WRITING PROSE

THOMAS S. KANE & LEONARD J. PETERS

TECHNIQUES AND PURPOSES

THIRD EDITION

Writing Prose

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Third Edition

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Preface to the Third Edition

In this, as in the previous editions of *Writing Prose*, the emphasis is upon techniques rather than upon ideas. It is, indeed, disputable whether ideas and techniques can be pulled apart. In practice it is certainly true that the student who would master either must preforce grapple with the other. Certainly, too, one can work into the heart of good prose from either direction. For the purpose of teaching composition our own preference continues to be to approach matter through manner. Thus the majority of our questions probe the writer's use of words, the style of his sentences, and the strategy of his organization.

We have added two new sections. The first comprises four selections illustrating some of the problems of writing a judgment. These we have set between exposition and argument, where they seem reasonably to belong, being something more than merely informative in purpose, yet clearly less than persuasive.

The second addition tries to catch and hold, if only for an instant, that elusive quality called style. It attempts to examine style more closely than is done elsewhere in the text, though not, we hope, with such multiplicity of detail as to bewilder the student. Still, the questions in this section are probably a bit more demanding, and therefore we have set it at the end, where, presumably, the student whose teacher wishes to take him so far will come to it with some experience of style gained from the study of preceding selections. We have found, contrary to what one might suppose, that students are interested in style and like to study it. But it must be made precise for them, and the teacher must show them that style is intimately related to the success or failure of a piece of prose.

Once again we should like to thank Mr. Thomas Dulack of the Waterbury Branch of the University of Connecticut and the staff of the Oxford University Press for their editorial understanding and encouragement, which, as always, have been invaluable.

Waterbury, Connecticut
December, 1968

THOMAS S. KANE
LEONARD J. PETERS

Preface to the Second Edition

In the four years since this text was first published, we have remained of the opinion that the best way to learn to write good prose is to study good prose, to study it as intensively as possible. Accordingly, this revision is not essentially different from the first edition. The text is still an analytical reader, approaching the problem of writing through the close study of models.

We have, however, enlarged it somewhat. The section on argumentation has been almost doubled; the examples of definition have been increased and treated as a separate section; and there have been substantial additions to the material on description, characters, narration, and beginnings and closings. In general these additions, while conforming to the pattern of short, self-contained pieces, are a little longer than the average selection in the first edition. To the section of complete essays we have added four pieces, each worth studying and each, we hope, a workable model for student writing.

We wish to thank Mr. Thomas Dulack of the Waterbury Branch of the University of Connecticut for valuable suggestions; and we owe a great debt to the staff of the Oxford University Press for their constant help and encouragement.

Waterbury, Connecticut
March 1963

THOMAS S. KANE
LEONARD J. PETERS

Preface

This book offers the student examples of good writing. It assumes that the close study of good models is an indispensable aid to both teaching and learning, that one learns to write by imitation—an imitation of the basic patterns, forms, and structures that lie behind the infinite variety of all English prose. We believe that the principles of organization, sentence structure, and diction can be studied best not in the dead rules of rhetoric, but in the living example. In short, our assumption is this: the student of composition should study good prose to learn to write good prose.

There is nothing new or revolutionary in learning to write by close analysis and imitation. In one form or another this method has been used for many years in European schools. It is the method of books like J. C. Dent's *Thought in English Prose*, long familiar to American teachers of composition. Indeed, it is the method of everyone who learns to write, even if some writers have imitated more haphazardly and less consciously than others. Styles, of course, change from period to period; no two writers, however similar, write in exactly the same way; and in every age appear writers who change the shape and sound of English prose. Imitation does not mean a sterile conformity. But it does mean that any writer, if he is to be successful, must learn to use and to adapt to his own purposes the tools of others. It means that each writer must study the work of others if he is to learn to use the vast resources of the English language.

To acquaint the student with the diversity of the subjects, purposes, and techniques of good prose is the intention of this book. In selecting our models, therefore, we have made our standard not superficial journalistic appeal or timeliness or an introduction to great ideas, but high quality. We have tried to insure that the selections illustrate the most common techniques of expressing ideas and display a variety of tone, purpose, and point of view. In our arrangement we have emphasized the typical patterns of organization and paragraphing, for these are the most troublesome to the average student; and we have paid considerable attention to diction, in-

cluding neglected matters like sound and rhythm, as well as to sentence structure.

