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SOME NEW APPROACHES TOWARD TEACHING¹

Teaching Basic Writing

I

The term “basic writing” implies that there is a place to begin learning to write, a foundation from which the many special forms and styles of writing rise, and that a college student must control certain skills that are common to all writing before he takes on the special demands of a biology or literature or engineering class. I am not certain this is so. Some students learn how to write in strange ways. I recall one student who knew something about hospitals because she had worked as a nurse’s aide. She decided, long before her sentences were under control, to do a paper on female diseases. In some way this led her to the history of medicine and then to Egypt, where she ended up reading about embalming—which became the subject of a long paper she entitled “Post-mortem Care in Ancient Egypt.” The paper may not have satisfied a professor of medical history, but it produced more improvement in the student’s writing than any assignments I could have devised.

Perhaps if students with strong enthusiasms in special fields were allowed to exercise themselves in those fields under the guidance of professors who felt responsible for the writing as well as the reading of students, we could shorten the period of apprenticeship. But clearly this is not the way things are, and students who need extra work in writing are therefore placed in courses called Basic Writing, which are usually taught by English teachers who, as specialists themselves, are inclined to assume that the best way to teach writing is to talk about literature. If such talk will stimulate the student to write, however, then it will serve most students at least as well as mummies, for the answer to improved writing is writing. Everything

else—imaginative writing texts, thoughtfully designed assignments, elaborate rationales for teaching writing this way or that—is merely part of the effort to get writing started and to keep it going.

There are many views on the best way to do this and there is some damning evidence piled up against some of the ways that once seemed right. Since English teachers are often considered both the victims and the perpetrators of these apparently mistaken approaches, it becomes important for them to try once in a while to think away everything except the facts and insights that their experiences with students as writers have given them.

The following pages are my effort to do this.

II

Writing is the act of creative reading. That is, it is the encoding of speech into lines of print or script that are in turn decoded into speech by a reader. To understand the nature of writing, and therefore the way writing can be learned, it is necessary to understand the connections and distinctions between speech, writing, and reading and to identify the skills that are implied in the ability to write.

For most people, speech is easy and writing is difficult; the one is inevitable, the other acquired, generally under conditions that seem to violate rather than use the natural learning abilities of people. Because of this violation, learning to write requires almost as much undoing as doing, whether one is involved with those skills implied in the encoding process itself (handwriting, spelling, and punctuation) or those skills that are carried over from speech to the page (making and ordering statements).

Beyond these two types of skills, there is an additional opportunity in writing that distinguishes it both as a skill and as a product: the opportunity to objectify a statement, to look at it, change it by additions, subtractions, substitutions or inversions, the opportunity to take time for as close and economical a “fit” as possible between the writer’s meaning and the record of that meaning on the page. The typescript of a taped discussion is not, therefore, writing in this sense; it is, rather, a repetition on the page of what was spoken. And the goal in writing is not simply to repeat speech but to overcome certain disadvantages that the medium of sound imposes upon speech. (In speech, time says when you are finished; in writing, you say when you are finished.)

Writing thus produces a distinctive circuitry in which the writer continually feeds back to himself (as writer and reader) and acts upon that feedback at any point and for as long a time as he wishes before his statement is finally put into circulation. This opportunity for objectifying a statement so as to “work” on it is the distinctive opportunity of writing, and the central goal of any writing class is therefore to lead the student to an awareness of his power to make choices (semantic, syntactic, organizational) that bring him closer and closer to his intended meaning. Ideally, this opportunity should free the writer because it increases his options; it should give him pleasure because it sharpens his sense of what to say and thereby his pleasure in saying it; and it should make him feel comfortable with so-called mistakes, which are simply stages in the writing process. Unfortunately, the fact that writing can by its very nature produce a more precise and lasting statement than speech has led teachers to expect (and demand) a narrow kind of perfection which they confuse with the true goal in writing, namely, the “perfect” fit of the writer’s words to his meaning. Teachers, in other words, have not only ignored the distinctive circuitry of writing—which is the only source of fullness and precision—but have often shortcircuited the writing activity by imposing themselves as a feedback. Students, on the other hand, have tended to impose upon themselves (even when bluebook essays do not) the conditions of speech, making writing a kind of one-shot affair aimed at the teacher’s expectations. Students are usually surprised, for example, to see the messy manuscript of pages of famous writers. “You should see how bad a writer Richard Wright was,” one of my students said after seeing a manuscript page from *Native Son*. “He made more mistakes than I do!” Somehow students have to discover that the mess is *writing*; the published book is *written*.

