

AMERICAN THINKING AND WRITING

by

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PREFACE

Amid the welter of conflicting opinions that assail our thinking in these days, Americans will agree on two basic truths: (1) our democratic way of life is now almost unique in the world and hence grows daily more precious; and (2) this democratic way is imperiled. Committed to a historically rooted belief in human freedom, we in America have come to the testing time of democracy.

There have not been wanting distinguished interpreters and eloquent defenders of the American way of life. The fifty selections of contemporary writing in this book bear witness to the worth and validity of the American tradition. There is a deep glow of pride and love of country in many of the pieces in this volume, but their prevailing tone is objective, reasoned, dispassionate. They are not emotional, not hortatory, not bombastically patriotic. The authors are firm in their belief in democracy but none the less critical of its deficiencies. The strength and weakness of America and the great issues of our time, as they affect the pattern of American life, are the concern of many of the book's most brilliant essays.

The selections in *American Thinking and Writing*—although varied in style, tone, and type—are knit together into an integrated whole. A glance at the Table of Contents will reveal many well-known names in the list of authors. But it will also indicate how the synthesis of the book moves from the breadth and sweep of the land to the people, to the social and political problems of our form of government, to the present functioning and the future ideals of the democratic system. An appeal to varied literary tastes has been made by the inclusion of formal and familiar essays, short stories, satirical sketches, public addresses, and editorials.

This book has been prepared as a text for the teaching of writing through intelligent reading. That is its primary purpose. But the compilers believe that students may learn from this volume many lessons having a special meaning at the present time.

Readers may well feel that their studies in these provocative essays have made them better Americans by confirming their faith in the inherent greatness of their native land.

Formal acknowledgment of permission to use each essay has been made at the page on which it begins. But the compilers wish, in a more personal way, to acknowledge the kindness of the following writers, many of whom graciously acquiesced in slight changes in or deletions from their articles to make them absolutely contemporary: Brooks Atkinson, Stephen Vincent Benét, Pearl Buck, W. J. Cameron, Henry S. Canby, Henry Steele Commager, W. H. Cowley, Edmund E. Day, R. L. Duffus, Irwin Edman, John Erskine, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Roy Helton, Ethel Ambler Hunter, Dale Kramer, Stephen Leacock, Ralph Linton, Walter Lippmann, John A. Lomax, Matthew Luckiesh, Della T. Lutes, Walter Millis, the Honorable Frank Murphy, William Fielding Ogburn, Donald Culross Peattie, Harriet Duff Phillips, Channing Pollock, Gene Richard, Vincent Sheean, Wallace Stegner, Benjamin Stolberg, Webb Waldron, the Honorable Henry A. Wallace, and E. B. White.

It is impossible to thank individually the editors of magazines and the editorial departments of various publishers for all their courtesies, but their helpful suggestions and generous granting of requests are none the less appreciated. The compilers do wish to thank specifically Miss Beatrice Wardell of Carleton College, for many and diverse services to the book while in preparation; Mr. Leland S. Dutton, of the Miami University Library, for his kindness in making available source materials; Mr. Edgar W. King, Librarian of Miami University, whose interest and assistance invariably solved the multitudinous perplexities and difficulties that attend a book from its inception as an idea to its appearance as a bound volume. The compilers, indeed, found so much friendliness and ready help in every direction in which they turned that they were throughout encouraged, and in the end humbled, by the sincerity and warmth of so much human good-will.

J. M. B.
R. L. H.

TO THE TEACHER

A text is an educational tool; a good text should be as efficient a tool in the hands of a teacher as a saw or hammer is in the hands of a carpenter. It is hoped that teachers of English will find *American Thinking and Writing* a truly effective classroom tool.

The selections in this book, although they vary greatly in length and style and thought, all have to do, in one way or another, with the present-day American scene. Indeed, the writing itself is wholly contemporary and deals with contemporary problems. Most of the material is making its first appearance in textbook form; hence the essays have a freshness that should please teachers as well as students.

