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Writing Papers in College

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Little, Brown and Company
Boston Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Rosen, Leonard J.

Writing papers in college.

1. English language—Rhetoric. 2. Report writing.

I. Behrens, Laurence. II. Title

PE1478.R58 1985 808'.042 85-12919

ISBN 0-316-75716-0

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Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 85-12919

ISBN 0-316-75716-0

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Published simultaneously in Canada by Little, Brown & Company (Canada) Limited
Printed in the United States of America

A Note to the Reader

One of the hardest myths about college writing is that it's a matter of concern only to students in English courses. Once out of the clutches of one's English teacher, the myth maintains, one need never again bother with readability, organization, coherence, or logical argumentation — at least not on paper.

In fact, however, the quality of student writing is of universal concern among college faculty. A survey of over 400 faculty members in various academic disciplines (including business and computer science) at The American University revealed professorial concern, in descending order of significance, over the following areas of student writing: vagueness, insufficient evidence or research, disorganization, faulty diction, poor quality of thought, dullness, and incoherence. Moreover, faculty often did more than just complain about such problems — they frequently downgraded papers. Professors in the social sciences and the humanities downgraded to an equal degree.

In the working world beyond college, effective writing becomes even more critical. The president of a natural gas firm asserts that "one of the greatest needs in business is the ability to communicate effectively, both by the written word and the spoken word." Scientists and engineers are not exempt from this requirement. Engineers, in fact, are notorious for their inability to produce readable reports in plain English. A consulting firm recently advertised for a writer to prepare technical proposals for multi-million-dollar contracts with the U.S. Navy. Engineers were specifically excluded from consideration because experience had demonstrated that few engineers could write well enough to make themselves understood, let alone impress readers of proposals.

A growth industry — the business-writing consulting firms — has developed because corporations urgently require executives who can communicate effectively with their clients as well as with each other. This requirement is expensive, not only to the corporations who have to pay the costs of seminars and writing courses, but also, on occasion, to the individuals concerned. As one high-level insurance executive noted: "... I have personally witnessed situations where [employees] have been highly skilled and were professional in every degree except that they could not relate to other people. In one case, it cost a man his career; and in another, a man had to resign an advancement he had been given because of his inability to effectively communicate with his subordinates."

In short, writing is a crucial skill for anyone who expects to do well in college and, later, in the business and professional world. Because of the current and unprecedented need for information, the need for good writing

is likely to become ever more crucial. John Naisbitt, author of *Megatrends*, writes: "The new source of power is not money in the hands of a few but information in the hands of the many."

Information is the central focus of this book. *Writing Papers in College* is not designed as a comprehensive writing text, nor as a conventional research paper handbook. Rather, it is conceived as a brief guide to analyzing and synthesizing source materials.¹ Sources may be presented within the confines of the standard research paper, but just as often students must analyze and synthesize them in papers of lesser scope. Of course, the use of sources is not limited to the college and university: those writing reports in the business and professional worlds must also draw heavily upon source material.

This book focuses primarily on three forms of writing that are crucial to college-level work: the summary, the synthesis, and the critique. You have probably attempted all three forms in your academic career. When you restate material briefly, you write a *summary*. When you combine material, you write a *synthesis*. When you analyze an article or a book, you write a *critique*.

We should, however, note two things at the outset. First, we have isolated these forms of writing largely for ease of teaching. Pure examples, especially of summary and critique, are the exception, rather than the rule. Most college writing assignments employ at least two and often three of these forms. Second, separate pieces of summarized, synthesized, and critiqued material are just that — separate pieces. The mortar that bonds all of this material together and gives it a distinct shape and tone is the force and originality of the writer's own mind drawing conclusions from what he or she has read and experienced. Such conclusions are not simply tacked on at the end; they are integral to the paper, and they determine how the writer selects, orders, and proportions the source materials. Several people might have studied exactly the same data on portable computers, but only one might have drawn the conclusion that the market for such devices would crash in the near future. Thousands of people have studied the history of science, but only one, Thomas Kuhn, discerned from that history a particular recurrent pattern that explains how scientific revolutions occur. Once he published his conclusions, the recurrent pattern became clear to everyone.