A writing course should help the student learn how to make his own mess, for the mess is the record of a remarkable kind of interplay between the writer as creator and the writer as reader, which serves the writer in much the same way as the ear serves the infant who is teaching himself to speak. No sooner has the writer written down what he thinks he means than he is asking himself whether he understands what he said. A writing course should reinforce and broaden this interplay, not interrupt it, so that the student can use it to generate his own criteria and not depend upon a grade to know whether he has written well. The teacher can help by designing writing situations that exter-

nalize the circuitry principle. The teacher and the class together can help by telling the writer what they think he said, thereby developing an awareness of the possibilities for meaning or confusion when someone else is the reader.

But if the student is so well-equipped to teach himself to write and the teacher is simply an extension of his audience, why does he need a teacher at all? The answer is, of course, that he doesn't absolutely need a teacher to learn to write, that, in fact, remarkably few people have learned to write through teachers, that many alas, have learned to write in spite of teachers. The writing teacher has but one simple advantage to offer: he can save the student time, and time is important to students who are trying to make up for what got lost in high school and grade school.

To help in even this limited way, a teacher must know what skills are implied in the ability to write what is called basic English and he must understand the nature of the difficulties students seem to have with each of them. The following list is a move in that direction.

Handwriting. The student has to have enough skill at writing to take down his own dictations without getting distracted by the muscular coordination writing requires. If a student has done very little writing in high school, which is often the case, he may need to exercise his writing muscles. This is a quantitative matter—the more of anything he copies, the better the coordination. Malcolm X's exercise of copying the dictionary may not be inspiring enough for many students, but if a student keeps copying something, his handwriting will begin to belong to him. Until then, he is likely to have his problems with handwriting mistaken for problems with writing.

Spelling and Punctuation. To write fluently, a student must feel reasonably comfortable about getting the words and punctuation down right, or he must learn to suspend his concern over correctness until he is ready to proofread. If he is a bad speller, chances are he knows it and will become so preoccupied with correctness that he will constantly lose his thought in order to find the right letters, or he will circumlocute in order to avoid words he can't spell. A number of students enter our classes every semester so handicapped by misspelling and generally so ineffectively taught by us that they are almost certain not to get out of basic writing. It is a problem neither we nor the reading teachers have willingly claimed, but it presses for a solution. The computer, which seems to hold great prom-

ise for misspellers, is still a laboratory. The Fidel chart, so successfully used by Dr. Gattegno in teaching children and illiterate adults to read, has not yet been extensively tried in college programs such as ours.²

Students are generally taught to think of punctuation as the scribal translation of oral phrasing and intonation. Some students have, in fact, been taught to put commas where they breathe. As a translation of voice pauses and intonations, however, punctuation is quite crude and almost impossible to learn. Commas can produce as long a pause as a period, and how much time does a semi-colon occupy? Most students solve the problem by working out a private punctuation system or by memorizing a few "rules" that often get them into more trouble than they are worth (like always putting a comma before "and").

