

From the Notebook

TEACHING WITH KEN MACRORIE

Cheryl Stevens

I use Ken Macrorie's Writing to Be Read with my college-bound seniors in Advanced Composition. Macrorie's approach to writing stresses originality and economy of expression, avoids clichéd and hackneyed expression, and, above all, recommends honesty.

Memorable Utterances

I begin discussing the first chapter of the book with a fairly fundamental assignment asking students to submit three examples of original word expression --memorable utterances by children. Reaction to the assignment seldom varies:

"I don't have any brothers or sisters."

"You kidding? I avoid little kids at all costs. They'd make a cup of coffee nervous."

But, they do it, and their examples ring with what Macrorie calls the "authentic voice." It is sincere, simple, and honest--language not yet made dull and empty by twelve years of schooling. High school students need to relax and go back, to rediscover the truly memorable diction of childhood. This assignment helps them to do it.

Another technique to get them to unwind and write freely minus slush and pomposity is free writing. I have them write continuously for five-, ten-, or fifteen-minute spurts on any subject they choose. I tell them that it is practice before the game, that they should write to improve, that there is only one rule: Do not stop to ponder or pause, just write and keep writing. Sometimes I fill the board with words or phrases to give their thoughts direction, to suggest writing ideas.

Journals and Honesty

Chapter 17 in Macrorie's text is a beautiful description of what a journal is and can contain. A journal is a place to

fail or succeed, to try Erma Bombeck humor, to write a serious poem or a mini-short story without fear of failure. My students write in theirs twice a week, outside of class, and turn it in every other Friday. Their journals are never used against them. They are read, comments are made, and an overall reaction suffices for "grades."

By honesty, Macrorie doesn't mean total honesty. For example, if a girl refuses a Friday night date with, "I cannot go out with you," instead of, "You are a total bore," Macrorie would not take exception. His quarrel is on another level.

Journals are also an invaluable aid to encourage improvement of writing. Specifically, I use journals to stress detail, example, all the basics of good writing, and Macrorie honesty. By honesty, Macrorie doesn't mean total honesty. For example, if a girl refuses a Friday night date with, "I cannot go out with you," instead of, "You are a total bore," Macrorie would not take exception. His quarrel is on another level. He labels as dishonest the posing of a question such as this: "Have you ever wondered what it would be like to fall down the basement stairs into your sister's boyfriend's lap?" Dishonest. No one ever did wonder what it would be like.

Mad magazines's Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions, an illustrated paperback, brings home Macrorie's point about honesty in a humorous, memorable fashion. A lady is shown on her hands and knees searching the grass. Around her neck clings a chain and what is left of her pearl necklace. A passerby asks her what she is looking for even though it is perfectly obvious (a dishonest question). Only now there is a snappy answer. She replies, "I'm looking for nothing. I'm grazing."

Another picture shows a couple, shortly after entering a restaurant, being asked: "A table for how many, Sir?"

Since it is obvious there are two of them, Mad feels it deserves a snappy answer. The man responds, "A hundred and two. We like to change chairs a lot." Spend fifteen minutes with that type of back-up. It is visual, humorous, and students love it.

"Murder the Cliche Day"

Several chapters stress tightening, originality, and proof reading. I try to underscore these aims with several activities. One is "Murder the Cliche' Day." Students are asked to share clichés.

They are given a page containing 50 unfinished clichés and are asked to finish the expressions. Most are surprised at how many they know. I explain that if they know them, their classmates know them; therefore, those expressions must be weak, unoriginal, overworked. They are never to use them again, ever!

Another tightening exercise consists of having students choose three teachers they particularly admire and would like to know more about. A day is chosen and several staff members are invited to class to answer questions. I've found these teachers rather enjoy "The Hot Seat." Afterward my students are told to write a brief one-page paper on any three teachers. There is one stipulation: they may not use the word "is." This is not easy. They labor, moan, and glare a lot. But it does get across a point. Good writing requires work--reaching for good description and relying less on "safe," overused diction.

Twisting Words

Macrorie also teases students into twisting clichés. In his chapter on "Playing With Words," he lists clichés and asks students to change, twist, and fracture them into something resembling original expression. I give my students a list of proverbs and they do the same thing. The ingenious ones conclude: A fool and his money are soon partying, Dead chickens don't count, and A penny saved is not worth the trouble. A corol-

lary to this assignment asks students to choose a proverb, fracture it, and write a paper illustrating their newly changed proverb. This fractured proverb is an example of student work.

Once there were two rich farmers who desired to be richer. They both owned large farms and raised prize chickens. Each farmer had his own favorite chicken: one had a prize rooster; the other had a prize hen. The rooster had won many prizes for his size and beauty. The hen also had won many prizes and produced broods of prize-winning biddies.

Now these two farmers were greedy and wanted more money and more prizes from their chickens. So they got together and decided to match the prize rooster with the prize hen and have the most fabulous and valuable chicken ever.

The farmers went to work, building an elaborate carpetted chicken coop in which the hen was to lay her egg on a feather bed. They moved the hen and rooster into their new home and began to rub their greedy hands.

They waited.

From inside the coop came terrific squawking and screaming, pecking and flapping. Out came the hen and rooster fighting like cats and dogs. Quickly the farmers separated the hen and rooster. Not soon enough, however, for the chickens had pecked each other bald. The farmers sadly gathered up their ruined chickens and went home, leaving dreams of wealth behind.

The Moral: Don't count your chickens before they're matched.

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