Interesting and stimulating as it is believed these essays will prove to students, their purpose is not merely to supply reading for English classes. Not that they will fail to provide informative and aesthetic enjoyment as *reading*—good writing will always do that for persons who have any appreciative responses—but they have a further and, frankly, a more practical purpose. That purpose is to harness a student's writing to his reading: to supply him with specimens of various kinds of good writing as models and to provide him with challenging ideas that will encourage or provoke or even goad him to the expression of his own ideas. Intellectual indifference or mental lethargy has all too often resulted from reading which students found unrelated to their own problems and interests. If there is any student who will not defend—and sometimes oppose—the ideas in this book, he must indeed be a peculiar American.

To harness writing to reading, unusually full apparatus for teaching the essays has been supplied. The first set of questions after each selection is for the student's own use. The purpose of these questions is to test his reading ability. The questions are entirely factual, not matters of opinion or controversy; if he can answer them satisfactorily, he has read the essay intelligently and

comprehendingly. These questions are a test not only of his reading ability but also of the degree of his concentration at the time of reading each essay. If any student is unusually backward in reading ability, it is suggested that he be asked to write out the answers to the questions. This, of course, will add to his labor, but specific replies will develop his comprehension of the printed word. The ability to read intelligently is of the very essence of a student's success, not alone in English but in all his content courses. Incidentally, these questions are not intended to take any of the teacher's time nor any of the class period. The teacher should assume that the student has completed an intelligent reading of the selection assigned when he comes to class.

The questions in the second set are for class discussion. They stem directly from the essay; they ask the student's opinion about the author's ideas or about points of larger significance suggested by the essay. They are intended to elicit reactions from the student. Doubtless there will be diversity of student opinion. The purpose of the questions is not to obtain conformity of thought, but to have the student *think*. The teacher, of course, will make such selection of these questions as will put any particular class on its mettle. The reaction of each student to these discussions should provide him with something vital about which to write. Although this urge to express his ideas will not in itself guarantee good writing, it will likely result in better writing than he would do if he were not personally interested. There is, fortunately, an inevitable relationship between interest and accomplishment.

The third set of questions is of an entirely different kind: they direct the student's attention to certain rhetorical and stylistic effects in the essay and call attention to *how* the author gained these effects. They show how the author began his essay in a way to catch the reader's attention, how he organized his material, how he linked his paragraphs together, how he obtained graphicness by figurative language, how he lightened his writing by humor, how he made it pungent by satire and irony, how he drew upon personal experiences to illustrate and humanize his ideas and to make them concrete, how he summarized his thesis at the close of the essay. These questions are a kind of practical

rhetoric. If the student will incorporate in his own writing the principles and devices he observes in these essays, he will be utilizing the "machinery" of successful writing; he will, in actuality, have a working knowledge of rhetorical principles and stylistic devices. But one point must be kept constantly in the foreground: the value of reading in developing the art of writing consists almost entirely in *analyzing* what is read. The student must observe that an author writes clearly because he unifies his thoughts and arranges them logically, that he makes his sentences and paragraphs "stick together," that he emphasizes certain ideas by the *way* he expresses them and by *where* he puts them in the sentences, in the paragraphs, and in the whole composition. In short, it is observing *how* good writers write, far more than reading *what* they write, that helps a student likewise to write well.

The next section of the apparatus supplied for each essay is intended to instill in the student an interest in words and to increase his vocabulary. There is a definite relationship between a student's command of words and his ability to write. It is not merely a matter of a larger vocabulary with which to express himself; it is a *feeling* for words, which gives his writing personality and individuality quite independent of the size of his vocabulary. An interest in words as an aid to good writing has all too long been neglected in books intended for instruction in English. If writing, as has been facetiously pointed out, is merely putting one word after another, good writing is the putting of the right words, one after another. The right word will always be the *inevitable* word; when a student has an unerring instinct for words, he is moving toward clear and effective composition. There is, indeed, no surer means of guaranteeing good writing than to acquire a knowledge of words. To foster this knowledge, the teacher will use these ample and diverse vocabulary exercises as will best fit the needs of the class and as time allows. Many of them may be assigned as outside work; others may be done more painstakingly in class. These vocabulary exercises are not devoid of the spirit of intellectual adventure. They should yield a maximum of vocabulary improvement for the time

expended. And it may be well to remember that many an indifferent student has entered into an enthusiastic appreciation of English through the avenue of the mastery of words.

