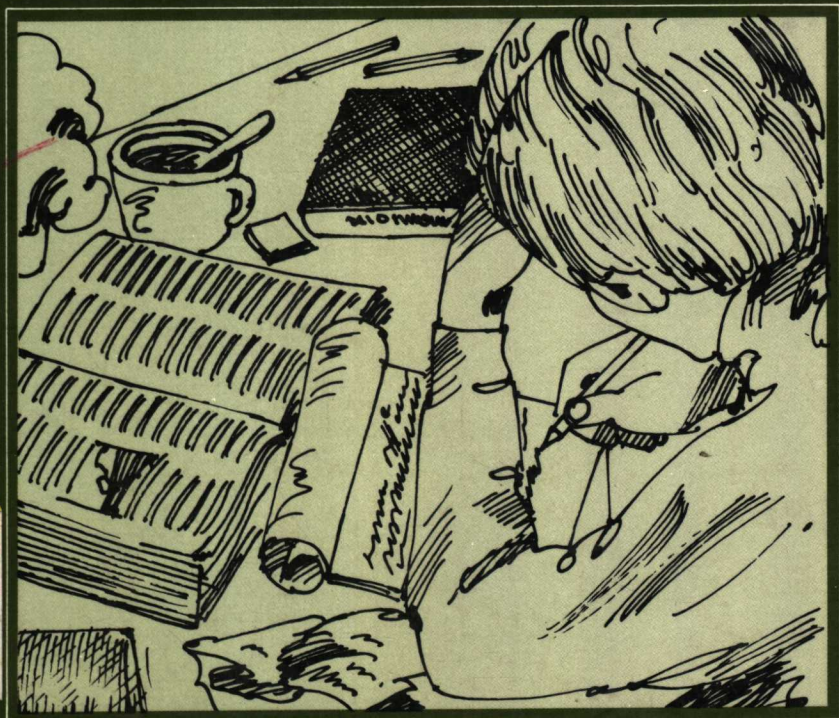


Writing with style

*Conversations on
the art of writing*

John R. Trimble



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A word about these "conversations"

About a year ago a bright sophomore came by my office for his first writing conference of the term. First conferences are usually slow going, and this one proved no exception. After 20 minutes we were still discussing the problems of his opening paragraph. Suddenly, his growing sense of himself as a bungler broke through his composure. He leaned back, shook his head, and said with a wan, courageous smile, "I think what I could use is a good survival kit."

That remark stayed with me, for it seemed to sum up the anguish of countless other undergraduates equally bewildered by the basics of expository writing. Perhaps you're among them. Their plight is ironic, but even more it is poignant. Theoretically, they are well trained in writing: they have years of classrooms, half a dozen textbooks, and scores of essays behind them. In reality, though, a writing assignment makes them feel as ignorant and panicky as the first day they walked into their high-school trigonometry class.

Why are they so bewildered? For some, perhaps because their textbooks haven't explained the basics to them in language they could readily understand, or even care to understand. Others, perhaps, are victims of overlong textbooks, self-defeating in their glorious comprehensiveness. (Who, after all, can distinguish the fundamental from the trivial after trudging through 500 pages of technical lore, however well presented?) The befuddlement of still others may stem from having been given the tools but never a graphic sense of how good writers actually use them. And yet another not-so-remote possibility: many of them may have been conditioned to believe that writing acceptably involves translating every thought into a dead classical tongue known as Formal English. Whatever the reason or reasons, one thing is certainly clear enough: they feel lost.

My hope is that this book—an informal, compact, practical little book styled after my own writing conferences—answers the wish for a “survival kit.” I’ve stocked it with emergency provisions especially useful to those of you lost in the jungles of essay-writing. Many of the provisions, though, are equally useful in other desperate situations, as you will see. Above all, I’ve tried to equip you with advice on how to become a literary Robinson Crusoe—that is, self-sufficient. A writer isn’t self-sufficient until he has learned to think well. This involves, among other things, understanding the psychological element of the whole business. As I see it, writing is applied psychology because it is the art of creating desired effects. It follows from this that our chief need is to know *what* effects are desirable and *how* to create them. Thus this book: a blend of commonsense theory and practical suggestions.

Specifically, I tried to do four things here:

- 1 Explain how experienced writers think.
- 2 Share a number of useful tips on writing.
- 3 Answer some of the most recurring questions about punctuation, conventions, and stylistic taboos.
- 4 Keep it all brief enough to be read over a couple of cups of coffee.

