

THIRD EDITION

# The Complete Stylist and Handbook



**SHERIDAN BAKER**

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**SHERIDAN BAKER**

The University of Michigan

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# Preface

The process makes the product—the essay, the poem, the speech, the painting, the home, the garden, the achievement awarded, the effort satisfied. For almost a decade, teachers and students in thousands of classrooms have tested *The Complete Stylist and Handbook* in achieving the essentials of composition and the graces of good prose through a basic *Rhetoric* and a supplemental *Handbook*. But teachers have recently asked for more help with the process. Hence this new edition.

In the *Rhetoric*, I have refocussed Chapters 1, 2, and 3 on the problem of getting started and finding something to write about, retaining the significance of discovering a thesis with an argumentative edge and of swinging a dialectical argument *pro* and *con*, which are the rudiments of thought and persuasion. Chapter 4 retains the structures of paragraphing and the form of the whole essay. Chapter 5 moves on to the rhetoric of description, narration, exposition, and definition.

At the request of many users, I have restored, though simplified, the syllogism in Chapter 6, and I have restored, though amplified, the aids to outlining in Chapter 7. Chapters on sentences and words, which seem the most durable parts of the book, remain as before, with some refining, some added detail, especially on parallelism, and some new examples and exercises. Indeed, there are new examples and exercises throughout the book.

But the basic approach, as in my short rhetoric, *The Practical Stylist*, remains the same, since, in more than two decades, it has proven itself fundamental. It stresses rhetoric as the art of communication and persuasion. It emphasizes argument as the quickest and clearest teacher of rhetorical principles. It begins with the two primal elements, inner idea and outer form, thesis and structure.

It proceeds step by step with the progressively smaller and more powerful units—paragraphs, sentences, words. Then the rhetorical process culminates in “Writing About Literature,” with some new examples and aids, and in the research paper. Here, for the first time in any text, I explain and illustrate the Modern Language Association’s new and simplified system for documentation, already standard in *PMLA* and other journals, and soon to be published in a new edition of the *MLA Handbook*. Consequently, for instance, I have dropped the “p.” from my own references to pages and parenthetical cross-references. I have followed the new style throughout.

The *Handbook*, as before, begins with a short section on “The English Language,” and covers grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage, all newly considered. I have added a “Glossary of Grammatical Terms” and a considerable section on how to handle written examinations and how to write letters of application and personal résumés for the jobs to come. I have restored, as many have asked, a section on classical rhetorical devices, as they strengthen one’s grasp of sentences and figures of speech. The *Handbook* thus reinforces chapters in the *Rhetoric*, offering material the teacher may integrate with assignments or assign separately, and the student may use for constant and ready reference.

I have revised the *Instructor’s Manual* to match the new edition of the text, again adding possibilities for other angles and alternate uses and solutions for exercises. New diagnostic and achievement tests are available to help set priorities for assignments.

*The Complete Stylist and Handbook* again strives to show the student how important writing is in coming to grips with our ideas and ourselves, to demonstrate that writing is really our only steady means of getting our thinking straight and clear. Throughout, I urge students to see that style is both personal and public, a matter of finding one’s self in language—as always, one’s own personality written into reason and looking its best.

SHERIDAN BAKER

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# THE RHETORIC



# The Point of It All: Why We Write

### WRITE FOR YOUR SHARE

Writing is one of the most important things we do. It helps us catch our ideas, realize our thoughts, and stand out as fluent persuasive people both on paper and on our feet in front of the meeting or the boss. Reading and writing have already enlarged your education and your speech. Even television, in its news and advertising, and in most of its shows, pours into our thoughts the words and habits that literacy—and written scripts—has built into our speech and thinking.

This language we share is Standard English—sometimes called “edited Standard American English,” unfortunately making it seem like some unnatural necessity for the business we would rather not do. But it is our living language, in speech as well as print. Actually, even our most local and private dialects partake of its forms and vocabulary, as do our silent thoughts, however fragmentary, our “inner speech,” as several psychologists and linguists have recently called it.\* In fact, we automatically “edit” all our fragmentary thoughts for even our most spontaneous expressions, intuitively selecting from our store of possibilities, filling in the grammar, expanding, rephrasing, just as if we were writing and rewriting: “. . . er . . . I mean . . . but really. . . .” So writing is an extension of the way we naturally handle language. Writing simply straightens out and clarifies our intuitive editing, and in turn makes the

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\*Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962), with “Comments” by Jean Piaget; James Moffett, “Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation,” *College English* 44 (1982): 231–46.

editing itself more fluent. Writing perfects thought and speech. Indeed, over the millions of years from our first emotive screams and gurgles of pleasure to the bright dawn of literacy, writing—thinking in full dress—seems to be where speech has been going all the time.