The point is that any significant piece of college writing — though it may not be as epoch making as Thomas Kuhn's — uses source material not for its own sake but in support of the writer's own independent power of thought. Your instructors assign papers not simply to torment you (though that may be the inevitable side effect); rather, they are testing for those skills and qualities of mind basic to all academic and much professional

¹Much of this guide has appeared in slightly different form in our *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985).

work: the ability to locate, comprehend, and evaluate evidence; the ability to use evidence effectively and, incidentally, to document it. Most important, they want to see how well you can *think* about your evidence in the process of developing arguments and insights of clarity, force, and (if possible) grace.

You may be able to think and to express yourself perfectly well in a non-academic environment; but it is likely, if you are a freshman or sophomore, that you will not know enough about academic subjects to express valid opinions or to identify important information. Could you, for instance, read Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* and identify the passages your instructor would consider "crucial to any coherent reading of the novel"? Could you read a statistical summary of an experiment in physics and identify significant features? When you are new to a subject, you lack the experience required to make such judgments. All of us have been in this predicament, but it is a temporary one. With study, with each completed assignment, you will learn more and eventually will be ready to join the academic conversation. Both you and your professors will come to agree on what counts as essential information, as an important question, or as dubious scholarship.

As you gain experience you will be asked to present what you know in papers of varying lengths and complexity. *Writing Papers in College* is designed to help you meet the challenge of these presentations. Although the book will not provide infallible formulas for success, we do hope it will provide a set of tools that will allow you to make the best use of your abilities. Writing good college papers is not easy, but neither is it a mystery.

A Word of Thanks

It is a pleasure to acknowledge those colleagues and friends who reviewed this guide in manuscript and made valuable recommendations. Thanks to Patricia Bizzell of the College of the Holy Cross, Christopher Thaiss of George Mason University, Bill Leap of The American University, and Yvonne Yaw of Bentley College. Thanks also to Joseph Gibaldi of the Modern Language Association for reviewing the appendix on citing sources, and to Avril Rodkin of the University of Maryland Library for her help on gathering sources. Finally, we wish especially to acknowledge the work of Virginia Tiefel and other members of the staff of the Ohio State University Library in preparing the material on library search strategies, the subject of Appendix 1.

Contents

1. Summary 1

Introduction 1

- What Is a Summary? 1
- Using the Summary 1
- How to Write Summaries 2
- A Note on Purpose 4
- A Note on Revision 4

Demonstration 1: Summary of an Inductively Organized Passage 6

□ ONE WORLD, ONE LANGUAGE: *Ralph E. Hamil* 7

- Consider Your Purpose 12
- Reread, Label, Underline, Divide into Stages of Thought 12
- Write One-Sentence Summaries of Each Stage of Thought 15
- Write a Thesis: A One- or Two-Sentence Summary of the Entire Passage 15
- Write the Summary 16
 - Summary 1: Combine the Thesis with One-Sentence Section Summaries* 17
 - Summary 2: Combine a Thesis Sentence, Section Summaries, and Carefully Chosen Details* 18
- Discussion 20

Demonstration 2: Summary of a Deductively Organized Passage 20

□ INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY—A STUDY OF GOOD AND EVIL: *Arthur R. Miller* 21

- Consider Your Purpose 24
- Divide the Passage into Sections or Stages of Thought 24
- Write One-Sentence Summaries of Each Stage of Thought 25
- Write a Thesis: A One- or Two-Sentence Summary of the Entire Passage 25
- Write the Summary 26
 - Summary 1: Combine the Thesis with One-Sentence Section Summaries* 26
 - Summary 2: Combine the Thesis, Section Summaries, and Carefully Chosen Details* 27

2. Synthesis 29

Introduction 29

- What Is a Synthesis? 29
- Purpose 29
- Using Your Sources 30
- Some Typical Relationships 31
 - Process* 32 *Example* 33 *Description* 33 *Comparison and Contrast* 34 *Cause and Effect* 35