Now that the book is finished, I see that you’ll probably need a third, maybe even a fourth cup to see you through. For that I apologize. The book became a friend I was loath to bid good-bye to.

I suppose a few readers—teachers mainly—may be disappointed that I’ve excluded end-of-chapter exercises, not to mention discussion of research papers, grammar, syllogistic reasoning, patterns of “paragraph movement,” and other such things conventionally covered by textbooks on writing. I can only answer that this is not—and doesn’t want to be—a conventional textbook on writing. There are plenty of those already, and no need to duplicate their efforts.

What I offer here is practical shoptalk for armchair consumption—in effect, an informal 3-hour refresher course, with the emphasis on refreshment. The book is primarily geared to those writers who’ve already been through the textbook mill and who now find themselves hungering for helpful tips, inspiration, and a clear, lively synthesis of the essentials. But precisely because it concentrates on fundamentals,

the book may also prove useful to the less advanced writer in need of a quick overview of the terrain he's now painfully traversing. I hope so, anyway.

Two last points and then I'm done. First, while you will inevitably find some chapters more pertinent than others, I urge you to read them in sequence, for they move sequentially, not only building on earlier ideas but also becoming more deliberately provocative. The second point concerns chapter 12, Punctuation. It's unseemly for an author to recommend one of his own chapters, but here I feel I must breach decorum, for I know that *no one* is going to read about punctuation, the most tedious of subjects, without special urging. So why bother now? Because chapter 12 is where most of the jokes are (not mine mainly, but others'), and I would hate to be the only person chuckling over them.

Acknowledgments

It's humbling to sit down and inventory your debts after writing a book such as this. You suddenly realize how much you owe to others, and how much poorer the book would have been had you been forced to go it alone.

I owe, first of all, an enormous debt to my students, many of whom read the manuscript at its various stages of development, generously lent me examples from their papers, reminded me in their own writing of what makes for readable prose, and kept me from falling too often into over-solemnity. This is, in a very real sense, as much their book as mine, so strongly did they influence its conception and spirit. Thank you, lovely people.

Of my colleagues at The University of Texas, Professors Maxine Hairston, W. R. Keast, Neil Nakadate, John Velz, and John Walter have been particularly helpful—especially Rea Keast, whose suggestions on organization and whose meticulous editing of chapter 13 were invaluable.

I was also fortunate in being assisted by a veritable brain trust of anonymous prepublication reviewers. I wish I could thank them by name for their wonderful helpfulness and good will—all this toward a complete stranger, no less. When they see the number of their suggestions that I've incorporated into the final version, they will know the extent of my indebtedness to them.

Finally, my thanks to two outstanding people at Prentice-Hall: Bill Oliver, English Editor and resident benign spirit, who shepherded the manuscript these many months with the devotion of a co-author; and Carolyn Davidson, Production Editor, whose literary expertise, thoroughness, and taste made her downright indispensable.

What blemishes remain in the book after all this help are naturally mine only, for here and there I perversely chose to follow my own Muse.

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Fundamentals

1 *Getting launched*

Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what it is one is saying.

JOHN UPDIKE

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns, as it were instinctively, to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink.

GEORGE ORWELL

Books on writing tend to be windy, boring, and impractical. I intend this one to be different—short, fun, and genuinely useful.

My chief goal is to take the mystery out of how skilled writers actually think so that you can begin thinking like them yourself. With good thinking comes good writing, as you will see; without it, no amount of technical expertise will save you. Beyond that, this book is essentially a storehouse of practical tips on how to make your prose more readable. You'll find literally dozens of tips in the chapters ahead—tips covering everything from opening strategies to the artful use of semicolons.

For all of these tips to be of value to you, though, you have to start out with confidence in your ability to get a piece of writing launched. What good are the fine points if you can't even get underway? Basic confidence, I think, depends on two things: having a reliable means of coming up with ideas plus some technique of readily converting them into coherent prose. I want to begin, then, where you begin yourself—with the launching process. I want to equip you with a method of generating ideas and getting them down on paper.