The first section of the book reprints short, but self-contained, excerpts from books and essays rather than whole pieces, a procedure that we think has two advantages. First, it keeps the model closer to the length of the average student theme. Second, it allows the student to focus upon a limited number of writing problems and to study these closely without being distracted or overwhelmed by too much to consider, as he sometimes is with a long essay. The short selections are arranged in the traditional, if oversimple, categories of exposition, argument, description, and narration, though most of these pieces are expository in their chief intention. Under exposition we offer two or three examples of each of the more common patterns of development. Along the way we have tried to make clear that exposition often includes description and narration, and that narrative is often a kind of description.

For a change of pace the student and teacher may turn at any time to the study of complete essays in the second part of the book. Whole essays permit the study of more complex kinds of organization than appear in the short selections in addition to illustrating the techniques of paragraph development in a more mixed form than sometimes appears in the shorter selections. Furthermore, in the complete essays we have paid more attention to matters of reader and purpose than we have in the first part of the book. The instructor, however, need not follow the general arrangement of the book at all. If he wishes to skip about, to study the writing of characters or description as a change from exposition, he can easily do so; and he may wish to assign the material in "Beginnings and Closings" early in the course of study.

In both parts of the book we have followed each selection with analytical questions, among which the instructor can pick and choose if he wishes. Since certain technical terms are unavoidable in the questions, these have been marked with an asterisk and will be found defined and discussed briefly in a glossary at the end of the book. Following each group of questions is a list of "points to learn" about the principles of writing illustrated in the selection. These questions and the "points to learn" are intended to guide the student's reading and, if possible, to help him discover the principles of good writing for himself.

From experience we have found that the best way to use the selections is to assign them first of all for study outside the classroom. The student is encouraged to read each short piece two or three times—at least once

aloud—before attempting to answer the questions. Answers are not intended to be written out by the student, although he may wish to take notes on one or two, but rather to be carried to class in his head. In class the instructor, if he wishes, may lead a discussion of those questions and answers that seem most appropriate to his teaching at the moment. Following the class discussion the instructor may want to assign a theme in which the student applies immediately the principles he has learned. Suggestions for theme topics will be found at the end of each unit of study, but the instructor may wish to supplement these or substitute better topics of his own.

If it seems that this method of study pays more attention to form than to content or meaning, we can only say that to us close attention to a writer's means of expressing what he says is the best way of reading—really reading—what the writer has to say. How a writer shapes and expresses his thought greatly affects that thought in its final form. It is just this attention to how the writer works that is most important to the student of composition. It is true that after such analysis the student will have no great store of knowledge about current issues and great ideas, but then he will be well on his way to acquiring one of the most valuable intellectual skills he can possess—how to say what he does know with clarity and precision. Before a student tries to wrestle with Great Ideas, he should at least have mastered some of the holds. A close analysis of techniques and purposes gives the study of prose a solid foundation and keeps the student's attention where we believe it belongs—upon the problems of writing.

Waterbury, Connecticut
November 1958

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What does the mind enjoy in books? Either the style or nothing. But, someone says, what about the thought? The thought, that is the style, too

CHARLES MAURRAS

If the cardinal virtue of poetry is love, the cardinal virtue of prose is justice; and, whereas love makes you act and speak on the spur of the moment, justice needs inquiry, patience, and a control even of the noblest passions . . . By justice here I do not mean justice only to particular people or ideas, but a habit of justice in all the processes of thought, a style tranquillized and a form moulded by that habit. ARTHUR CLUTTON-BROCK

Easy writing's vile hard reading. RICHARD SHERIDAN

Exposition

Different kinds of writing achieve different purposes. On the basis of controlling purpose we traditionally divide all prose into three kinds: narration, description, and exposition. Of these, exposition is especially important to the college student since much of what he reads, and most of what he writes, is expository prose. Exposition is writing that explains. In general, it answers the questions how? and why? If we go into any university library, most of the books we find on the shelves are examples of exposition. Philosophies, histories, literary essays, theories of economics, studies of government and law, the findings of sociology, the investigations of science—all these, however different, have for their purpose to explain. Although exposition often is formal and academic, it appears also in magazines and newspapers, in any place where people look for explanations. It is the most common kind of writing, the sort with which we conduct our workaday affairs—the business letter, the doctor's case study, the lawyer's brief, the engineer's report—and the writing with which we attempt to control our world, whether our means of doing so is a complicated system of philosophy or a cook book.

Exposition, then, is a wide net. What, we may ask, is not exposition? If the guiding purpose of the writer is to tell a story, to tell merely what happened, then we say the writing is narrative rather than exposition. If the writer intends to tell us how something looks, to re-create the thing in words, we may call it description. A narrative arranges its material in time. Description most often organizes in space. We might think of narrative as a stage play or motion picture in words, and of description as a verbal photograph or painting. Exposition organizes its subject not in time or space but by logic. The subject of the expository writer may be people, things, ideas, or some combination of these, but always he is a man thinking, interpreting, informing, and persuading. Although he may appeal to our emotions, he is more likely to appeal to our reason by using evidence and logic. In other words, exposition is less like a stage play or painting and more like a lecture, discussion, or debate.