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| How to Write Syntheses | 35 |
| Demonstration 1: The Simple Synthesis | 37 |
| □ PROSPECTS FOR THE YEAR 2000: <i>Marvin Cetron and Thomas O'Toole</i> | 37 |
| □ THE GLOBAL 2000 REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT | 40 |
| Consider Your Purpose | 44 |
| Formulate a Thesis | 45 |
| Decide How You Will Use Your Source Material | 45 |
| Develop an Organizational Plan | 45 |
| Write the Topic Sentences | 45 |
| Write Your Synthesis | 46 |
| Discussion | 47 |
| Demonstration 2: Synthesis Using Comparison-Contrast | 47 |
| Consider Your Purpose | 47 |
| Formulate a Thesis | 47 |
| Decide How You Will Use Your Source Material | 48 |
| Develop an Organizational Plan | 48 |
| Write Your Synthesis | 49 |
| Discussion | 52 |
| Organizing Comparison-Contrast Syntheses | 53 |
| Organizing by Summary | 54 |
| Organizing by Criteria | 54 |
| Demonstration 3: The Complex Synthesis | 55 |
| □ FROM REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY TO PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY: <i>John Naisbitt</i> | 56 |
| □ DEMOCRACY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: <i>Arthur Bronwell</i> | 62 |
| □ HARRISON BERGERON: <i>Kurt Vonnegut Jr.</i> | 69 |
| Consider Your Purpose | 74 |
| Formulate a Thesis | 75 |
| Decide How You Will Use Your Source Material | 75 |
| Develop an Organizational Plan | 75 |
| Write Your Synthesis | 76 |
| Discussion | 87 |
| More on Thesis Statements | 89 |
| The Components of a Thesis | 90 |
| Limiting the Scope of the Thesis | 91 |
| Begin with a Working Thesis | 91 |
| Begin with a Subject and Narrow It | 93 |
| Make an Assertion | 95 |
| Using the Thesis | 97 |
| Introductions and Conclusions | 98 |
| Introductions | 98 |
| Quotation | 99 |
| Historical Review | 99 |
| Review of a Controversy | 100 |
| From the General to the Specific | 101 |

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>From the Specific to the General: Anecdote, Illustration</i> | 101 |
| <i>Question</i> | 102 |
| <i>Statement of Thesis</i> | 102 |
| Conclusions | 103 |
| <i>Statement of the Subject's Significance</i> | 104 |
| <i>Calling for Further Research</i> | 105 |
| <i>Solution/Recommendation</i> | 105 |
| <i>Making a Plea</i> | 106 |
| <i>Allusion</i> | 107 |
| <i>Anecdote</i> | 108 |
| <i>Quotation</i> | 109 |
| <i>Questions</i> | 110 |
| <i>Speculation</i> | 111 |

3. Critical Reading and Critique 112

Critical Reading 112

Consider Three Questions When Evaluating a Passage 112

Question 1: What Is the Author Trying to Accomplish in This Passage? 112 *Question 2: How Has the Author Attempted to Accomplish This Purpose, and How Successful Has the Effort Been?* 113 *Question 3: What Are the Author's Assumptions, How Do They Compare with Your Own, and How Do They Affect the Validity of the Passage?* 114

Demonstration: Critical Reading 117

□ THE FUTURE AS THE MIRROR OF THE PAST:

Robert L. Heilbroner 118

Discussion 120

Exercise: Critical Reading 124

□ THE FORCES OF CHANGE EMERGE:

Robert L. Heilbroner 124

Discussion 127

Critique 128

How to Write Critiques 128

Demonstration 1: Critique 129

□ DO WE OWE ANYTHING TO FUTURE GENERATIONS?:

Robert B. Meltzer 130

Discussion 142

Appendix 1. Discovering Sources: The Search Strategy

*by Virginia Tiefel and other members of the staff of
The Ohio State University Library* 144

Primary and Secondary Sources 144

General Search Strategy 146

I. Select a Subject 147

II. Consult Encyclopedias 147

III. Use Appropriate Dictionaries 148

| | |
|----------------------------------------------|-----|
| IV. Locate Information on Your Initial Topic | 150 |
| V. Consider Additional Sources | 154 |
| Conclusion | 159 |
| A Selective List of Sources | 160 |

Appendix 2. Citing Sources

| | |
|------------------|-----|
| Works Cited | 167 |
| In-Text Citation | 171 |



Summary

INTRODUCTION

What Is a Summary?

