

WRITING AS LEARNING

Sheridan Baker

The Practical Stylist arose directly from an article I wrote, as a young Instructor of English, against the new "Communication Skills," touted to replace old-hat freshman composition. Communication Skills was to include Speaking, Listening, and Reading, along with writing, not very strongly capitalized. It included a lot of listening to speech in hallways and playgrounds, pasting up bits from newspapers, magazines, and advertisements, watching people communicating through gestures and postures, and responding to movies and each other in darkened theaters. This new playschool almost crowded writing out completely, at best demoting it a clear seventy-five percent, and ignoring it as one of our most essential and powerful means of learning.

The new course took its cue from the new linguistics, whose slogan was "The spoken language is the language." Writing, newly described as a pale and imperfect imitation of speech, moved to the edges of education, and almost completely out the doors. The man whose article I answered in my first step toward The Practical Stylist was Ken Macrorie, then of the English department at Eastern Michigan University. He too eventually wrote a couple of textbooks, still representing his early stand against the square ideas of traditional composition, providing a kind of south pole to my north. A few years ago, and twenty-five years after our initial confrontation in the pages of an academic journal, Ken Macrorie and I finally met, for the first time, on a panel at a conference on composition where we aired our opposite views.

Macrorie believes that composition should be purely autobiographical. Students write best about what they know, he says, and they know themselves best. His students write first-person confessionals and complaints, sounding off as they produce an admirable number of pages--fluent, emotive, and, of course, interesting, like all human turmoil. The agonized "I" dominates throughout:

"I...I...I....," like the kindergartener's "show and tell" promoted to paper.



Lively, yes--but oblivious to the greatest advantage composition has for a student.

Composition is a way of learning. It teaches us how to move from the circumscribed self-center of childhood and adolescence into mature thinking, how to generalize from our attitudes, emotions, hunches, and private ideas into mature and valid thought. It moves us from self to object, from emotional expression to rational thinking. The emotive and expressive is always with us. What an education should develop constantly is our rational and intellectual powers, not so readily operative as to need no encouragement. And composition, reasoning through language, does this better than anything else.

In The Practical Stylist, I urge two points: (1) writing leads to maturity, in the only places we mature significantly, in our attitudes, in our minds; (2) writing discovers our thoughts for us, as we try to produce them, clarify them, grasp them, and state them, on paper.

My point about maturity is this. If you say "I liked that film," you state a personal and historical fact, of no more consequence than "She went over to the

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neighbors'." If you say, "This film is good," you transform the personal report into an evaluation, an intellectual proposition to be illustrated as valid before the whole universe. This is growing up, this shift from believing that ideas are good because you hold them to realizing that they are good because they are good, and can be so demonstrated. Writing confirms this realization as you persuade others that what you believe true is indeed true. Writing reveals that you can trust what you think, not because it is yours--that kindergartener's "I"--but because it has demonstrable validity. So writing is one of our essential means of realizing our maturity. Writing teaches us that our ideas are valid, not merely personal and adolescent whimsies, and it teaches us to think as we attempt to prove those ideas so.

Writing formulates our thoughts. It is our supreme teacher. All of us know that having to write about something is our most effective means of learning about it, grasping it for ourselves as we try to explain it to others. Our schools have sadly neglected this elemental means of learning. Do you want to understand how an internal combustion engine works? Get the basics in mind, and then write out your understanding for someone else, adding details and connections you hadn't even thought were there. You will understand it as never before. Writing is our supreme means of understanding, of discovering our thoughts, of learning, of grasping things in the mind. Reading a book is following a stream of understanding. Writing one is a whole Mississippi. The simplest single page of freshman composition writing demonstrates this process. Writing is discovery of thought. Writing is learning. Writing is maturity. We should use it in all our classrooms for all it is worth.

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Amy J. Devitt, John Grove

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John Warriner's Warriner's English Grammar and Composition Complete Course, used extensively in high school classrooms, is divided into six parts: grammar, usage, sentence structure, composition, mechanics, aids to good English, college entrance and other examinations. The grammar and usage sections cover the familiar topics found in the earlier Warriner's texts such as parts of speech, parts of a sentence, subject-verb agreement, correct form and use of verbs, correct use of pronouns. Devotees of sentence diagramming will find everything from adjective clauses through subordinate clauses in the chapter on parts of speech. The glossary of usage at the end of part two is provided as a reference tool for correcting usage errors.

The greatest portion of the text is devoted to composition, including instruction on paragraphs, precis, factual reports, research papers, and business letters.

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Edward P. J. Corbett (cont. from p. 28) just how much other systems of rhetoric and composition represent variations, extensions, refinements, or modifications of the classical system. I can promise quite confidently that readers will not find much that is wholly new in these other systems. The classical rhetoricians did not say it all once and for all, but what they said they said very well.

Edward Corbett has published extensively in the field of rhetoric and composition. He is presently teaching at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio.