writing

analysis & application

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WRITING:
Analysis and Application

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Preface

THIS book provides a practical approach to writing. Its chief concerns are, as the title indicates, the analysis and application of techniques that improve written communication. The opening chapter features a variety of examples of sentence construction as well as definitions and illustrations of simple, compound, and complex sentences. Hints about achieving clarity, concreteness, variety, and vividness grow out of close study of sentences composed by professional writers and students. Discussion of student samples should prove especially useful, because these models came from actual class debates about how to improve individual sentences in the context of the complete essay. The same benefit accrues to the analysis of paragraph structure, which constitutes the book's second chapter. Tips on topic and thesis sentence form mark this section; classes of sentences are defined and illustrated with samples from student and professional writing. Problems of beginning and ending, paragraph development, transition and coherence receive thorough treatment. I have tried to represent the range of writing situations—reviewing, editorializing, narrating, defining, persuading—to be faced not only in classes but outside them as well. The third chapter is made up of a collection of essays classed according to their purpose. These classes include the description of personalities ("Famous People I've Known"), definition and defense of a subject, simple description, reviewing, humorous writing, and so on. Each essay receives careful analysis, paragraph by paragraph, to indicate how each argument is developed and what role each paragraph plays. The essays should first be read without stopping, then reexamined through the paragraph-by-paragraph analysis. The process should reveal how the elements of sentences and paragraphs are combined effectively to build to the completed essays. It will disclose not only the strengths but also the weaknesses of

the sample essays. Discussion of these weaknesses and strengths will improve an understanding of structure and style to the point at which both can be applied effectively in original composition. The remainder of the book can be called a handbook for correction of errors in mechanics and for revision of sentences and paragraphs to remove errors and to make them more effective.[1] Sections are referred to in the text of the book. An appendix contains instructions for the writing of a research paper demonstrated in a student model.

The chapters on sentences and paragraphs include exercises for practice. Questions for discussion are included in the chapter on essays. The first two chapters also contain checklists for sentence and paragraph composition that the reader should refer to before completing the final editing task for his or her essay. I have titled these three chapters "Sentence Power," "Paragraph Power," and "Essay Power" because I believe that the goal of all good writing is what might be called potency. Whether one is trying to describe something to a reader, define a difficult concept, persuade a reader to take one's point of view, or simply communicate a feeling, one's success depends upon the effectiveness of the words chosen and the manner in which they are employed. By breaking the grand structure of the essay into its components and showing how to construct them, I demonstrate that writing is like any other craft and that with care and attention it can be improved.

Among the many debts of gratitude I have incurred in the development of *Writing: Analysis and Application,* one in particular requires mention. Marion Jean Leyrer, for the estate of John M. Kierzek, and Walker Gibson generously gave me permission to borrow and adapt material from *The Macmillan Handbook of English,* Sixth Edition, by Kierzek, Gibson, and Willson. Without the additions from that work, *Writing: Analysis and Application* would lack something no diligence on my part alone could supply: the cumulative refinements of forty years' publishing history.

R. F. W.

[1] This portion of the book is adapted from *The Macmillan Handbook of English,* sixth edition, by John M. Kierzek, Walker Gibson, and Robert F. Willson, Jr. (copyright © Macmillan 1977).

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1: *Sentence Power*

§ 1. INTRODUCTION

SENTENCES are like bricks. Bricks are used to make buildings, and therefore are essential objects, but after the building is constructed they should draw little attention to themselves. Sentences are the materials of writing, and like any builder the writer should know the nature of the materials—what they can and cannot do—before beginning to mortar ideas together.

Another analogy may better demonstrate the idea. Most of us have tried at one time to play pinball. The good player knows there are only five balls to work with. To score a high number of points, one must get the most out of these mindless objects. So the player learns how to shoot them at just the right velocity, how to depress the flippers at the exact moment of impact—how, in other words, to control the game. Sentences and pinballs, however, have a way of avoiding control, resulting in frustration and anger for writer and player alike.

I have used analogies here because defining a sentence does not provide a good idea of sentence variety, function, and purpose. Any group of words using a subject and predicate to express a thought or describe an action can be called a sentence. We need to understand this definition if we are to avoid blurting out our thoughts in fragments: "Running when he should be walking"; "Which wasn't much fun." (The statement the writer is really trying to make here is something like this: "His doctor told him he was running when he should be walking, which wasn't as much fun.") Sentences describe, define, persuade, dissuade, and express opinions, feelings, and ideas. They can be short—"You lie!"—or long—"He lost interest, the job ran out, the company went out of business, people stopped buying bicycles, sugar tripled in price and ruined his Nabisco distributorship" (Walker Percy, *Lancelot*). There are four types of sentences: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex; and we will discuss and illustrate these types a little later on. For the moment it is important to understand that if sentences are effective they give the impression that the person writing them is intelligent, witty, sensitive—a dependable guide.

