Progress in Writing

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PROGRESS IN WRITING

A Learning Program

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PROGRESS IN WRITING

PREFACE

Typically, composition texts concentrate on grammar and usage—on analyzing sentence structures, on placing periods and commas correctly, on distinguishing between *who* and *whom*. **Progress In Writing** contains nothing whatever about such matters. As one wise teacher has said, we don't write grammar, we write English. Of course it certainly helps writing if, for instance, commas and periods are where they belong. But good writing is not the result of correctness. Rather, it is the result of effective word choice, skillful sentence building, sound paragraph organization, and finally, meaningful and coherent arrangement of all parts. The four sections of this text are directed at these four crucial aspects of writing. When the student has finished, he will know all the major decisions a writer has to make and the ways to make these decisions successfully in his own writing.

Progress in Writing is different from ordinary composition texts in another important way. It is a programmed text, in which each segment, or frame, is part of a learning sequence that begins with the simplest ideas related to a subject and progresses by short steps to the more difficult. Each frame requires a response by the student; as a result, his study must be active. At the side of each frame is the correct response so that the student can check himself at each step and thus guard against uncertainty or error. Another advantage of a text such as this is that the student works independently, proceeding at the rate that best suits his own learning needs.

Now that programmed texts are fairly common, most students know how to use them without instruction. However, to be sure that all students using the text get off to a good start, the teacher should go over with them the brief section "To the Student," which directly precedes Part One, and then help them complete the first three or four frames.

An early version of the present text was tested among several hundred students, and the results of those tests, together with the comments and criticism of those who participated, were invaluable in the modification of the text for publication. I would like to acknowledge my gratitude, therefore, to the following teachers and their students: Raymond O'Dea, Ferris State College, Big Rapids, Michigan, and Marinus Swets, Grand Rapids Junior College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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TO THE STUDENT

Before beginning **Progress in Writing,** glance through the text briefly. Notice that it is divided into short units, each one marked by a small box at the end: □. These units, called "frames," give information and require a response of some kind such as filling in a blank or choosing between alternative words. Directly beside each frame is the correct response.

When you begin the text, cover the response column at the side of the page with a folded piece of paper. Read the frame and complete the response required by filling in the blank or marking the correct choice. Don't guess. If you have read the frame carefully, you will know the correct response. Then check to see that your response is right. If it is, go on to the next frame. If it is not, reread the frame to find out where you went wrong, correct your response, and then go on to the next frame.

Be sure to cover the response column before beginning each frame and to uncover it only after you have completed your response. Your eyes will always tend to wander when you are thinking, even when you try to keep them from doing so, and obviously just copying the correct response is not going to help you learn much. The correct responses are printed beside the frames only to protect you against the possibility of taking a false step in the learning process.

Briefly, then, here are the directions:

Cover the response column.
Read the frame and complete it.
Check your response.
Correct any error before continuing.

This book is designed the way it is for only one purpose—to help you make your writing easier and better. Give it a chance to do so by following the instructions carefully.

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ONE
WORDS

Words are the building blocks of writing. When we speak or write, we try to use the words that suit our purpose best—to explain or describe something, to tell a story, or just to express our feelings. In Part One we will be looking at the various kinds of words there are and the various ways we choose words to make our writing clear and effective.

DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION

Choosing words to fit the exact meaning we have in mind takes some care, as this example shows:

This perfume has a lovely stench.

The word very much out of place in this sentence is _____. ☐

stench

Without referring to a dictionary, we know that *stench* has the basic meaning of smell. But that's only part of its meaning. In addition, it means a smell that is (pleasant, unpleasant). ☐

unpleasant

This perfume has a lovely fragrance.

Now the sentence is right because *fragrance* means a smell that is (pleasant, unpleasant). ☐

pleasant

It's not enough, then, to consider only a word's basic meaning. *Stench* and *fragrance* have the same basic meaning but aren't interchangeable.

She's thrifty.

He's cheap.

Both *thrifty* and *cheap* have the same basic meaning, a tendency to avoid spending, but their total meanings are (the same, different). □

different

The basic meaning of a word is called its "denotation." *Stench* and *fragrance* denote smell. *Thrifty* and *cheap* _____ a tendency to avoid spending. □

denote

The difference between *stench* and *fragrance*, or *thrifty* and *cheap*, is not the denotation but rather the feelings we have about them. *Stench* and *cheap* suggest unpleasant feelings; *fragrance* and *thrifty* suggest (pleasant, unpleasant) feelings. □

pleasant

I am firm.