In the end, it is more economical for the student to learn to translate punctuation marks into their conventional meaning and to recognize that while there are stylistic choices in punctuating, even these choices are related to a system of signs that signal grammatical (or structural) information more accurately than vocal spacing and intonation. The marks of punctuation can in fact be studied in isolation from words, as signals that prepare a reader for certain types of constructions. Whether these constructions are given their grammatical names is not important, but it is important that a student be able to reconstruct from a passage such as the following the types of constructions he—and other readers—would expect:

_____ . _____ : _____ .
_____, and _____ .
_____, _____, _____ .
_____ : _____, _____, _____ .

Sentence fragments, run-ons, and comma splices are mistranslations of punctuation marks. They can occur only in writing and can be understood once the student understands the structures they signal. This suggests that punctuation marks should not be studied in isolation from the structural units they signal. For example, when the student is experimenting with the ways in which information can be added to a subject without creating a new sentence (adjectival functions), it is a good time to look at the serial comma, the appositional commas, and the comma in the nonrestrictive clause.

Making Sentences. An English-speaking student is already a maker of statements that not only sound like English but sound

like him. Because he has spoken so many more years of sentences than he has written, however, there is a gap between what he can say and what he can write. Sometimes the writing down of sentences is in fact such a labor that he loses his connection with English and produces a tangle of phrases he would never speak. Such a student does not need to learn how to make statements but how to write them at least as well as he speaks them. Other students with foreign-language interferences may have to work on English sentence structure itself, but even here their speech is doubtless ahead of their pens. Learning to write statements, therefore, is at first a matter of getting the ear to "hear" script. Later, when the writer wants to exploit the advantages that writing has over speech, the advantage of polishing and perfecting, he may write things he would not be likely to say, but this happens after his pen has caught up with his voice. Students who have little confidence in their voice, or at least in the teacher's response to that voice, have often gone to a great deal of trouble to superimpose another voice upon their writing—sometimes it represents the student's version of a textbook voice; sometimes it is Biblical; sometimes it is a business letter voice—but almost always it seems to keep the writer from understanding clearly what he wants to say. The following sentence, which seems to be a version of the textbook voice, illustrates the kind of entanglement that can result:

In a broad sense admittance to the SEEK program will serve as a basis of education for me in terms of enlightenment on the tedious time and effort which one must put into all of his endeavors.

A student will usually not abandon this acquired voice until he begins to recognize his own voice and sees that it is safe to prefer it.

There is another skill with sentences which affects the quality of a student's theme as well as his sentences. It involves his ability to "mess" with sentences, to become sensitive to the questions that are embedded in sentences which, when answered, can produce modifications within the sentence or can expand into paragraphs or entire essays. It involves his awareness of the choices he has in casting sentences, of styles in sentences. As Francis Christensen has illustrated in *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*,³ the sentence is the microcosm. Whatever the writer does in the sentence when he modifies is in principle what he does in paragraphs and essays. The principle of coordination and subordination can be learned there. The foun-

dation of a paragraph, a chapter, a book is there. It is tempting to say that a student who knows his way around the sentence can get any place in writing. And knowing his way means working on his own sentences, not so much to polish them as to see how much of his meaning they can hold.

But for many students, putting sentences on a page seems a little like carving something on stone: an error cannot be ignored or skimmed over as it can be in speech. It is there forever. "Everything has to be exactly right," explained one of my students, "and that makes me nervous." The page disconnects the student from his product, which will appear alone, before strange eyes, or worse, before the eyes of an English teacher who is a specialist at finding mistakes. To make matters worse, most students feel highly mistake-prone about sentences. They half remember prohibitions about beginning with certain words, but they aren't certain of which words or why (probably the result of lessons on sentence fragments). In short, they feel they are about to commit a verbal sin but they aren't certain what sin is. In such a situation, it seems safer to keep still. It is not unusual to have students at the beginning of the semester who sit through several class periods without writing a word, and when they explain that they don't know how to begin, they are not saying they don't have an idea. They are saying they are not certain which are the "safe" words to begin with.

Students who become observers of sentences and experimenters with sentences lose their fear of them. This experimentation can take many forms. Sentences can be examined as if they were separate compositions. A sentence such as the following by Richard Wright can be written on the board without reference to its context:

Those brave ones who struggle against death are the ones who bring new life into the world, even though they die to do so, even though our hearts are broken when they die.

