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EFFICIENT AND ATTRACTIVE WRITING
FOR ALMOST ANY AUDIENCE

A.M. Tibbetts

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FOR ALMOST ANY AUDIENCE

A.M. Tibbetts

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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PREFACE

I do two things for a living: write and teach writing. For nearly thirty years, I have been teaching composition, grammar, and usage to college students. As a consultant, I teach business executives, engineers, and other professionals how to write more clearly and accurately.

This little book is written for all those people, and also for anybody who is eavesdropping. I don't believe in slicing up the craft of nonfiction writing into procrustified pieces: *business writing*, *technical writing*, *freshman English*, *medical communication*, *memos*, *reports*. These academic classifications are mainly artificial and silly. It's all one, really.

Writing done in any field for any audience should be, as my subtitle suggests, *efficient* and *attractive*. Those who write efficiently do so to make a point; they have a clear sense of organization and direction. They know where they are going, and so does their reader. The writing thus produced is efficient: conveying its message clearly and without fuss. Such writing should also be attractive, drawing the reader in with its liveliness and good sense. The nature of efficient, attractive writing does not change significantly from discipline to discipline or from topic to topic. We are all in the same boat, using the same language.

Then why does my subtitle say "almost any, au-

dience''? Because there are those who don't agree with my ideas about clearness and simplicity in writing. Among them, lately, have been a few computer experts and some directors of doctoral dissertations in the social sciences. Be warned. If you write in these areas and follow my advice, you may get into trouble.

Also, that "almost" is a reminder that many truths about most things tend to be partial. For the sake of style, let us agree here to drop all but the most necessary *many's*, *most's*, and *tends-to-be's* for the remainder of our journey. Let such qualifications be implied. I claim to be no more than 51 percent to 75 percent accurate on the great questions in writing.

Finally:

1. I use the term *essay* throughout to mean any piece of writing that has a beginning, middle, and end—and a *point* to make. For our purposes, an essay can be an interoffice memo, a scientific report, a critical paper on *Hamlet*, a letter to the editor.
2. You will see that occasionally I change format from chapter to chapter (note the differences in four, five, and six). I do this to illustrate certain techniques of organization and visual effect.
3. I have borrowed some of my ideas about argument, persuasion, and audience from Aristotle. The term *argumentative edge* has been used by several authorities, most notably by that fine scholar and writer, Sheridan Baker.
4. In their preface to a book on writing, Deborah Gunther, Lynda Marin, Joan Maxwell, and Jeri Weiss say this on the question of the generic pronoun:

In our opinion good writing is simple and clear. We find it impossible to write simply and clearly while using the very awkward constructions of *he or she*, *him or her*, and *his or her*. Since the accepted generic singular personal pronouns in the English language are *he*, *his*, and *him*, we have consciously chosen to employ them in the interest of clarity of style. . . .

As four women who know that the sexes are equal, we ask that you not take our use of the masculine pronoun as a political or philosophical statement.*

I agree.

For helping to shape the manuscript, I thank Harriett Prentiss and Amanda Clark of Scott, Foresman. Thanks particularly to my editor, Kathy Lorden, for helping me to improve it in several important ways.

—A. M. Tibbetts

*From *Writing: A Sourcebook of Exercises & Assignments* by Deborah Gunther, Lynda Marin, Joan Maxwell and Jeri Weiss. Copyright © 1978 by Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

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CHAPTER 1

THE ARGUMENTATIVE EDGE

It was early June of 1949, about one o'clock in the afternoon. I was standing in a small pit that I had just finished digging with a shovel. Except that it was only about two feet deep, the pit (whose purpose here is of no consequence) looked like a grave. At that moment—in the early afternoon of a hot Colorado day—I wished it was mine. I was working as a roustabout on an oil exploration crew, twelve hours a day, six to seven days a week. No overtime pay, ever. I was beyond blisters and hope.

Two hours later, I was in the field office gingerly typing a progress letter on a small portable. No shovel. Sitting down. A fan blowing on me. A broken fingernail snapped off, and blood dripped on the typewriter. No matter; reprieve had come. While I had been leaning on a shovel wishing for death, somebody in the Tulsa headquarters had found in my personnel file these lovely words: "Had two years of composition in college," and phoned that information to Colorado. The field crew had nobody who could write English fast and accurately. So for the next five years, I spent

hundreds of hours planning, writing, and editing reports in the science of seismic geophysics.

In the three decades since that transfiguration, I have written or edited nonfiction materials on just about any subject you can name. But I'll spare you their naming.

Such has been my education as a writer. Teachers, unquestionably, have been helpful. But I have learned more from other writers and editors, many of them specialists in "non-English" fields like history, business, advertising.