The best way to demonstrate your comprehension of the information and the ideas in any piece of writing is to compose an accurate and clearly written summary of that piece. By a summary we mean a *brief restatement, in your own words, of the content of a passage* (a group of paragraphs, a chapter, an article, a book). This restatement should focus on the *central idea* of the passage. The briefest of all summaries (one or two sentences) will do no more than this. A longer summary will indicate, in condensed form, the main points in the passage that support or explain the central idea. It will reflect the order in which these points are presented and the emphasis given to them. It may even include some important examples from the passage. But it will not include minor details. It will not repeat points simply for the purpose of emphasis. And it will not contain any of your own opinions or conclusions. A good summary, therefore, has three central qualities: *brevity*, *completeness*, and *objectivity*.

Using the Summary

In some quarters the summary has a bad reputation, and with reason. Summaries are often provided by writers as substitutes for analyses. As students, we've all summarized books that we were supposed to critically review. All the same, the summary does have a place in respectable college work. First, writing a summary is an excellent way to ensure that you understand what you read. This in itself is an important goal of academic study. If you don't understand your source material, chances are you won't be able to refer to it usefully in an essay or research paper. Summaries help you understand what you read because they force you to put the text into your own words. Practice with writing summaries also develops your general writing habits, since a good summary has almost all of the qualities of any other piece of good writing: unity, clarity, coherence, and accuracy.

Second, summaries are useful to your readers. Let's say you're writing a paper about the McCarthy era in America, and in part of that paper you

want to discuss Arthur Miller's *Crucible* as a dramatic treatment of the subject. A summary of the plot would be helpful to a reader who hasn't seen or read — or who doesn't remember — the play. (Of course, if the reader is your American literature professor, you can safely omit the plot summary.) Or perhaps you're writing a paper about nuclear arms control agreements. If your reader isn't familiar with the provisions of SALT I or SALT II, it would be a good idea to summarize these provisions at some early point in the paper. In many cases (a test, for instance), you can use a summary to demonstrate your knowledge of what your professor already knows; when writing a paper, you can use a summary to inform your professor about some relatively obscure source.

It may seem to you that being able to tell (or to retell) exactly what a passage says is a skill that ought to be taken for granted in anyone who can read at high-school level. Unfortunately this is not so: for all kinds of reasons, people don't always read closely. In fact, it's probably safe to say that they usually don't. Either they read so inattentively that they skip over words, phrases, or even whole sentences or, if they do see the words in front of them, they see them without registering their significance.

When a reader fails to pick up the meaning and the implications of a sentence or two, there's usually no real harm done. (An exception: you could lose credit on an exam or paper because you failed to read or to realize the significance of a crucial direction by your instructor.) But over longer stretches — the paragraph, the section, the article, or the chapter — inattentive or haphazard reading creates problems, for you must try not only to catch every word, but also to perceive the shape of the argument. You have to grasp the central idea, to determine the main points that comprise it, to relate the parts to the whole, and to note key examples. This kind of reading takes a lot more energy and determination than casual reading. But, in the long run, it's an energy-saving method because it enables you to retain the content of the material and to use that content as a basis for your own responses. In other words, it allows you to develop an accurate and coherent written discussion that goes beyond summary.

How to Write Summaries

Every article you read will present a different challenge as you work to summarize it. As you'll discover, being able to say in a few words what has taken someone else a great many can be difficult. But like any other skill, the ability to summarize improves with practice. Here are a few pointers to get you started. These pointers are not meant to be iron-clad rules; rather, they are designed to encourage habits of thinking that will allow you to vary your technique as the situation demands.

- *Consider your purpose.* Ask yourself these questions: Why are you reading this passage? Do you need to summarize it at all? In whole? In part? Will the summary stand by itself, or is it to be part of a larger paper? If part of a larger paper, what information in the passage does your audience need to know in order to follow your overall discussion? (The following steps are based on the assumption that you are going to summarize the entire passage. If this is not the case, you will need to modify these procedures accordingly.)
- *Read the passage carefully.* Determine its structure. Identify the author's purpose in writing. (This will help you to distinguish between more important and less important information.)
- *Reread.* This time divide the passage into sections or stages of thought. The author's use of paragraphing will often be a useful guide. *Label*, on the passage itself, each section or stage of thought. *Underline* key ideas and terms.
- *Write one-sentence summaries*, on a separate sheet of paper, of each stage of thought.
- *Write a thesis: a one-sentence summary of the entire passage.* The thesis should express the central idea of the passage, as you have determined it from the preceding steps. You may find it useful to keep in mind the information contained in the lead sentence or paragraph of most newspaper stories — the *what*, *who*, *why*, *where*, *when*, and *how* of the matter. For persuasive passages, summarize in a sentence the author's conclusion. For descriptive passages, indicate the subject of the description and its key feature(s). *Note:* in some cases *a suitable thesis may already be in the original passage*. If so, you may want to quote it directly in your summary.
- *Write the first draft of your summary* by (1) combining the thesis with your list of one-sentence summaries or (2) combining the thesis with one-sentence summaries *plus* significant details from the passage. In either case, eliminate repetition. Eliminate less important information. Disregard minor details, or generalize them (e.g., Nixon, Ford, and Carter might be generalized as "recent presidents"). Use as few words as possible to convey the main ideas.
- *Check your summary against the original passage*, and make whatever adjustments are necessary for accuracy and completeness.
- *Revise your summary*, inserting transitional words and phrases where necessary to ensure coherence. Check for style. *Avoid a series of short, choppy sentences*. Combine sentences for a smooth, logical flow of ideas. Check for grammatical correctness, punctuation, and spelling.