Students can talk about the way the sentence is built; they can try to imitate it or change it; or they can try to build a paragraph by expanding some part of it.

There is a kind of carpentry in sentence making, various ways of joining or hooking up modifying units to the base sentence. Suffixes added to make adjectives or adverbs, prepositions, -wh words like where, when, who, which, etc., the double commas used in appositional constructions—all of these can be seen as hooking devices that preserve us from the te-

dium of Dick-and-Jane sentences. As a form of sentence-play, students can try to write 50- or 100-word sentences that contain only one independent clause. Once discovering they can do it, they usually lose their inhibitions about "real" sentences. Some even move from carpentry to architecture. This sentence was written by a student who was asked in an exam to add information to the predicate of the sentence: "The problem will be solved."

The problem will be solved with the help of the Almighty, who, except for an occasional thunderstorm, reigns unmolested, high in the heavens above, when all of us, regardless of race or religious differences, can come together and study this severe problem inside out, all day and all night if necessary, and are able to come to you on that great gettin' up morning and say, "Mrs. Shaughnessy, we do know our verbs and adverbs.

Ordering Sentences. Order is an arrangement of units that enables us to see them as parts of something larger. The sense of orientation that results from this arrangement creates a pleasure we call understanding. Perhaps because writing isolates a reader from everything except the page, whereas speech is supported by other gestures and by the right of the audience to query and disagree, we seem to be more tolerant of "disorder" (no clear pattern) in speech than in writing. The talker is not, therefore, committed to knowing where he is going in quite the way that a writer is although he often gets someplace in a way that turns out to have order to it. The writer, however, puts himself on the line, announcing where he is going to go before he sees how he is going to get there. He has to move in two directions at the same time—ahead, point by point toward a destination he has announced but never been to, and down, below the surface of his points to see what they are about. Sometimes, having decided on or having been given an over-all arrangement (or plan) that seems a sensible route to where he is going, the writer hesitates to leave the security of this plan to explore the parts of his paper. Result: a tight, well-ordered but empty paper. At other times, the writer stops to explore one point and never gets back because he cannot get control over the generating force of sentences, which will create branches off branches off branches unless the writer cuts them off. Result: a wilderness.

The skill of organizing seems to require a kind of balance between the demand that a piece of writing get someplace along

a route that is sufficiently marked for a reader to follow and the demand that there be freedom for the writer to explore his subject and follow where his questions and inventions take him. The achievement of this balance produces much of the "mess" in writing. Often, however, teachers stress the "administrative" aspects of writing (direction and procedure) over the generative or even assume that the generative is not a part of the organizing skill. This assumption in turn seems to lead to the formulation of organizational patterns in isolation from content (pyramids, upside-down pyramids, etc.) and the efforts to get students to squeeze their theme materials into these patterns. I do not mean to say that restrictions or limits in writing are necessarily inhibiting. They can be both stimulating and liberating, as the sonnet illustrates. But the restrictions I speak of here merely hint at forms they are unable to generate, leaving the reader with the feeling that there is a blank to be filled in but with no sense of how to do it.

Because of this isolation of form from content, students have come to think of organization as something special that happens in themes but not in themselves, daily, as they think or talk. They do not notice that they usually "talk" a better-organized paper than they write, that they use illustrations, anticipate questions, repeat thematic points more effectively in conversation than in writing, whereas the conscious effort to organize a theme often cuts them off from the real content of the theme, giving them all the organizational signposts but no place to go. In talking, they are evolving order; in writing, they often feel they must impose it.

This is not to say that developing a paper is as easy as talking but simply that the difficulty lies not in fitting an amount of raw content into a pre-fabricated frame but in evoking and controlling the generating power of statement. Every sentence bears within it a new set of possibilities. Sometimes the writer chooses to develop these possibilities; sometimes he prefers to let them lie. Sometimes he decides to develop them fully; at other times, only slightly. Thus each step in the development of a base or thesis statement must inevitably send the writer into a wilderness of possibilities, into a fecundity as dense and multiform as thought itself. One cannot be said to have had an idea until he has made his way through this maze. Order is the pattern of his choices, the path he makes going through.