One thing they taught me is that successful pieces of writing in the real world are more alike than different. An accounting report has important similarities to a memo on a problem in geophysics. A theoretical statement on secondary oil recovery is surprisingly like a paper on contemporary novelists. When successful, these pieces of writing tend to use the same basic language, the same rules of grammar, the same "patterns of exposition" (for example, *classifying, contrasting, comparing*). They will even use very similar strategies of paragraphing and organization of large blocks of material. But perhaps the most important similarity lies in one fact: *they are all arguments*.

Early in my career, I had trouble with some of the writing jobs the company threw at me. I was doing from ten to twenty pieces a week; they ranged from highly scientific reports to gossipy stuff for the company magazine. I went to the head of the geophysics department with my tale of woe.

"Well," he said, "try thinking this way. Imagine that every piece you write is an argument that asks a reader to *believe* or *do* something. Or both. Your job is

to convince the reader to believe what you want him to, to do what you suggest. Lead him by the hand through your report or letter. When you think he might stumble, stop and find out why, and where you went wrong—because *you* are responsible for keeping him on his feet.”

I went away feeling that my mind had been rinsed out with uncommon good sense. I had taken those two years of composition at the university, but no one (as I recall) had ever talked about argument except as a type of writing one took a course in. For example, there was the second-year sequence in composition: a twelve-week quarter each of narration and description, exposition, and argumentation. Nor do I recall any discussion of the reader and his hardships. For my professors I guess he didn't exist. As for the possibility that he might “stumble”—the metaphor opened up a new way of thinking about the difficulties a reader could have in following me over the rhetorical hills and rocks peculiar to scientific work.

But, as it turned out, not so peculiar as I thought. I now have students ranging in age from eighteen to sixty (college freshmen to company presidents), and most of the papers they write are argumentative—they are trying to get people to *believe* or *do* something. Or both.

In effect, my department head's suggestion was that I apply an “argumentative edge” to my writing. I tried it and it worked. Moreover, it has worked on every topic I've ever attacked—from *The Satire of Samuel Johnson* to *Why a Machine Gun Breaks Down*. You employ the argumentative edge on a topic by cutting firmly, even ruthlessly, into its matter, omitting

irrelevancies along the way. When you get to the heart of the matter, you stop. The classic introduction, body, and conclusion of an essay are no more than:

1. Tell the reader where you are going to cut the topic
2. Cut till you are finished
3. Stop.

Most of my students tell me they have a hard time getting started. "I've been fiddling around with this piece for a week, and still all I've got are three false starts and a lot of crumpled paper."

I ask: "What's the main point of your argument?" If the student can tell me, my answer is simple: *Start proving that point.* Don't write an "introduction"; just start cutting to the heart of the topic. You may discover that when you have finished writing, you don't need a formal introduction. If you do need one, write it and tack it on.

If the student cannot tell me his main point, I suggest that he ask these questions:

What exactly do you want your reader to think? Believe?

What, if anything, do you want your reader to do? Write (I say) a short but very specific answer to each question. Typical answers look like these:

1. "I want the reader to agree with me that *Macbeth* is not a tragedy."
2. "I want the reader to help me put pressure on the city council to pass a law preventing the burning of leaves in the fall by homeowners."
3. "I want my reader to believe that food stamps are being misused by a significant number of Americans."

4. "I want my reader to accept my plan for buying a word-processing machine for the Public Affairs Department."

Numbers 1 and 3 may require further discussion with the writer; I'll cover such discussion in a later chapter. But 2 and 4 require more discussion and questioning right away:

For 2: Why is burning leaves bad? Will your reader automatically accept your implied premise that it is bad? Do you need to move back a step and write an argument proving just that? In other words, do you need to write Argument A (*need for a change*) before you write Argument B (*call for action*)? Or do you want to try to combine Arguments A and B? This can be done, but it takes more space to develop the arguments convincingly, and the process is more complex.

For 4, the same kind of questioning: Should you write first an Argument A, that there is a need for a change in the Public Affairs Department? If you can't prove a need for a change, proposing one is probably a waste of time. If Argument A is obvious, spend just a little time on it and then charge into Argument B with all flags flying. Argue, convince, persuade.

Of course, for the writer, *persuade* is a transitive verb; there are always readers to be persuaded. And your readership, your audience, can be quite confusedly mixed. A memo to Mr. Jones may be read by five other people—and later acted on by Ms. Smith, a vice-president you never heard of.