A Note on Purpose

Pay special attention to the first step: considering your purpose. Are you writing a summary in response to a summary assignment? If so, you will need to summarize the entire source. Are you (on the other hand) concerned with only a portion of the source, a portion that you must work into your discussion of some broader or related subject? If so, you are probably writing a selective summary, to be incorporated into a *synthesis*. (Syntheses are discussed in Chapter 2.) What about your audience? How much can you assume your audience already knows about the topic treated in the source material? How much of this material is your audience likely not to know? The responses to such questions will determine the extent of your summary and the kind of source material it emphasizes.

If your purpose is simply to fulfill the instructor's assignment to summarize a particular article or book, then you may go through the remaining steps of the process just as they have been specified. You may, however, have a different purpose. Suppose that in the course of discussing a particular subject, you want to summarize what the author of article A has said about this subject. In such a case, you would summarize only that part of article A that is relevant to your discussion. It may well be that you would ignore or de-emphasize most of article A. But even if you were to summarize the entire source, the length of your summary would depend on your assessment of your audience's needs. Let us return to our earlier example, a summary of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (which might be incorporated either into a paper on the Salem witch trials or into a paper on the McCarthy era in the United States during the early 1950s). The appropriate length for a summary would depend largely on whether or not you believed your audience was already familiar with the play. If the play had, in fact, been studied in class, a one- or two-sentence summary would be sufficient; otherwise, a longer summary would be required.

For the purpose of our demonstrations on summary, we'll proceed as if it were necessary to summarize the entire source, and as if this summary were not to be integrated into a larger paper. Keep in mind, however, that considerations of purpose and audience can drastically affect the nature of a summary.

A Note on Revision

The final step in the summary process is revision. Revision, of course, is crucial; most practiced writers spend more time revising their work than drafting it in the first place. In fact, it's somewhat misleading to say that revision is the final step, since revision is often a very early step in the writing process. Some writers (Rosen and Behrens, for instance) insist on

repeatedly revising their first sentence before drafting the next one. (Perhaps we should just say, "before drafting the next." Is that "one" really necessary? In fact, is that "really" really necessary?)

It's important to free yourself of the illusion that the more practiced and skillful you become as a writer, the less you'll have to revise. If anything, the opposite is true. The more writers care about their work, the more they tend to revise and revise until they get each phrase exactly right. In their book *Improving Student Writing*, Andrew Moss and Carol Holder offer some valuable insights into revision:

When told that F. Scott Fitzgerald labored over successive drafts of his novels, one student replied, "Well, he mustn't have been a very good writer!" Unaware that revision plays such an important role, many students are inhibited by the image of the Perfect First Draft. They write a sentence and ponder its correctness, write another and ponder anew. Their fluency crippled, they labor mightily and produce little.

Yet autobiographical material and interviews with professional writers have demonstrated the iterative process of writing: the process of reshaping language to explore and express an idea. The economist John Kenneth Galbraith, a respected literary craftsman, has remarked about how it takes five drafts to complete a manuscript, four drafts when he's able to be "spontaneous."

Occasionally we'll comment on some passages that we've significantly revised. These comments will serve as a reminder that although the prose you read here or elsewhere may *seem* spontaneous, you can be sure that (through the author's multiple drafts and the editor's revisions) it has been rewritten a half-dozen times or more.