So your writing in college continues a very long evolution from the cradle upward—your own and civilization's too. All of your studies, and even a good many of your pastimes, involve some writing. You take notes, assemble them, get back into your head what you have written from it. Composing your thoughts in notebooks pulls your knowledge into a meaningful flow, pulls new thoughts into the stream, and helps keep them there. Your lab courses require writing to augment that other language of mathematics. Computers demand a lively dialogue, with special languages to compose, translate, and command. Courses in history, philosophy, languages, economics, the social sciences, literature—all require some papers, short or long, and some examinations in spontaneous essays.

Your composition course prepares you for the challenge, not only of college but of the business of life ahead, whether in the executive suite or the courtroom, the hospital or the consulate, the legislature or the press room. You must write for admission to postgraduate studies. You must write proposals for grants and programs. You must write to persuade people of your worth—demonstrated in your literacy—and of the worth of your ideas. You must write to develop and advance them—and yourself. You must write for your share of life. Thinking and persuasion are your business, and the business of your course in composition. All communication is largely persuasion. Even your most factual survey as engineer or educator must persuade its audience to approval by its perception and clarity and organization—in short, by its writing.

## ATTITUDE

Writing well is a matter of conviction. You learn in school by exercises, of course; and exercises are best when taken as such, as body-builders, flexions and extensions for the real contests ahead. But when you are convinced that what you write has meaning, that it has meaning for you—and not in a lukewarm, hypothetical way, but truly—then your writing will stretch its wings and have the whole wide world in range. For writing is simply a graceful and articulate extension of the best that is in you. Writing well is not easy. As it extends the natural way we express ourselves, it nevertheless takes unending practice, each essay a polished exercise for the next to come, each new trial, as T. S. Eliot says, a new “raid on the inarticulate.”

In writing, you clarify your own thoughts, and strengthen your conviction. Indeed, you probably grasp your thoughts for the first time. Writing is a way

of thinking. The process of writing not merely transcribes but actually creates thought, and generates your ability to think. Through writing, you discover thoughts you hardly knew you had; through writing, you come to know what you know. All kinds of forgotten impressions, lost facts, and surprising up-drafts of words and knowledge support your flight. As you test your thoughts against their opposites, as you answer the questions rising in your mind and in the minds of your imagined audience, your conviction grows. You learn as you write. In the end, after you have rewritten and rearranged for your best rhetorical effectiveness, your words will carry your readers with you to see as you see, to believe as you believe, to understand your subject as you now understand it.

### Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously

Take your subject seriously—if it is a serious subject—but take yourself with a grain of salt. Your attitude is the very center of your prose. If you take yourself too importantly, your tone will go hollow, your sentences will go moldy, your page will go fuzzy with *of's* and *which's* and nouns clustered densely in passive constructions. In your academic career, the worst dangers lie immediately ahead. Freshmen usually learn to write tolerably well, but from the sophomore to the senior year the academic damp frequently sets in, and by graduate school you can often cut the gray mold with a cheese knife.

You must constantly guard against acquiring the heavy, sober-sided attitude that makes for wordiness and its attendant vices of obscurity, dullness, and anonymity. Do not lose your personality and your voice in the monotone of official prose. You should work like a scholar and scientist, but you should write like a writer, one who cares about the economy and beauty of language, and has some individual personality. Your attitude, then, should form somewhere between a confidence in your own convictions and a humorous distrust of your own rhetoric, which can so easily carry you away. You should bear yourself as a member of humankind, knowing that we are all sinners, all redundant, and all too fond of big words. Here is an example from—I blush to admit—the pen of a professor:

**The general problem is perhaps correctly stated as inadequacy of nursing personnel to meet demands for nursing care and services. Inadequacy, it should be noted, is both a quantitative and qualitative term and thus it can be assumed that the problem as stated could indicate insufficient numbers of nursing personnel to meet existing demands for their services; deficiencies in the competencies of those who engage in the various fields of nursing; or both.**



Too few good nurses, and a badly swollen author—that is the problem. “Nursing personnel” may mean nurses, but it also may mean “the nursing of employees,” so that the author seems to say, for a wildly illogical moment, that someone is not properly pampering or suckling people for the necessary services. Notice the misfiring *it* (fourth line of quotation), which seems to refer to *term* but actually refers to nothing. And the ponderous jingle of “deficiencies in the competencies” would do for a musical comedy. The author has taken the wrong model, is taking herself too seriously, and taking her readers almost nowhere.

### Consider Your Readers

If you are to take your subject with all the seriousness it deserves and yourself with as much skeptical humor as you can bear, how are you to take your readers? Who are they, anyway? Some teachers suggest using your classmates as your audience to solve the puzzle as to those invisible readers you hope to please and persuade. This is a good beginning. But the problem remains with all those other classes, with those papers in history or social science, with the reports, the applications for jobs and grants, the letters to the editor. At some point, you must become a writer facing the invisible public.