Learn to *worry* about your reader! Do you know that I spend more time thinking about *you* (my reader); about how you are reacting; about what you know and don't know; about what interests you and what does not; about your age, experience, and predilections—oh,

lord, is *predilections* the right word for you? . . . To start up my sentence again: I spend more time pondering you and your reactions to my writing than I spend on any other issue—except perhaps the subject of writing itself.

Years ago, I worked with a fine writer who scribbled profiles of his readers. Sometimes a profile ran three or four pages. The rest of us writers wondered why he spent his time this way. He told us, “I must know my readers because I carry on a sort of one-sided dialogue with them”:

You don't know that word? I'll define it.

You disagree that Process Q is more expensive than process Z? I'll supply a paragraph of statistics to prove the point.

You're getting bored? I'll see if I can cut some of this section.

You wonder whether there aren't solutions to the problem other than the one I mentioned? I'll describe other solutions and tell you why they are weaker than mine.

Your argumentative edge cuts most cleanly when you present the *relevant facts*. They are perhaps the profoundest part of your message. If you are discussing a short story, quote from it; give the relevant facts about action, characters, and setting. If you are writing a scientific report, give the relevant facts about the experiment, materials used, and variables. I often handle facts with two tools: a typewriter and a pair of sharp scissors. After typing a draft, with the scissors I cut away the unnecessary head or false beginning of the draft, whack off its redundant tail, and perform surgery on the undistinguished parts of

its middle. I scissor up to where the facts are. What's left is the argument.

All that I have said is mainly true, but it is not all of the truth. Like other human endeavors, writing has its paradoxes and contradictions. No sooner does an authority say that the writer should always stick to the subject, and not vary from it, and define terms, and give all the facts, and organize in an orderly fashion, than we readers rise up and complain: "This stuff is getting wretchedly dull—give it a rest, will you? Don't you know any jokes?"

No matter what readers may tell you with a perfectly straight face, what they want deep down is an occasional impertinence, digression, or piece of nonsense to alleviate tedium.

And sure enough, a good argument occasionally "impertinates," takes a detour into a little story, pun, or alliterative allusion. These represent the bright colors of the mind and are the legitimate invention of a true writer at work. Gray is dull, and prose that is all gray will make your reader feel a dampness in his soul.

Now I have finished this chapter and will stop.

CHAPTER 2

WORDS TO THINK WITH

Americans have always had their words to live by—words found in the language as fashioned by our uncommon common people. A few examples.

On the day before Christmas, 1775, George Washington wrote to Major General Philip Schuyler:

When is the time for brave men to exert themselves in the cause of liberty and their country, if this is not? Should any difficulties that they may have to encounter at this important crisis, deter them? God knows, there is not a difficulty, that you both [Schuyler and General Montgomery] very justly complain of, which I have not in an eminent degree experienced, that I am not every day experiencing; but we must bear up against them, and make the best of mankind as they are, since we cannot have them as we wish.

During the Civil War Mary Chesnut, a Southerner, wrote in her diary:

One begins to understand the power which the ability to vote gives the meanest citizen. We went to one of Uncle Hamilton's splendid dinners, plate, glass, china, and everything that was nice to eat. In the piazza, when the

gentlemen were smoking after dinner, in the midst of them sat Squire MacDonald, the well-digger. He was officiating in that capacity at Plain Hill, and apparently he was most at his ease of all. He had his clay pipe in his mouth, he was cooler than the rest, being in his shirt sleeves, and he leaned back luxuriously in his chair tilted on its two hind legs, with his naked feet up on the banister. Said Louisa—"Look, the mud from the well is sticking through his toes! See how solemnly polite and attentive Mr. Chesnut is to him?" "Oh, that's his way. The raggeder and more squalid the creature, the more polite and the softer Mr. Chesnut grows."—*A Diary from Dixie*

Late in the nineteenth century, a country physician wrote to a woman about her tubercular husband: "My advice is short, but I know it is good. Tell him to dismiss all thoughts of curing his lungs; it can't be done, never could be, never will be by way of lung remedies. Nature will cure them if she can. No doctor can."

In 1937, Richard Wright published these words:

I now saw a world leap to life before my eyes because I could explore it, and that meant not going home when school was out, but wandering, watching, asking, talking. Had I gone home to eat my plate of greens, Granny would not have allowed me out again, so the penalty I paid for roaming was to forfeit my food for twelve hours. I would eat mush at eight in the morning and greens at seven or later at night. To starve in order to learn about my environment was irrational, but so were my hungers. With my books slung over my shoulder, I would tramp with a gang into the woods, to rivers, to creeks, into the business district, to the doors of poolrooms, into the movies when we could slip in without paying, to neighborhood ball games, to brick kilns, to lumberyards, to cottonseed mills