are surprised and a little hurt when they tell you that, fine though your description undoubtedly is, it will not get you too far with the steely-eyed cynics at Brightside Brokers. Much more in this vein and you might find yourself paying for your own repairs. What is required, they gently remind you, is a brief description of the facts; not of how it feels to have had those outraged feelings; not of how satisfying it is to nurture feelings until facts disappear; just a little cool description of the facts themselves.

At first you sulk, because nobody likes to abandon a fine ebullient piece of writing, but eventually you are persuaded to attempt an impersonal, coldly objective account, in conventional documentary style, of what really happened at the intersection of Rollinghome Road and Wanderlust Way on that afternoon in July. This turns out to be surprisingly hard. It is always easier to give expressive rein to your personality than it is to come down to little brass tacks. You struggle with the problem, however, and after several drafts manage something along the following lines:

> The accident occurred on Friday, 22 July, at 3 p.m. approximately, at the intersection of Rollinghome Road and Wanderlust Way. (See the enclosed sketch-map.) My vehicle, a 1957 sand-coloured Bono-de-Luxe convertible, reg. nr. OUR A1, was waiting at the traffic lights in Rollinghome Road South, when it was struck from behind by a silver-grey BMW saloon car, reg. nr. BEAST 666. I estimate that the BMW was travelling

> at 10–12 m.p.h. when the collision occurred. It appeared that the driver had failed to apply his brakes in good time. Visibility was good, and the road surface dry. The impact was so hard as to result in appreciable damage to the rear of my vehicle. (See the enclosed mechanic's report.) The collision was witnessed by a passing pedestrian, Mr J. P. Shufflewell, a retired minister of religion, whose address I append.

This you show to your friendly adviser, who reads it through with nods and grunts and eventually suggests that you should add the words 'with the gear shift in neutral and the parking brake engaged' after 'waiting at the traffic lights in Rollinghome Road South'. You make this addition partly for the sake of domestic peace, and partly because you see the wisdom of representing yourself as one who follows good driving practice to the uttermost letter of virtue. Of course your purpose is to present a reliably objective account, but even so there are ways, without actually *loading* the piece, of conveying to the insurance assessor how blameless you are and how culpably negligent the other driver has been. 'It appeared that the driver had failed to apply the brakes in good time', you say. *Appeared*? You wouldn't really know, would you? Butter wouldn't melt in your mouth, would it? You wouldn't like to imply that he was asleep, would you, or drunk, or reaching into his back pocket for a sachet containing a narcoleptic substance, or just suffering one of those blinding lapses of memory he has kept concealed from his general practitioner? You will only say that when he slammed into your rear end it *appeared* that he had failed to 'apply' the brakes – and let the experts at Brightside see what they make of that. It is devious dealing, but the conventions of this kind of writing allow for it. Then again, 'the road surface was dry'. This is in case the other fellow, in his account, comes up with the well-known slippery tarmacadam ploy, or invents an oil slick, or happens to remember a sudden squall of intensively localised rain breaking precisely over his car. You forestall him with your laconic assertion, 'the road surface [was] dry'. Good stuff. It will probably save your no-claims bonus. Peace descends on your heart as you fold the form into its pre-paid envelope. These things, you tell your domestic consultant, should only be written after a period of mature reflection. And you are right. Never be in a hurry to put pen finally to paper; you may

presently be obliged to put paper finally into waste basket.

Such experiences, however, may tell us something about the craft of writing. If nothing else, they teach us to write *appropriately*, using – or exploring, sometimes expanding – conventions of form and style most likely to achieve an envisaged purpose: making a report, arguing a case, appealing to an audience, telling a story. All such purposes are essentially social, or, as we shall say, *societal*. A society is an intricate thing, a complex of institutions, hierarchies, kinships, practices, assumptions about behaviour, powerfully influential not only as they exist in themselves, but also as they are perceived in the mind of the individual. We each have a diffuse mental impression of our society, a kind of internalised map/guide in accordance with which, whether consciously or unconsciously, we think and act *societally*. Writing itself thus becomes in many ways a societal practice, though beginners in prose, and college aspirants to poetic stardom, dislike the proposition that writings exist and take shape in societies. Asked why they write, they will often say 'to express myself', learning only by grudging degrees that 'self-expression', if not exactly a will-o'-the wisp, is always a light to be followed circumspectly. In any case, nobody who writes formally, in full sentences and completed texts, can write for 'myself' and 'myself' alone. Even diarists do not write wholly for 'themselves', unless, perhaps, like Samuel Pepys, they resort to a secret code; as long as they write in plain English (or any 'natural' language), they write for someone, for 'the other me', the postulated audience. They write *as if* this diary-making, for all its privacy, were nonetheless a societal act.

Let us nevertheless allow that of all forms of text, the diary is the most *personal*. It is even, to use an out-of-town word, solipsistic. Your diary will allow you to please yourself in many ways. You need not be able to spell, or construct grammatically correct sentences, or use a standard vocabulary, or proceed logically in connected stages, or indeed do so many of the things a societally-governed text will demand of you. The diary puts no constraints upon you. It leaves you to scribble, to fumble, to stumble, just as you please and just as the words come out; and for that very reason the keeping of a diary may be an excellent school of unhampered facility and assurance in writing.

The case is greatly altered, however, when you have to write a