The initial blocking out of a paper, the plan for it, is a kind of hypothesis which allows the writer to proceed with his

investigation. Any technique of organization, however, that ignores the wilderness, that limits the freedom of the writer to see and make choices at every step, to move ahead at times without knowing for certain which is north and south, then to drop back again and pick up the old path, and finally to get where he is going, partly by conscious effort but also by some faculty of intellection that is too complex to understand—any technique that sacrifices this fullest possible play of the mind for the security of an outline or some other prefabricated frame cuts the student off from his most productive thinking. He must be allowed something of a frontier mentality, an over-all commitment, perhaps, to get to California, but a readiness, all along the way, to choose alternative routes and even to sojourn at unexpected places when that seems wise or important, sometimes, even, to decide that California isn't what the writer really had in mind.

The main reason for failure in the writing proficiency test at City College, a test given to all upper classmen, has not been grammar or mechanics but the inability to get below the surface of a topic, to treat a topic in depth. The same problem arises in blue-book essays. It is the familiar complaint of students: "I can't think of anything more to say." They are telling us that they do not have access to their thoughts when they write. A part of this difficulty may be related to the way they have learned to write. And a part of the answers may lie in our designing assignments that make the student conscious of what the exploration of an idea is and how this exploration relates to organization.

Grammatical Correctness. Correctness involves those areas of a dialect where there are no choices. (The "s" on the present tense 3rd person singular is correct in standard English; the use of a plural verb with the subject "none" is a choice; the comparison "more handsome" is a choice but "more intelligenter" is incorrect.) Native speakers of a dialect are not concerned with correctness; they unconsciously say things the correct way. Non-native speakers of a dialect must consciously acquire the "givens" if they want to communicate without static in that dialect. This is a linguistic fact that seems at the outset to put speakers of a non-standard dialect at a disadvantage. But it is a strange logic that says having access to one dialect is better than having access to two, particularly when we know that every dialect or language system sets limits on the ways we can perceive and talk about the world.

Unfortunately, this is not the way speakers of other dialects have been encouraged to think about their dialects, with the result that writing classes and writing teachers seem to put them at a disadvantage, creating either an obsessive concern with correctness or a fatalistic indifference to it. The only thing that can help the student overcome such feelings is to help him gain control over the dialect. It is irresponsible to tell him that correctness is not important; it is difficult to persuade him after years of indoctrination to the contrary that "correctness" plays a subordinate role in good writing; but it is not impossible to give him the information and practice he needs to manage his own proofreading.

The information will inevitably be grammatical, whether the terminology of grammar is used or not. But it is more important to remember that the student who is not at home with standard English has most likely had several doses of grammar already and it hasn't worked. For reasons that he himself doesn't quite understand, the explanations about things like the third-person "s" or the agreement of subject and verb haven't taken. He is not deliberately trying to make mistakes but for some reason they keep happening. What he often does not realize, and what the teacher has to realize is that his difficulties arise from his *mastery* of one language or dialect, and that changing to another often involves at certain points a loss or conflict of meaning and therefore difficulty in learning, not because he is stubborn or dumb or verbally impoverished but because he expects language to make sense. (The student, for example, who finally told me he *couldn't* use "are" to mean something in the present because it was too stiff and formal and therefore faraway, and the Chinese student who could not make a plural out of sunrise because there is only one sun, were both trying to hold on to meaning, as Will James, the cowboy author, was when, he continued to use "seen" for the past tense because it meant seeing farther than "saw.")

