the contemporary writer

A PRACTICAL RHETORIC

w. ross winterowd

The Contemporary Writer

W. Ross Winterowd
University of Southern California


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Preface

Most of the textbooks that an average student goes through in his or her freshman year—economics, biology, psychology, and so on—are in a sense *real* books; that is, they are interesting because they are conceptually rich. The one freshman textbook that few people read for or with pleasure is the rhetoric-handbook that most students use (or at least carry about) for one or two semesters.

Now, most rhetoric-handbooks are undoubtedly more or less useful, for they cover such matters as punctuation and verb agreement, and, the world being what it is, most freshmen need that kind of information. But rhetoric-handbooks can be, even though they seldom are, useful *books*. When you read a real book, you carry on an intellectual dialogue with it; you are engaged. To be frank and brief: I view *The Contemporary Writer* as a real book. Its conceptual basis is rich and unified; it is not, I feel certain, overly difficult, but I have tried to give it the intellectual depth and unity that will allow students to become engaged with it.

Conceptual substance is a great virtue in any book, but a rhetoric-handbook needs other important virtues as well: completeness, reliability, modernity, practical usefulness. *The Contemporary Writer* has these.

A glance at the Table of Contents and the Index will give some idea of the completeness of the book: all modes of writing are dealt with, and the major concepts in regard to writing and language are covered in detail. Furthermore, the scholarly background that informs the book makes for high reliability of both general concepts and specific information.

The book is modern—both in tone and in theory. Again, a survey of the Index will demonstrate that important contemporary thought and thinkers are amply represented.

And the book is useful, in that it is carefully designed to be practical for students at all levels of ability. No theory is presented merely for the sake of theory: all aspects of the book contribute to the goal of helping students express themselves to an audience in writing.

I would like to say something graceful and witty by way of thanking three scholars whose help with this book has been invaluable, but grace and wit, it occurs to me, always seem tortuous in a preface. So unadorned but sincere thanks to Richard Young of the University of Michigan, Robert Gorrell of the University of Nevada, and Edward P. J. Corbett of Ohio State University.

An old American folk song tells of simple pleasures; among my simple pleasures are bagels with chopped liver, sherry at three in the afternoon, and good company. Often my friend Rose Kreitzberg supplies the bagels with chopped liver and the good company, while I supply the sherry. Rose was much more than the patient and meticulous worker who typed my rough draft; indeed, her comments and suggestions were very useful. She has had an influence on every chapter of this book. My thanks to her.

My editors at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich have been more than kind and helpful: they have been magnificent. Gordon R. Fairburn has, with unfailing common sense and good humor, shepherded the project since it was little more than an idea and a stack of scratchy pages making less than a fragment of a manuscript.

Cecilia Gardner has been nothing short of phenomenal in her work with the manuscript. With intelligence and tact she showed me where I went astray and invariably made just the right strokes to put me on the track again. I particularly admire Cele's work because she is a real prose craftswoman, with tremendous sensitivity to the nuances of words and the movement of sentences. I am not exaggerating when I say that working with her edited copy—which might have been an odious task—was always a pleasure and at times fascinating. My very special thanks to her for the care she has taken.

My thanks also to Tina Norum, whose careful work in styling the manuscript and handling the proof has made this a better book.

And I am grateful to Pat Smythe for her handsome design and to Alice Sánchez for her attentive supervision of the production of the book.

My sons, Jeff and Tony; my mother, who provides the ballast for our family; and Norma, my wife and best pal—these four make my circle just, and make me end where I begun.

W. Ross Winterowd

Contents

PART ONE

The Uses of Writing

1 The Uses of Writing: Self-Expression

Part One of *The Contemporary Writer* will discuss, in detail, four kinds of writing: self-expressive, expository, persuasive, and imaginative. Each type of writing will be discussed from two viewpoints: the writer's problems and the reader's interest. (Of course, this separation is artificial; the reader's interests and the writer's problems are really one and the same. But the division allows us to discover some basic principles and gives us a convenient way to approach the subject.)

The problems of the writer and the concerns of the reader will be classed under five headings: the *writer,* the *context* in which the writing is done (including external reality as well as internal, mental reality), the *structure* of the piece, the *style,* and the *audience* for whom the piece seems to be intended.

Summary of the Chapter

It may be unusual to find a summary at the beginning of the chapter, but actually it makes very good sense to begin this way. The most efficient way to approach a reading task is to attempt to gain an overview of what is to come. The more "clues" you bring with you to the text, the easier it will be for you to understand and master what you read. The chapter summary gives you an overview, an idea of what is to come, and therefore should help you with the detailed and sometimes thorny material in the chapter.

The summary is also a good device for putting it all together after you have read the chapter. Therefore, I suggest that you come back to the

summary after you have finished the chapter. That way you will begin and end by taking a broad general view of the materials.

In this chapter, four types of self-expressive writing will be considered: the interior monologue, the personal letter, the journal, and the autobiography.

The Interior Monologue. The best way to characterize this sort of writing is to say that it is you, as the writer, talking to yourself. Since your purpose in the "pure" interior monologue—if there is any such thing as a pure use of language—is to talk to yourself, to attempt to find yourself through your writing, you do not need to be concerned with structure, style, or audience.

The Personal Letter. While the interior monologuist does not care about audience, the writer of a personal letter cares very much, for there is a very definite audience, someone who will read the letter. And usually the letter contains news—that is, it deals with exterior context. The writer's adjustment to the audience for a personal letter is usually automatic, causing no problems.

