

TOWARD GUARANTEEING SUCCESSFUL WRITING

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One of our most challenging problems as teachers of composition is to identify precisely what is wrong with the bad writing we see. Then, if we succeed at that difficult task, how shall we communicate our analysis to the writer? Experience convinces us that the analytic apparatus we possess is not easily transferred into the possession of our students nor are we often able to apply it profitably to our own writing.

Because I find these dual problems particularly challenging, I will spend much of the time available to me in Workshop '80 attempting to derive and apply an editorial apparatus which, in my experience, describes all the significant acts that teachers or writers perform in their editorial work upon the writing they encounter or produce.

Editing

One example of the kind of work I expect to be doing in our Second Annual Writing Workshop is embodied in the following parallel texts. The original text (T. I) is composed of two sentences taken from a brief report written for administrative peers by an English teacher who is also an administrator. In my view as editor and teacher, the significant question is not whether I can rewrite the two sentences so that they are efficient and graceful. More important, can I define their faults with enough clarity to communicate editorial principles and related practices to their author?

The second text (T. II) is my attempt at editing the original. It is the best I can do now, but I know that it is neither the best nor only possible reworking of these two sentences. It is, however, responsive to problems that I think I can communicate unambiguously to the author in the form of the questions and answers which follow the two texts:

(T. I: 80 words)

I present this information to you in general exposition of the present efforts being undertaken or projected in the area of basic English instruction (composition and language skills assistance/development) under our direction or in association with us. I believe such information may be useful as a base for the determination of what further efforts and possible costs might be practicable in reference to basic English instruction efforts that could be relevant to the student focus of the new proposal.

(T. II: 32 words)

This information summarizes present or projected instruction in writing

that we direct or supervise. It may be useful in determining

costs to this unit of further instruction associated with the new proposal.

Question I: Why does the passage seem so wordy and repetitious to me?

Answer A: In two sentences I find 20 words with more than two syllables. In rewriting, I reduce this plethora to ten because I know that the average number of such words in effective complex or compound English sentences is nearer five than 10 (note the five in this last sentence).

Answer B: The two sentences contain a total of fifteen prepositional phrases in the original text. Their effect upon the rhythm of the sentences is a periodic disaster, for their frequency induces the reader to respond to the rhythm rather than the meaning of the words. In rewriting, I reduce the number from fifteen to five, concentrating especially upon the soporific first sentence where I am able to reduce the number of prepositional phrases from eight to one.

Answer C: Nine words in the original text end with "tion." Since they are not apparently being used by the author for the emphases that can come from interior rhymes or echoes, I have reduced such words from nine to three.

Answer D: Six substantive words are repeated in the two sentences, three of them (information, instruction, English) twice and two of them (efforts, basic/-

base) three times. The sixth, present, is used both as a verb and an adjective in the first sentence. In the edited version, only instruction is repeated.

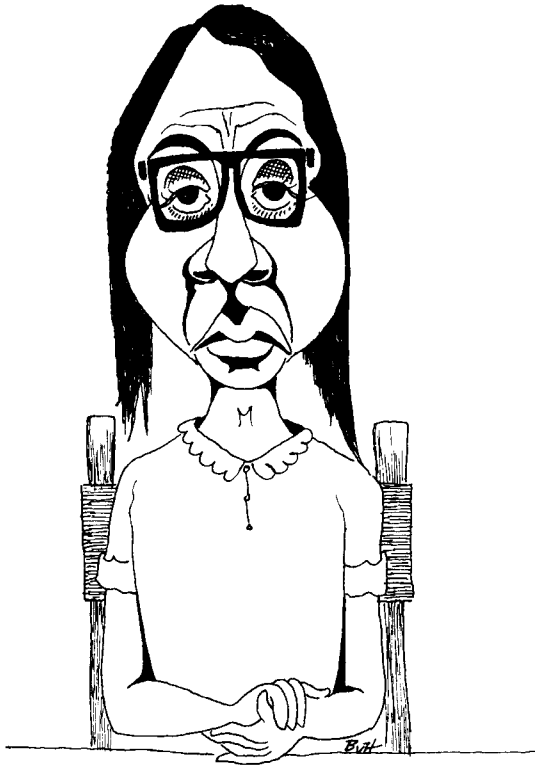
Question II: Why does the passage seem so congested to me in spite of its great length?

Answer A: Adjective-noun phrases, the heaviest syntactical blocks available to builders of sentences, are used twelve times in these two sentences; about 35% of the words in the passage are involved in such phrases. In the edited version I have reduced 12 to 3, involving about 25% of the words in the two sentences.

Answer B: Nouns are repeatedly used as adjectives throughout the passage. In the first sentence, composition and language skills assistance/development is impossibly congested, while the second sentence continues the practice with instruction efforts and student focus. All such usage is eliminated in the edited version.

Assignment Construction

The six different types of explanations encompassed in the answers to Questions I and II have proven useful to me in describing to my students, both in secondary and collegiate composition classes, the flaws in their writing and



*Freshman woman dormitory student essay
writer ponders communication skills
instructor's classroom lecture on
noun-use avoidance strategies in
acute-anxiety stages of
non-peer-group cost-effective
type writing assignment situations*

the remedies available to them. However, I have often been aware that their poor writing has been in part provoked by the poor assignments I have made. Because I am conscious of the near relationship between the quality of assignments and the quality of writing they elicit, I shall also spend some time during Workshop '80 discussing the making of assignments. For example, I believe that ETS writing assignments which ask high school juniors and seniors to write for twenty minutes on such topics as "We have met the enemy and he is us" are travesties of what we know about obtaining representative writing from our students.

Such an assignment fails to make use of itself to promote a sense of familiar

ease and competence in the writer. Furthermore, it fails so completely to identify an audience for the assignment that definition of audience becomes--improperly, in my opinion, considering the occasion and purpose of the assignment--a part of the writer's problem of composition. Both of these failures happen frequently in assignments intended to provoke copious, competent writing, and both are good reasons why bad writing occurs as a result of such assignments.

Peer Grouping

In addition to giving attention to problems of editing and making assignments, I shall attempt to describe and model the employment of peer groups in the teaching of writing. Because the use of such groups can help to resolve problems as various as plagiarism and class size, I will often make them the context for much of my discussion of editing and of creating assignments.

Last year fifteen English teachers from a junior and senior high school in the same district spent forty hours in an ECB-related seminar on the teaching of writing. One of the joint products of the five sets of three teachers who worked together during the seminar was a list of fourteen guidelines for the use of peer grouping in secondary schools. In the opinion of these teachers, "peer grouping is based upon two human needs that are both social and linguistic: the need for an interested audience and the need for peer models." To support "successful peer grouping in their classes," according to the fifteen teachers reporting on their own experience, instructors must realize that "early and repeated success is crucial to the group's progress. Initial assignments should be designed to guarantee that success." During the course of Workshop '80, I shall try to place the processes of editing, assignment making, and peer grouping into a pattern for the teaching of composition that goes some way toward a guarantee of successful writing.