Seldom is any piece of writing pure exposition. Just as the lecturer tells a story or uses maps, charts, or slides to interest his audience and clinch his point, so the expository writer may turn for aid to narration or description. Often these kinds of writing become so fused as to be practically indistinguishable: the description of the structure of an atom is as much an explanation as it is a picture. The historical narrative is as much concerned with the why and how as with what happened. Even so, the traditional classification of prose into description, narration, and exposition is useful so long as we are aware of its limitations. The expository writer will do well to remember that his primary purpose—the purpose that guides and shapes his total organization—is to explain by logic and to show relationships.

The writing of exposition begins, therefore, in an understanding of the broad purpose to be achieved. It begins, like all composition, in the writer's head. Even before he sharpens his pencil, the expository writer must ask himself four questions: What specific point do I intend to make? Is it worth making? For whom am I writing? How can I best convey my point to my readers? Unless the writer has carefully answered each of these questions, no amount of good grammar and correct spelling will save him, and his composition is already worthless even before he begins to scribble. Deciding upon reader and purpose is easily half the task of writing. Once the writer has determined what point he intends to make, his composition is already half organized, if not completely planned. The writer has already saved himself time by eliminating several false starts, and he has already resisted the temptation to lose himself and his reader in the thickets and bypaths of his subject. With his reader in mind he has already solved many of his problems of diction and tone as well, and, however awkwardly he has expressed himself when he has done, he will know that he has fulfilled the first requirement of all writing—a definite point for definite readers.

On paper, the writing of exposition begins with paragraphs. Within each paragraph the writer shapes and develops a single unit of his thought. Every expository writer therefore must understand the nature and construction of paragraphs. To begin our definition we may say that paragraphs are like men. Each is an individual, unlike any other. Yet, as all men are alike in having a head, eyes, two arms, and two legs, every paragraph is like all the others, all possessing, so to speak, the same anatomy. Learning to write good paragraphs must begin with an understanding of the pattern common to all. We find that paragraphs of exposition contain two different kinds of statements. The first—a *general*, rather abstract statement—is called the topic sentence. Here, the writer says, "This is what I assert or believe in a general

way; this is my opinion, my evaluation or conclusion about the subject of this paragraph. For instance, Frederick Lewis Allen, writing about the great depression of 1929, begins the paragraph on page 16 with this topic sentence: "The Big Bull Market was dead." Sometimes the general drift of a paragraph is so clear that the topic idea is only implied. To be sure, it is there, but the writer feels he will not lose his reader if he fails to state his topic idea in so many words. A second class of statements in every paragraph consists of *particular* facts, examples, illustrations, and supporting details that say, in effect, "This is why I believe or conclude what I do. You may not agree with what I say, but at least you understand now why I believe or conclude it. Here is my evidence."

Most often the topic sentence stands first in the paragraph, unless one or two sentences of transition go before. Less frequently, topic sentences appear last, or nearly so, when the paragraph is developed from particular to general, a pattern useful both for variation and, building as it does to a climax, for emphasis. Sometimes for the sake of clarity or emphasis the writer may restate his topic idea in a second or third sentence and again at the end of a paragraph. With or without restatement the expository writer usually moves from topic sentence to supporting details, from general to particular.

The particulars of exposition are patterns of logic and evidence, patterns that may shape individual paragraphs, a group of several paragraphs, or the composition in its entirety. To show that Fenimore Cooper's novels at times are absurdly unbelievable, Mark Twain (page 6) brings forward several devastating examples. His pattern of expository development is clear, and it is hilariously convincing in its effect. Again, the expository writer may throw new light upon two things by comparing and contrasting them, by showing how they are alike and yet different, as Stephen Leacock does when he compares and contrasts Oxford and American universities. Or the writer may use the logical pattern of cause and effect. "The Technological Revolution" (page 48) is organized by showing the reader the effects of the machine upon our civilization. The expository writer, therefore, uses the common methods of logic and thinking: he develops his material by offering examples as evidence, by comparing and contrasting, by making analogies, by restating, by giving reasons, by classifying and dividing his subject, by showing cause and effect, by defining, by arguing from premise to conclusion. The selections that follow give examples of each of the common types of expository development. These every student of composition should learn to use when his intention is to explain and inform.