These are obviously grammatical matters, but this does not mean they require the traditional study of grammar. The question of what they do require is widely debated. Certainly it should be apparent that teachers working with students who have black dialect or Spanish or Chinese or some other language background should be familiar with the features of those languages that are influencing their students' work in Standard English. This should be part of the general equipment of us all as teachers. And the new insights that come from the linguists

should also be ours. But none of this information will be of much use if we simply make pronouncements about it in class. Students cannot be expected to get more help from memorizing two grammatical systems instead of one, and the diagrams in transformational grammar are still diagrams. The acquisition of new information will not automatically make us better teachers. To make this happen, we need to develop a sharp sense of the difference between talking and teaching. We need to design lessons that highlight the grammatical characteristics of a dialect so that the student can discover them for himself. (It is one thing to tell a student about the "s" in the third-person present singular; it is another for him to discover the power of that schizophrenic letter which clings so irrationally to its last verb to mark its singularity while it attaches itself to nouns to mark their plurality, and then, confusing things further, acquires an apostrophe and marks the singular possessive.) We need to devise ways of practicing that the student enjoys because he is able to invent rather than memorize answers. We need, finally, to teach proofreading as a separate skill that uses the eye in a different way from reading and places the burden of correctness where it belongs--at the end of (rather than during) the writing process. To do things for the student that he can do himself is not generosity but impatience. It is hard work for a teacher not to talk, but we must now be very industrious if we want our students to learn what we have to teach.

III

I have been speaking about the skills that seem basic to writing, but basic writing courses that prepare students for college writing are actually concerned with a rather special kind of prose called exposition, a semi-formal analytical prose in which the connections between sentences and paragraphs surface in the form of conjunctive adverbs and transitional sentences. More simply, it means the kind of writing teachers got B's and A's for in college, a style whose characteristics they have now internalized and called a standard.

Teachers of basic writing are thus responsible for helping their students learn to write in an expository style. They must also give them practice in writing to specification (i.e., on a special topic or question and in a certain form) since many assignments require it. The question of how to reach such objectives and at the same time give each student a chance to discover other things about writing and about his individual

powers as a writer troubles many teachers and creates many different “positions.” Where, for example, on the following list, ranging from highly controlled to free assignments, is it best to begin a course in basic writing:

1. paraphrase
2. summary
3. exegesis of a passage
4. theme in which topic sentence and organizational pattern are given
5. theme in which topic sentence is given (includes the examination question which is usually an inverted topic sentence)
6. theme in which subject is given
7. theme in which form is given—description, dialogue, argument, etc.
8. theme in which only the physical conditions for writing are given—journal, free writing, etc.

Teachers take sides on such a question, some insisting that freedom in anything, including writing, cannot exist until there is control and that this comes through the step by step mastery of highly structured assignments; others insist that students must begin not with controls but with materials—the things they have already seen or felt or imagined—and evolve their own controls as they try to translate experience into writing. Meanwhile students confuse the issue by learning to write and not learning to write under almost all approaches. I prefer to start around #7, with description. But then, I have to remember the student who started a research paper on mummies before she could manage her sentences. “Positions” on curriculae and methods are somehow always too neat to say much about learning, which seems to be sloppy. They tend to be generalizations about students, not about the nature of the skills that have to be mastered, and the only generalization that seems safe to make about students is the ones they persistently make about themselves—that they are individuals, not types, and that the way to each student’s development is a way the teacher has never taken before. Everything about the teacher-student encounter should encourage a respect for this fact of individuality even though the conditions under which we must teach in large institutions often obscure it. Books do have to be ordered and teachers do have to make plans. But perhaps the plans need not be so well-laid that they cannot go awry when the signals point

that way. A teacher must know deeply what it is he is teaching—what is arbitrary or given and what is built upon skills the student already possesses. This is his preparation. But he cannot know about his student until both meet in the classroom. Then teaching becomes what one student described as “simply two people learning from each other.”

In the confusion of information on methods and curriculae that comes to us from publishers—and from each other—it is probably important to emphasize this single truth.

Notes

¹Reprinted by permission from *A Guide for Teachers of College English*. New York: Office of Academic Development, CUNY, 1970.

²Caleb Gattegno, *Teaching Reading with Words in Color*, Educational Solutions, Inc., New York, 1968.

³Francis Christensen, *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*, New York, Harper & Row, 1967.