Good sentences are marked by clarity and concreteness. They have a definite shape and function that the reader does not have to guess at. Nothing turns us off faster than a sentence without its mind made up: "I believe that under most circumstances it is possible that most of you will like this movie." A self-possessed sentence, like a mature person, not only will tell you the movie is worth seeing but will tell you why. Hemming and hawing often begin, moreover, with the personal pronoun *I. I think, I believe, I feel* are all sure signs that the writer lacks a clear sense of where he stands with the reader, who after all *knows* the opinions expressed are those of the writer. Dropping such pronoun clauses not only results in greater directness—*"Jaws 2* was just as exciting as *Jaws"*—it also contributes to the cause of economy. Once you begin writing concisely and directly you will find that opinions must be supported by something other than the weight of the personal pronoun: *"Jaws 2* was just as exciting as *Jaws;* the shark was just as terrifying and the plot equally intriguing." Now the sentence carries the weight of *evidence,* not just the assertiveness of an expression of taste.

It is difficult to talk in a general way about how to write a good, or even great, English sentence. Most of us would have trouble defining the elements of a superb steak, but we know it when we've eaten it. For that reason it will be most profitable—if not filling—to spend the rest of this section looking at specific examples of sentences that perform various functions: description, definition, persuasion, exposition. As we discuss these examples we should ask a few pointed questions. Has the writer fully understood what he or she wants to say? The answer should reveal whether you are "listening" to a hemmer and hawer or to a clear-thinking, confident "speaker." One way to test clarity is to read the sentence aloud, in a group session, and ask whether others have understood it. Can you determine what audience the writer is writing for? Has the writer succeeded in making contact with that audience? In this exercise it is particularly useful to define various audiences and their expectations. Would a group of scientists respond favorably to the following opening sentence? "Science studies nothing other than facts; there's no room for interpretation." This writer obviously knows little about science and even less about how to assess the audience.

Besides impressing by means of intelligence or thoughtfulness, an effective sentence, like a beautiful flower or spectacular sunset, catches and holds the reader's attention. Just as you select attractive—or at least distinctive—clothes or use your best jokes to impress someone you like, work to enliven your sentences with the tools available—active verbs, lively adjectives, appropriate punctuation. Good writing is, after all, more than just communicating. It begins with the development of sentence power.

§ 2. DESCRIPTIVE SENTENCES

A careful observer should describe an event or setting so that those who read his sentences will see exactly what he wants them to see. Accuracy and vividness are his watchwords, and they also happen to be essential to effective sentences of any kind. Here is a descriptive passage in which the sentences are combined to paint a kind of moving picture.

[1] A low-swung Jaguar swept around the hill in front of me and slowed down so as not to bathe me in the granite dust from the half mile of neglected paving at the entrance to Idle Valley. [2] It seemed they wanted it left that way to discourage the Sunday drivers spoiled by drifting along on superhighways. [3] I caught a glimpse of a bright scarf and a pair of sun goggles. [4] A hand waved at me casually, neighbor to neighbor. [5] Then the dust slid across the road and added itself to the white film already well spread over the scrub and the sunbaked grass. [6] Then I was around the outcrop and the paving started up in proper shape and everything was smooth and cared for. [7] Live oaks clustered towards the road, as if they were curious to see who went by, and sparrows with rosy heads hopped around pecking at things only a sparrow would think worth pecking at.

—RAYMOND CHANDLER, *The Long Goodbye*

Chandler's detective hero, Philip Marlowe, describes here his entrance into an exclusive California neighborhood called Idle Valley. Although Chandler gives us some sense of the terrain's texture and shape, his main purpose is to suggest that the curious outsider is not welcome in Idle Valley. Sunday drivers are "discouraged" by poorly repaired entrance roads; oak trees "cluster" over the road to pass judgment on whoever goes by. We are also given a feeling of animation by the use of active verbs, even when Chandler is describing the movement of inanimate objects: "the dust *slid* across the road and *added itself* to the white film"; "the paving *started up* in proper shape." An apparently peaceful scene has been given not just life but a kind of attitude by the careful selection of verbs. Notice too that the Jaguar "swept" toward Marlowe, its driver slowing so as not to "bathe" him in granite dust. Nothing "speeds" or "rushes" on Idle Valley streets; no one is ever "drowned" in anything, either.

Sentences 3 and 4 appear to describe the driver of the approaching car, but in fact all that we see are a scarf, sun goggles, and a casually waving hand. Do we need more information to tell us about the driver's personality? Or is it clear that she is a woman, probably rich and somewhat flashy, who could not be called unfriendly yet who waves more out of habit than from a genuine feeling of friendship? "A hand waved at me casually, neighbor to neighbor" deserves a second look: Do hands nor-