The last section of the apparatus following each essay provides theme topics based upon the essay or suggested by it. They are subjective topics which allow the student to express his personal opinions. These topics, however, are intended to be only suggestive. Class discussion will produce others by the score. If a student has something of his own that he wishes to say, he should be encouraged to "get it out of his system." The whole spirit of this book is to induce the student to think and then to express what he believes. His ideas may be immature, but if they are sincerely his own, they will gradually run into the deeper and steadier currents of objective truth. The colors in which strong personal feeling is expressed are likely to be the primary colors; but the color of perfunctory writing is forever a monotonous, neutral gray.

As a final aid to the teacher in using reading as a basis for good writing, what for want of a better name may be called a "Corrective Handbook" has been placed at the back of this text. The chart is so arranged that the teacher, in correcting a theme, can direct the student instantly to the kind of error made. For example, 1a would mean that he has written a sentence fragment. The student should turn to the handbook and from it correct his error. This handbook does not supply exercises for class work; its purpose is solely corrective. Nor does it lay claim to completeness. The common and fundamental errors made by students are included; unusual or debatable matters of usage have been omitted as irrelevant or confusingly superfluous.

Thus the purpose of *American Thinking and Writing* is to supply students with interesting reading that will be productive of good writing. The compilers hope that this volume will accomplish its objective; yet they know that these essays are at best only a tool. The real effectiveness of the book rests with the teachers who use it; a saw is merely a piece of steel attached to a piece of wood until it is in the carpenter's hands.

TO THE STUDENT

Although reading the selections carefully and doing the exercises as the teacher directs will be an essential part of your work with this book, your most vital relationship to it, and the greatest benefit you will derive from it, will be in the writing of themes. And immediately you should disabuse your mind of the idea that writing a theme is an incidental activity or a necessary drudgery—it is a privilege. Since you must either be able to express yourself effectively or suffer both socially and financially throughout your life, it is a privilege to learn how to write well. It is a privilege, also, to have a more experienced person care enough about your acquiring this ability to spend time correcting what you write and suggesting ways by which you can improve your writing. That you do not like to write themes, that you may do them poorly, that you have little aptitude in writing are sufficient reasons, in themselves, for your writing themes.

Naturally, the first question that arises is, What shall I write about? The question is basic. The compilers of this book believe that you will write a better theme about a limited, definite, concrete subject than about a broad, vague, abstract one. It should preferably have a high degree of personal element in it—something in which you have participated, something which you have observed, something about which you have well-formulated ideas. But whether or not the subject is personal, it must be limited; otherwise it cannot be treated adequately in a short theme. You should be able to state the *idea* of your subject in a single concise sentence. If you cannot do this, choose another subject.

The young writer often feels that he has nothing about which to write. To say this is to acknowledge that you have not observed, thought, felt, reacted. It is impossible that you have existed for eighteen years in a vacuum. A boy will never have a more poignant grief than that caused by the death of his dog

under an automobile; the memory of your childhood Christmas tree is a more beautiful sight than the Alps will ever be; that surprise party brought you greater joy than winning ten thousand dollars on the stock market will ever bring. Nothing to write about? Enough to fill several, perhaps many, books. But you protest that your life is just like everybody else's. Nonsense. There have never been two lives in an identical pattern since the world began. If you have nothing to write about, don't let anybody know it. Inarticulateness would possibly reveal that you are uninteresting as a personality; that you are unresponsive to the myriad of stimuli all about you; that you have no opinions of your own.

But to take a concrete case. Recently a student protested that he had nothing to write about. The teacher, with an assumed casualness, asked him what he had done during the summer. He had lived on a farm and, the season being unusually dry, he had had to haul water for the cattle. How many cows were there? Sixteen—and sheep and horses, too. “Well, that couldn't have been very much of a job.” “You bet it was a job! Do you know how much water a cow drinks on a hot day?” The instructor did not know. “About fifty gallons of water.” It seemed incredible. The instructor made a rapid calculation, then countered, “Fifty gallons would be over a barrel and a half apiece. That would be almost as big as the cow,” he continued with provocative exaggeration. “Now it hardly seems possible that—” “Well she does, too,” the boy interrupted with the vehemence born of experience and possibly from the memory of endless barrels of water being dipped from a creek and hauled to a barnyard—only to disappear into the cavernous stomachs of insatiable cows. The boy also knew how much a horse drank, and a sheep, and a pig. Strangely enough, although a horse is considerably larger and heavier than a milch cow, it drinks much less water.