You are stubborn.

Firm and *stubborn* both denote an unbending quality, but the feelings each word suggests are different. *Firm* suggests something (good, bad), whereas *stubborn* suggests something (good, bad). □

good bad

The feelings a word suggests are part of its meaning. We call this part the "connotation." *Firm* connotes something good; *stubborn* _____ something bad. □

connotes

Meaning, then, has two parts. Denotation is the idea a word carries; connotation is the feelings a word suggests.

She's very slender.

She's very skinny.

Both *slender* and *skinny* denote thin. But *slender* connotes something (good, bad), and *skinny* connotes something (good, bad). □

good bad

This dress is loud.

This dress is colorful.

Both *loud* and *colorful* (denote, connote) bright color, but *loud* (denotes, connotes) something unfavorable. ☐

denote

connotes

When we talk about the idea a word conveys, we use the term (denotation, connotation). ☐

denotation

Connotation, on the other hand, is the part of meaning that has to do with the (idea, feelings) a word suggests. ☐

feelings

Some words are rich in connotation. Think for a minute about all the feelings that the word *home* suggests—love, warmth, comfort, protection, and so forth. Does the word *house* have the same connotation as *home?* _____ ☐

no

House is one of many words in the language that suggest very little, if any, feeling. Other examples are *cement, chair, pencil.* All such words have very little, if any, (denotation, connotation). ☐

connotation

Compare with *chair* and *pencil* such words as *joy* and *pain.* Do these words suggest feelings? Yes, quite a lot. An important part of their meaning, therefore, is what they (denote, connote). ☐

connote

Scientific and technical terms are examples of words that don't suggest feelings. *Carbon, circuit, hexagon, transistor*—these words have little, if any, (denotative, connotative) meaning. ☐

connotative

A very large number of the words we use regularly, however, do have connotations that we need to take into account.

He is an individualist.

He is peculiar.

Both *individualist* and *peculiar* refer to a person whose behavior is different or unusual. But only one word suggests a favorable feeling, _____. ☐

individualist

Individualist and *peculiar,* then, refer to the same idea but suggest different feelings. That is, they have the same (denotation, connotation) but a different (denotation, connotation). ☐

denotation
connotation

My father tends to be (heavyset, fat).

Suppose *father* here refers to a person who weighed more than he should. Both *heavyset* and *fat* have the same denotation, but only one suggests that the condition is unfavorable, *(heavyset, fat).* ☐

fat

Denotation and connotation, the two dimensions of meaning, give the writer a rich variety of choices. He can express not only ideas but also particular feelings about those ideas. Look, for instance, at some of the possibilities in the expression of one idea, that of mental ability:

cunning *brilliant*
intelligent *sharp*

Two of these words suggest something favorable:

_____ and _____. ☐

intelligent brilliant

Sharp and *cunning* denote mental ability, but they connote something unfavorable. We would say *brilliant student,* for instance, but we would not ordinarily say *cunning student.* We might in some special meaning say *brilliant robber,* but we would be more likely to say *(intelligent, cunning) robber.* ☐

cunning

Arrange the following words according to connotation, from least to most unfavorable:

boozer *drinker* *wino*

_____ _____ _____ ☐
least more most unfavorable

drinker boozer wino

A man may call himself a *peddler,* a *salesman,* or a *merchandiser.* All three denote a person who sells something. But one has a very favorable connotation, another a less favorable, and one an unfavorable connotation:

_____ _____ _____ ☐
most less least favorable

merchandiser salesman peddler

To express a particular idea, then, we often have a choice among two or more words, allowing us to express the exact denotation and exact connotation we have in mind.

The American (draft, selective service system) needs revamping, some critics say.

If we wish to convey a more favorable connotation, we will complete this sentence with *(draft, selective service system).* ☐ *selective service system*

Complete the following frames as a brief review:

An important part of a politician's education is learning how to (cooperate, connive).

If we wish to convey a less favorable connotation, we will choose *(cooperate, connive).* ☐ *connive*

As a rule, the American consumer is very (trusting, gullible) when reading or listening to advertising.

The word with the more favorable connotation for this sentence is *(trusting, gullible).* ☐ *trusting*

The candle and fire cast a very (soft, weak) light over the objects in the room.

The word that gives a more appealing impression is *(soft, weak).* ☐ *soft*

Many gourmets prefer (chilled, icy) wine with their suppers.

The more appetizing word is *(chilled, icy).* ☐ *chilled*

The student leaders called upon the president to adopt several (bold, reckless) new policies.