To some extent, your audiences will vary. You imagine yourself addressing slightly different personalities when you write about snorkeling and when you write about nuclear reactors. Hypothetically, your vocabulary and your tone would vary all the way from Skid Row to Oxford as you turn from social work to Rhodes scholarship; and certainly the difference of audience would reflect itself somewhat in your language. Furthermore, you must indeed sense your audience’s capacity, its susceptibilities and prejudices, if you are to win even a hearing. No doubt our language skids a bit when down on the Row, and we certainly speak different tongues with our friends, and with the friends of our parents.

But the notion of adjusting your writing to a whole scale of audiences, though attractive in theory, hardly works out in practice. You are *writing*, and the written word presupposes a literate norm that immediately eliminates all the lower ranges of mere talk. Even when you *speak*, you do not so lose your identity as to pass for a total illiterate. You stand on your own linguistic feet, in your own linguistic personality, and the only adjustment you should assiduously practice in your writing, and in your speaking as well, is the upward one toward verbal adulthood, a slight grammatical tightening and rhetorical heightening to make your thoughts clear, emphatic, and attractive.

Consider your audience a mixed group of intelligent and reasonable adults. You want them to think of you as well informed and well educated. You wish to explain what you know and what you believe. You wish to persuade them pleasantly that what you know is important and what you believe is right.

Try to imagine what they might ask you, what they might object to, what they might know already, what they might find interesting. Be simple and clear, amusing and profound, using plenty of illustration to show what you mean. *But do not talk down to them.* That is the great flaw in the slumming theory of communication. Bowing to your readers' supposed level, you insult them by assuming their inferiority. Thinking yourself humble, you are actually haughty. The best solution is simply to assume that your readers are as intelligent as you. Even if they are not, they will be flattered by the assumption. Your written language, in short, will be respectful toward your subject, considerate toward your readers, and somehow amiable toward human failings.

## THE WRITTEN VOICE

### Make Your Writing Talk

That the silent page should seem to speak with the writer's voice is remarkable. With all gestures gone, no eyes to twinkle, no notation at all for the rise and fall of utterance, and only a handful of punctuation marks, the level line of type can yet convey the writer's voice, the tone of his personality.

To achieve this tone, to find your own voice and style, simply try to write in the language of intelligent conversation, cleared of all the stumbles and weavings of talk. Indeed, our speech, like thought, is amazingly circular. We can hardly think in a straight line if we try. We think by questions and answers, repetitions and failures; and our speech, full of *you know's* and *I mean's*, follows the erratic ways of the mind, circling around and around as we stitch the simplest of logical sequences. Your writing will carry the stitches, not those editorial loopings and pauses and rethreadings. It should be literate. It should be broad enough of vocabulary and rich enough of sentence to show that you have read a book. It should not be altogether unworthy to place you in the company of those who have written well in your native tongue. But it should nevertheless retain the tone of intelligent and agreeable conversation. It should be alive with a human personality—yours—which is probably the most persuasive rhetorical force on earth. Good writing should have a voice, and the voice should be unmistakably your own.

Suppose your spoken voice sounded something like this (I reconstruct an actual response in one of my classes):

**Well, I don't know, I like Shakespeare really, I guess—I mean, well, like when Lear divides up his kingdom like a fairy tale or something, I thought that was kind of silly, dividing his kingdom. Anyone could see that was silly if you wanted to keep**



**your kingdom, why divide it? But then like, something begins to happen, like a real family, I mean. Cordelia really gets griped at her older sisters, I mean, like all older sisters, if you've ever had any. There's a kind of sibling rivalry, you know. Then she's kind of griped at her father, who she really loves, but she thinks, I mean, like saying it right out spoils it. You can't really speak right out, I mean, about love, well, except sometimes, I guess, without sounding corny.**

Your written voice might then emerge from this with something of the same tone, but with everything straightened out, filled in, and polished up:

**The play begins like a fairy tale. It even seems at first a little abstract and silly. A king has three daughters. The two elder ones are bad; the youngest is good. The king wishes to keep his kingdom in peace, and keep his title as king, by dividing his kingdom in a senseless and almost empty ceremonial way. But very soon the play seems like real life. The family seems real, complete with sibling rivalry. The king, not the play, now seems foolish and senile. The older daughters are hypocrites. Cordelia, the youngest, is irritated at them, and at her father's foolishness. As a result, she remains silent, not only because she is irritated at the flattering words of her sisters, but because anything she could say about her real love for her father would now sound false.**

You might wish to polish that some more. You might indeed have said it another way, one more truly your own. The point, however, is to write in a tidy, economical way that wipes up the lapses of talk and fills in the gaps of thought, and yet keeps the tone and movement of good conversation, in your own voice.

### **Don't Apologize**

"In my opinion," the beginner will write repeatedly, until he seems to be saying "It is only *my* opinion, after all, so it can't be worth much." He has failed to realize that his whole essay represents his opinion—of what the truth of the matter is. Don't make your essay a personal letter to Diary, or to Mother, or to Teacher, a confidential report of what happened to you last night as you agonized upon a certain question. "*To me*, Robert Frost is a great poet"—this is really writing about yourself. You are only confessing private convictions.