The boy gave a description of the creek—nostalgic to the instructor who, as a boy, had swum in one like it—and a graphic portrayal of the time he upset while getting his wagon out of the stream. The instructor sat back, possibly a little self-satisfied. “It is all very interesting, and I have really learned a great deal

—about cows. You must write it for the class.” The boy looked amazed that he should write about hauling water for cows. And the class was interested and learned a great deal about cows—and about a certain boy who had before seemed uninteresting and “had nothing to write about.” They felt the drudgery and heat of the summer, the excitement and humor of the toppled-over barrels, the loneliness of a farm barnyard at evening. (The instructor, incidentally, verified the water-consumption of farm animals from the Government Agricultural Reports—and the boy was right.)

Your writing, to be good, must embody a few established principles. Unity is one of the basic requirements of good writing. This requirement you will have attained for the composition as a whole if you rigorously limited your subject as suggested above. Now all you have to do with such a subject is to stick strictly to it. Let no extraneous ideas, no matter how tantalizing, interesting, or amusing, beckon you away from it. The paragraphs making the whole should be separate units of that whole. Don’t develop two loosely related ideas in one paragraph nor split an indissoluble unit of thought into two paragraphs. Finally, each sentence must be a unit of thought; it must not combine unrelated ideas. Throughout, unity is *oneness* in writing.

Emphasis is the way in which a writer “manages” his writing. It is, so to speak, putting your best foot forward. The beginning and the ending of your composition are the places of importance; so the skilful writer uses them to advantage. Your chief concern at the beginning is to catch the reader’s attention; you may use any legitimate means to do this. Having caught the reader’s attention, you must hold it. Holding his attention will depend partly on *what* you say, but likely even more upon *how* you say it and *where* you put it. Emphasis is the art of marshaling your material so skilfully that the reader would resent being stopped before he reached the end. The close of your theme should bring the reader the sense of artistic satisfaction. A good theme doesn’t just stop; it is completed. The thesis is summed up; the whole is rounded off; it is all tied up neatly. Test the theme yourself. Read the first paragraph—Are you *interested*? Read the last paragraph

—Are you *satisfied*? Similarly, the opening and the close of the paragraphs are the places of vantage, and a good writer, like a good general, will concentrate his forces at key points. To obtain emphasis, the writer must be a conscious craftsman. Since emphasis is based on values, it doesn't just happen. Emphasis is *force* in writing.

Besides unity and emphasis, good writing must have coherence. Without coherence, the thought will ride along on a bumpy road. It will jar from sentence to sentence and jolt from paragraph to paragraph. The paragraphs should be linked together by connective words (see *Corrective Handbook*, 6d), by transition sentences, or by the logical development of the thought itself. The sentences within the paragraphs must likewise flow along smoothly and "stick together." Coherence represents the writer primarily as a logician, in which respect it is as much akin to science and mathematics as it is to good writing. Coherence is *smoothness* in writing.

These three essential qualities of good writing are concerned with words used in sentences; but all writing finally rests on words *used as words*. That is why words are so important. You may make your writing vaguely intelligible by using an inadequate vocabulary, but you will never make your writing effective, distinctive, or individual with such a vocabulary.

Let us analyze briefly the outstanding deficiencies in student themes because of the vocabulary used: (1) the words only approximately express what the writer intends to say; (2) they are too often abstract words instead of concrete words; (3) they are too often colorless words instead of picture-making words; (4) they are the first words that came into the writer's mind and no effort was made to find the one and only right word for each individual word-choice; (5) they are too often words without connotations, that is, words with no suggestive overtones.

To illustrate what poor and good words will do to a piece of writing, let us examine the following paragraphs:

The Squire's house was two log cabins put together, and both of them were worn out; two or three skinny dogs lay asleep at the door and raised up their heads whenever Mrs. Hawkins or the children

went in and out. Old stuff was in the bare yard; a bench stood near the door with a tin wash basin on it and a pail of water and a gourd; a cat had begun to drink from the pail, but that was too much work, so she took a rest. There was an ash-hopper by the fence, and an iron pot, for soft-soap-boiling, near it.