Let's consider the case of our own unspontaneous attempts to draft an introduction to this book. After some struggle, we produced the following paragraph:

In this book we will deal primarily with these three ways of handling source material. You restate material — in brief form — when you write a *summary*. You combine material when you write a *synthesis* (of which there are several types). You analyze and evaluate when you write a *critique*. But we should note two things at the outset.

The more we reread this paragraph, the less we liked it. First of all, there's a jarring shift of subject from the "we" of the first sentence to the "you" of the next three. Then in the final sentence there's a shift back to "we." Also, the emphases in the middle sentences seemed wrong. Since we wanted to emphasize the summary, the synthesis, and the critique, it seemed to us that the subordinate clauses ("when you write a summary," etc.) should become main ones and vice versa. Finally, there were some

parenthetical phrases ("in brief form" and "of which there are several types") that could be dropped without any loss.

Our next version looked like this:

This book focuses primarily on three forms of writing: the summary, the synthesis, and the critique. When you briefly restate material, you write a *summary*. When you combine material, you write a *synthesis*. When you analyze and evaluate material, you write a *critique*. But we should note two things at the outset.

This was better, but the paragraph still needed work. The transition between the first and second sentences was too abrupt. We used the word "material" too many times in this brief paragraph. Also, we should have provided a reason for focusing on these particular forms of writing. And that last sentence didn't belong there at all, since it was actually the topic sentence of the next paragraph. Moving it away would have the added benefit that the paragraph would end on an emphatic note.

Our final version, then, looked like this:

This book focuses primarily on three forms of writing that are crucial to college-level work: the summary, the synthesis, and the critique. You have probably attempted all three forms in your academic career. When you restate material briefly, you write a *summary*. When you combine material, you write a *synthesis*. When you analyze an article or a book, you write a *critique*.

Now let's try these procedures on an actual passage of text. To provide thematic consistency, we will draw primarily on readings dealing with speculations about the future.

DEMONSTRATION 1: SUMMARY OF AN INDUCTIVELY ORGANIZED PASSAGE

Most expository writing is arranged either inductively or deductively. Inductive writing proceeds from specific details and observations and builds toward a conclusion. Deductive writing proceeds from a conclusion, which is then supported with examples, explanations, and arguments. We'll consider these two arrangements one at a time.

Read the following inductively organized passage carefully. Underline what you regard as essential information, and make brief notations in the margins.

ONE WORLD, ONE LANGUAGE

Ralph E. Hamil

Language differences have often made existing economic and political conflicts worse and, in some cases, have led to bloodshed. In the twentieth century alone, language-inspired riots and terrorist attacks have occurred in Québec (English/French); Belgium (French/Flemish); Indonesia (Indonesian/Malay); India (Hindi/Urdu); and Sri Lanka (Sinhala/Tamil).

Sharing the same language does not guarantee harmony among people, but a common language does reduce the likelihood of violent strife by making diplomatic, commercial, scientific, and cultural exchanges easier and less liable to misunderstandings. If the 18 nations of Latin America each spoke a different language, wars among them would, no doubt, be far more frequent.

In the seventeenth century, improved transportation, together with the decline in the use of Latin as an international language, made Europeans desire new ways to ease communication between speakers of different languages. Comenius, a Bohemian bishop and educator, recommended that the leading languages of Europe be adopted internationally, with French and English serving the West and Russian the East. Some years earlier, the French mathematician and philosopher René Descartes had suggested constructing an artificial language. Both these concepts — hegemony of one or more existing languages or the universal adoption of an artificial “second language” — have spawned many proposals and variations over the years; both ideas are still being actively pursued today.

Elevating an Existing Language

At first glance, it appears easier to elevate an existing language to the status of official regional or world tongue and promote its use by having it taught in the schools of every country. Suggestions for languages to be so honored have been numerous — even including Basque, a tongue spoken by only 700,000 people who live in the Pyrenees Mountains (along the border between Spain and France), but “neutral” since it is apparently unrelated to any other language on earth. Setting up French and English as co-equal world tongues has had its advocates, too. And in the 1960s, Malcolm X urged Amer-

From *The Futurist*, June 1981, published by The World Future Society, 4916 St. Elmo Avenue, Washington, D.C., 20014. Reprinted by permission.