But first a word of explanation. It's generally recognized that most

people have highly individualized ways of getting their thoughts down on paper. Writers themselves, at least, recognize this, even if the authors of writing manuals tend to ignore it. Some writers love outlines; others gag over them. Some writers dash off their drafts at high speed; others, known in the trade as “bleeders,” tend to be mentally constipated or perfectionistic, and refuse to budge from one sentence to the next until the first has been rigorously revised. Some writers spend the bulk of their time lavishly researching their subject; others spend the bulk of their time revising and doing their research after the fact, so to speak. In the face of such diverse methods of composition, I am leery of recommending any one method as ideal, for the question always becomes, “Ideal for whom?” Each of us finally does the job in the way that best suits his temperament. Still, most of us are desperate enough to be always on the lookout for promising alternative ways, elements of which we might later decide to incorporate into our own habitual method. This explains why I’m brashly going ahead to describe yet another “ideal” method in items #3–9 below. Even if you find only two or three features to be of practical value to you, this discussion will have served its purpose.

Recommendations

1 My first recommendation is so simple as to seem puerile, but I can’t recall a piece of good prose that didn’t reflect it so I am persuaded that it deserves top billing. The recommendation is this: Pick a subject that *means* something to you, emotionally as well as intellectually. As in romancing, so in writing: you’re most effective when your heart is in it. If you can’t say of your topic, “Now *this* is something I really think is important,” you’re a fool to write on it, and you really don’t need me to tell you. Make yourself a cup of coffee and give yourself a few more minutes to ponder what you would genuinely enjoy tangling with. Eventually you’ll come up with a subject, or a new angle of the old subject, that ignites your interest.

If you feel in good spirits, you might consider writing what’s called an “appreciation”—of a person, an event, a character, a book, a locale, or whatever. Share your sense of his or its magic; let yourself

sing. If, on the other hand, you feel in a negative mood, you might consider writing a salty denunciation after the model of Mark Twain or H. L. Mencken. But whatever you do, *turn your feelings to account*—work in harmony with them and actively tap them. If you ignore your real feelings, which is perilously easy to do, or if you try to write with just your head, the inevitable result will be phony, bloodless prose. Also, the labor of writing will be excruciating. You'll have the nagging, wearying sense that you are simply practicing an intellectual minuet.

But all this is too abstract. We need examples—models of prose that crackles with emotional electricity. A fount of such examples is Pauline Kael, celebrated film critic for *The New Yorker*. Ms. Kael is one writer who never fails to turn her feelings to account. She is that rare creature: someone who thinks passionately. Her reviews—always gummy and dead honest—virtually smoke with emotion. Two brief excerpts will illustrate the point and perhaps induce you to read the book in which she's now collected them, *Deeper Into Movies*. The first, an "appreciation," lovingly eulogizes Marlon Brando's Oscar-winning performance in *The Godfather*. The second is one of Kael's patented 500-pound bombs, this one dropped on *The French Connection*. My apologies to her for wrenching the paragraphs out of context:

Brando's acting has mellowed in recent years; it is less immediately exciting than it used to be, because there's not the sudden, violent discharge of emotion. His effects are subtler, less showy, and he gives himself over to the material. He appears to have worked his way beyond the self-parody that was turning him into a comic, and that sometimes left the other performers dangling and laid bare the script. He has not acquired the polish of most famous actors; just the opposite—less mannered as he grows older, he seems to draw directly from life, and from himself. His Don is a primitive sacred monster, and the more powerful because he suggests not the strapping sacred monsters of movies (like Anthony Quinn) but actual ones—those old men who carry never-ending grudges and ancient hatreds inside a frail frame, those monsters who remember minute details of old business deals when they can no longer tie their shoelaces. No one has aged better on camera than Brando; he gradually takes Don Vito to the close of his life, when he moves into the sunshine world, a sleepy monster, near to innocence again. The character is all echoes and

shadings, and no noise; his strength is in that armor of quiet. Brando has lent Don Vito some of his own mysterious, courtly reserve: the character is not explained; we simply assent to him and believe that, yes, he could become a king of the underworld. Brando doesn't dominate the movie, yet he gives the story the legendary presence needed to raise it above gang warfare to archetypal tribal warfare.

The noise of New York already has us tense. [*The French Connection*] is like an aggravated case of New York: it raises this noise level to produce the kind of painful tension that is usually described as almost unbearable suspense. But it's the same kind of suspense you feel when someone outside your window keeps pushing down on the car horn and you think the blaring sound is going to drive you out of your skull. This horn routine is, in fact, what the cop does throughout the longest chase sequence. The movie's suspense is magnified by the sheer pounding abrasiveness of its means; you don't have to be an artist or be original or ingenious to work on the raw nerves of an audience this way—you just have to be smart and brutal. The high-pressure methods that one could possibly accept in *Z* because they were tools used to show the audience how a Fascist conspiracy works are used as ends in themselves. Despite the dubious methods, the purpose of the brutality in *Z* was moral—it was to make you hate brutality. Here you love it, you wait for it—that's all there is. I know that there are many people—and very intelligent people, too—who love this kind of fast-action movie, who say that this is what movies do best and that this is what they really want when they go to a movie. Probably many of them would agree with everything I've said but will still love the movie. Well, it's not what I want, and the fact that Friedkin has done a sensational job of direction just makes that clearer. It's not what I want not because it fails (it doesn't fail) but because of what it is. It is, I think, what we once feared mass entertainment might become: jolts for jocks. There's nothing in the movie that you can enjoy thinking over afterward—nothing especially clever except the timing of the subway-door-and-umbrella sequence. Every other effect in the movie—even the climactic car-versus-runaway-elevated train chase—is achieved by noise, speed, and brutality.