But the paragraph from *The Gilded Age*, as Mark Twain wrote it, reads as follows:

The Squire's house was a double log cabin, in a state of decay; two or three gaunt hounds lay asleep about the threshold, and lifted their heads sadly whenever Mrs. Hawkins or the children stepped in and out over their bodies. Rubbish was scattered about the grassless yard; a bench stood near the door with a tin wash basin on it and a pail of water and a gourd; a cat had begun to drink from the pail, but the exertion was overtaking her energies, and she had stopped to rest. There was an ash-hopper by the fence, and an iron pot, for soft-soap-boiling, near it.

These two paragraphs are in large part identical, and they certainly express the same facts, but they are remarkably different as pieces of writing. The superiority of the second paragraph depends entirely on Mark Twain's use of words.

There is no easy way to acquire an effective vocabulary, nor can anyone offer facile advice that will lead you to a mastery of words. Certain wise procedures are obvious: you should look up, thoroughly understand, and use all the words you encounter which are not already an active part of your vocabulary. Further, you should use with nice distinctions the words you already possess. You should pause, in writing your theme, before you scribble down any old word, to see whether you cannot find a more exact, forceful, or graphic word. And certainly, after your first draft is written, you should go over it searchingly to see whether you cannot substitute better words for the weak and colorless ones. With assurance this much can be affirmed: there are few rewards more satisfying and profitable than those which come from the study and mastery of words.

As a final suggestion as to the best way to write a theme, you are urged to write the first draft several days before the theme is due. A "cooling time" before you copy the theme will work wonders in its improvement. Defects, not at all obvious during

composition, will be startlingly patent. You can then make corrections and improvements while copying your theme, and you will be bringing to your aid the best teacher in the world—self-analysis.

Now that you have written the best theme you can, check it against the questions in the following chart. Be honest with yourself in your answers. If you have forgotten something, this check will remind you; if you can improve something, you have a final chance to do so.

Your instructor now has, presumably, the best theme you can write upon the topic assigned or chosen. You have handed in your theme as an example of your ability to write; it must now stand on its own legs as a piece of writing.

Occasionally your instructor may believe that the maximum benefit to you from a theme will come from your rewriting it. You must guard against doing this task—and let us honestly call it a task—in a perfunctory manner. Your initial interest in the subject will possibly be lacking but, if you earnestly try to improve the theme, you will find that the pleasure of original creation in writing is no greater than the *satisfaction* derived from perfecting what has been written.

Usually your instructor will indicate on the margin of the theme the corrections he wishes you to make. The Corrective Handbook, which follows the selections, will aid you in this part of your work. In it you can readily find examples of the kind of errors that occur in themes and illustrations of ways to correct them.

Spelling will likely be among the errors indicated for correction. Besides spelling the word correctly on the margin of your theme, you should copy it in your notebook (see Corrective Handbook 4a). Spelling, like mathematics, is absolute—it is either right or wrong—and therefore can be mastered. Incidentally, while you are looking up the spelling of a word, you can make a remarkable investment, for the time expended, by noting the derivation and definition of the word. This simple habit of mastering words will prove a life asset of inestimable value.

CHART FOR CHECKING A THEME

I. *Choice of a Subject*

1. Is the subject sufficiently limited?
2. Were you interested in it enough to want to write about it?
3. Did you know enough about it to write a satisfactory theme?

II. *Unity*

1. Have you stuck strictly to the subject?
2. Do your paragraphs develop unified segments of the whole?
3. Do your sentences have singleness of thought?

III. *Emphasis*

1. Does your beginning catch the reader's attention?
2. Does your development of the subject hold his attention?
3. Does your close satisfy his sense of completeness?

IV. *Coherence*

1. Have you avoided abrupt transitions between paragraphs?
2. Do your sentences run along smoothly and logically?

V. *Words*

1. Have you eliminated hackneyed, trite, weak, colorless words?
2. Have you employed accurate, definite, forceful, graphic words?
3. Can you substitute any other words that will improve the theme?
4. Are all the words correctly spelled?

VI. *Punctuation*

1. Have you punctuated a sentence fragment as a sentence?
2. Have you joined sentences with only commas?
3. Have you used commas wherever necessary?
4. Has each sentence the correct end-punctuation after it?
5. Have you put quotation marks around quoted material?

VII. *Mechanical Details*

1. Have you written your theme on regulation paper?
2. Have you given your name, section, date, etc., as required?
3. Have you indicated the source material accurately?
4. Have you left sufficient margin for your instructor's corrections?

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