The more frightening word is *(bold, reckless).* ☐ *reckless*

She has a large (beauty mark, mole) on her chin.

The more attractive completion is *(beauty mark, mole).* ☐ *beauty mark*

Robert Nunly turned out to be just the kind of political (leader, figure, rabble-rouser) that some voters had feared.

The most critical word is *(leader, figure, rabble-rouser).* ☐ *rabble-rouser*

ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE WORDS

All writing, no matter what its purpose is, should be so clear that the reader can understand it instantly. Obviously no reader can make clear for himself something that the writer has left unclear. It is the writer's responsibility, then, to see that each of his statements means just what he wants it to mean.

Clarity is the result partly of successful word choice. And one problem in choosing the best word for each purpose is deciding how concrete the word should be.

1. *He parked his transportation in the driveway.*
2. *He parked his car in the driveway.*

Which of these sentences seems clearer? For now, don't worry
2 about why. Sentence_____ ☐

Saying *He parked his transportation in the driveway* might be good for a laugh, but unless we know what *transportation* refers to, we can't really understand the sentence. Yet there's nothing seriously
is wrong with *transportation* here because a car (is, is not) a means of transportation. ☐

Can *transportation* also refer to *motorcycle, truck, sailboat,* or
yes *dogsled?* (yes, no) ☐

We say that *transportation* is more abstract than *car* or *dogsled*
more because it can refer to more things. Similarly, *tool* is (more, less), abstract than *hammer* or *scissors* because it can refer to more things. ☐

We say that the more specific words like *car* and *hammer* are more
abstract concrete. Of the words *fruit* and *apple, fruit* is more (abstract,
concrete concrete), and *apple* is more (abstract, concrete). ☐

Here's a good way to tell how concrete a word is: try to form a mental picture from it. If you can do so fairly easily, the word is concrete. For instance, which of these words allows you to form a mental picture more easily, *animal* or *elephant?*

_____ □

elephant

With the word *elephant,* you can visualize the animal's large size, the trunk, the tusks, the floppy ears, and so forth. With the word *animal,* you can visualize very little, if anything at all. *Elephant,* then, is more (concrete, abstract) than *animal.* □

concrete

The harder it is to form a mental picture from a word, the more abstract that word is. Which is more abstract, *thing* or *button?*

_____ □

thing

Remember the mental picture test. *Chair* and *table* are more (concrete, abstract) than *furniture.* □

concrete

It's difficult to form mental pictures from abstract words because they refer to more things than concrete words do. The word *furniture* includes the ideas of *chair* and *table* as well as many others–*lamp, stool, buffet,* and so forth. Similarly, the abstract word *container* includes the ideas of *jar, bottle,* and *bucket.* Can you name three others? _____ _____ _____ □

Can, bowl, barrel, tank are a few you might have listed.

It's easier to form a mental picture from a concrete word because it refers to fewer things. Which of the following refers to fewer things, *machine* or *typewriter?* _____ □

typewriter

A typewriter we can easily visualize, but there are so many kinds of machines that forming a mental picture from just the word *machine* is almost impossible. *Machine,* then, is much more (concrete, abstract) than *typewriter.* □

abstract

Remember, concrete words are easier to visualize because they refer to fewer things. In each of the following pairs, pick the word that is more concrete:

vegetable *oak* *dictionary*

carrot *tree* *book* ☐

carrot oak dictionary

Abstract words are harder to visualize because they refer to more things. This time, pick the more abstract words in these pairs:

picture *Boeing 747* *wood*

painting *airplane* *material* ☐

picture airplane material

So far we have been looking at words in pairs, one abstract and one concrete. But words are not just abstract or concrete.

material *wood* *pine*

As we have already seen, *wood* is more concrete than *material*, but *pine* is (more, less) concrete than *wood* because it refers to one kind of wood. ☐

more

clothing *sweater* *cardigan*

Reading from left to right, each word here is less (abstract, concrete) than the one before. ☐

abstract

( ) *house* ( ) *building* ( ) *split-level*

Number these three words, from the most abstract (1) to the most concrete (3). ☐

(1) building (2) house (3) split-level

Here's how it works: a house is a kind of building and a split-level is a kind of _____. ☐

house

( ) *iodine* ( ) *thing* ( ) *poison*

Number these three words from most abstract to most concrete. ☐

(1) thing (2) poison (3) iodine

( ) *girl* ( ) *person* ( ) *being* ( ) *Shirley*

Do the same with these four words. ☐

(1) being (2) person (3) girl (4) Shirley