To summarize: It is impossible to write vigorous prose like this unless vigorous emotion is present to energize your ideas, so pick a subject that you have an emotional stake in and write about it just as honestly as you know how. Even if the essay you finally come up with has serious faults, they are likely to seem pardonable. Most readers are inclined to forgive much when they encounter prose that

breathes feeling and honest conviction—the reason being, of course, that they so rarely encounter it.

2 Once you've chosen your general subject, take pains to *delimit* it so that its size is manageable. A small garden, well manicured and easily tended, is far more attractive than a large garden that shows signs of having gotten out of hand. So, too, with essays.

You'll delimit your subject in part simply by deciding how you wish to treat it. You might decide that it would be interesting to compare *X* with *Y*, for example, or *X* with two other things. But there are plenty of other possibilities, too. You might contrast *X* and *Y*, or compare and contrast them, or define the essential features of *X*, or explain its implications, or perhaps give several notable examples of it.

3 After you have decided on a promising subject and think you know what you want to do with it—you'll know for sure only later—you would be wise to follow the example of virtually every professional writer: begin like a miser to *stockpile data*. Your data should include facts, ideas, significant details, apt quotations, parallels, and impressions—but principally *facts*, because readers like to be *taught*, and they invariably prefer the concrete to the abstract. Facts are important to you, too. You know from experience that your best writing occurs when you're confident that you have enough data—particularly enough *solid* data. Confidence and preparation are, practically speaking, almost synonymous. Moral: If you have just enough solid data to work with, you don't have enough. If you have a big surplus of data, you are primed to write.

4 To generate facts and ideas, *formulate a variety of searching questions*, both general and specific, such as a tough examiner might ask—Why? What? How? When? Where?—and bombard your subject with them. As you do, *begin sketching out tentative answers to them* in the form of mini-paragraphs. For this purpose it's best to use 5-by-8-inch slips rather than 8-by-11-inch standard sheets. Being half as large, they are much less threatening and much easier to flip through later. (Note: don't confuse 5-by-8 slips with the smaller 3-by-5 cards. The former are sold in pads; the latter are usually sold in packs and are impractical except for recording bibliographical data.)

Each time you formulate a question, take a fresh slip, write the

question at the top, skip a space or two, and jot down whatever ideas occur to you. Use as many slips as you need for each question, but be sure to write out the question at the top of each new slip and number the slips relating to each question to avoid confusion later.

Suppose you are a psychology major who has decided to write an essay explaining the behavior of Martha in Edward Albee's play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* One of your slips might look like this:

How does Martha protect herself from feeling pain and alienation? (1)

- (1) She smothered any recognition of her father's lifelong indifference toward her (see p. 225) by vocally worshipping him — a good example of what psychologists term "reaction formation."
- (2) "I pass my life in crummy, totally pointless infidelities," she confesses (p. 189). Two probable reasons: to reassure herself that she is lovable and to discharge her strong masochistic feelings (e.g., "I disgust me," p. 189).
- (3) She internalizes that self-contempt — and feeds her insecurity — by loudly ridiculing her husband George.
- (4) She uses liquor to drown the pain. She's now an alcoholic: George remarks that she "can't get enough" liquor (p. 224).
- (5) She fancifully invents a child — a son — to bring beauty and meaning into her barren life. The son is one person who is all her own, to use as she wishes: to love and be loved by.

Note that each of the five points could be developed further in later slips and eventually become a separate paragraph of your essay.

Keep at it until you have formulated and framed answers to perhaps ten significant questions. Then collect the slips like cards in a pack and mull them over leisurely. As you reread them, keep shuffling the sequence of questions so that your mind is forced to confront different combinations of ideas. From these different combinations you'll find that unexpected contrasts and similarities will emerge.