The Journal. The journal is usually a record of the writer's impressions of internal and external reality—that is, of the world and the writer's reactions to it. The writer probably does not have a given audience in mind, but does intend the journal to be read by someone or some group. The basic structure is chronological, and the style cannot be "private," for it must be understandable to a reader.

The Autobiography. The autobiography is normally the most "public" kind of self-expressive writing. Therefore, it is more formal in organization, tone, and style than the other kinds. The audience for the autobiography is usually an unspecified group that might be called "the reading public."

What Is Useful?

A hammer and a screwdriver are useful, but what about a painting or a piece of sculpture? A recipe in *The New York Times Cook Book* is useful, but what about a lyric poem? The instructions for using a pay telephone are useful, but what about the "Damn it!" that I uttered last night when I stubbed my toe in the dark?

What I'm suggesting is that we shouldn't interpret usefulness too narrowly. The abstract painting in my parlor and the piece of "junk" sculpture that sits before it, the lyric poetry that I constantly read—these are as useful to me in their way as screwdrivers, hammers, recipes, and pay phone instructions are in theirs.

Frankly, it is hard for me to argue that learning to write well is "useful" in the narrow sense, to argue that you won't be able to get along in life without learning to accomplish the sorts of writing that this book teaches. Most people in the real world outside of school do not need to write very much. I think, for instance, of a friend who works for the Navy: his professional writing consists of filling in forms. Another friend is a physician, and the important writing that he does, of course, is cryptic scribbling on small pieces of paper that his patients carry to the drugstore. A

petroleum engineer friend must write a great deal in his profession, but since he composes technical reports according to a rigidly prescribed format, he almost never does the kind of "free" writing that this book will concentrate on.

Your own experience also tells you that very few people in the real world "out there" need to write in order to be successful. It was ever thus. During the Middle Ages, members of the ruling class felt that a skill such as writing was beneath them, so they hired scribes, to compose as well as to copy. In the *Phaedrus,* Plato even said that the invention of the alphabet was a curse, for when ideas were written down, they were no longer growing, organic things, but rather became fixed, like butterflies pinned in an exhibit case; furthermore, contended Plato, writing had the effect of ruining people's memory.

What about the world "in here," the world of higher education? You will probably do more writing per week during your years in college than you will ever do again in your life, and yet I suspect that most students could get through their four undergraduate years perfectly well without ever taking a composition course.

So I would argue that for most people the ability to write with grace, clarity, and conviction is not essential, is not even useful in the narrow sense.

But there is a broader and more important sense of usefulness, and when viewed from this perspective, learning to write well becomes terribly important.

The real usefulness of writing can be equated with the usefulness of dreaming. The great Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung wrote, "The general function of dreams is to try to restore our psychological balance by producing dream material that re-establishes, in a subtle way, the total psychic equilibrium."[1] I like to view all writing as one way in which we can express ourselves and thus find ourselves. All writing is the kind of psychic outlet for the conscious mind that dreaming is for the unconscious. This is just the point, for instance, that Eldridge Cleaver discovered when he began to write *Soul on Ice:*

> 1 After I returned to prison, I took a long look at myself and, for the first time in my life, admitted that I was wrong, that I had gone astray—astray not so much from the white man's laws as from being human, civilized—for I could not approve the act of rape. Even though I had some insight into my own motivations, I did not feel justified. I lost my self-respect. My pride as a man dissolved and my whole fragile moral structure seemed to collapse, completely shattered.
>
> I realized that no one could save me but myself. I had to seek out the truth and unravel the snarled web of my motivations. I had to find out who I am and what I want to be, what type of man I should be, and what I could do to become the best of which I was capable.

All of which is *not* to say that writing doesn't have many practical uses for everyone. The ability to write well can help you get through school with

[1]Carl G. Jung, "Approaching the Unconscious," *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), p. 50.

greater ease and better grades and might even put money in your pocket in the world "out there."

I am stressing usefulness so strongly only because I don't want the discussion that follows to be viewed merely as a guide for accomplishing a practical task that must be gotten through if one wants the bachelor's degree. In a very real sense, you can't write about anything but yourself. Therefore, learning to write is a way to achieve personal growth. That mystic substance, that island called *you,* must find ways out of itself. One of the best ways out is through writing.

Elements of Writing

To think profitably about so large a subject as writing, one needs some way of organizing the topic, of taking it apart so that its constituents can be viewed systematically. This is an important concept, one that we will return to in great detail.

The next few paragraphs will present a "way into" the generality called writing, a way of seeing its parts and their purpose. The concepts that will be outlined also serve as the organizational framework for this book; therefore, what is about to be discussed is a kind of map of *The Contemporary Writer.*

A linguist named Roman Jakobson devised the following diagram of the elements of discourse:[2]

2

CONTEXT
MESSAGE
ADDRESSER . . . . . ADDRESSEE
CONTACT
CODE

The diagram simply means that any time speech or writing takes place, there is

an addresser, someone who does the speaking or writing;
a context, a time and place in which the discourse occurs;
a message, something that the discourse says;
contact, something to convey the message;
a code, a language of some kind;
an addressee, someone or some group for whom the message is intended.

It is well to remember that *every* language act involves all six elements. And, as will become apparent, all this is not just theoretical fluff, but, rather, it all boils down to some very practical considerations for the writer. Just one example: If you are writing for young children, you will need to approach your subject in a different way than if you were writing for college students; that is, you need to keep the concept of addressee, or audience, firmly in mind.

[2]From Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1960), p. 353.