

# COMMONPLACE BOOKS AND THE TEACHING OF STYLE

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In the past, I, like many other novice and veteran composition teachers, was frustrated by my students' attitudes toward journal-keeping assignments. Few of my students made regular entries in their journals or used them to develop a personal writing style in any way. They generally viewed journal keeping as a busy-work task rather than as a method for informing their own writing. I now realize that the problem was not with the students, but with my assignments. In the past, I did not adequately explain the rationale for journal keeping, nor did I fully integrate the journal into the curriculum of the class. In lieu of abandoning the journal requirement for my writing classes, I now provide students with an historical precedent for keeping a commonplace book, give meaningful commonplace-book assignments, and show students how to "harvest" unique essays from the material stored in their commonplace books.

My students keep a commonplace book to learn stylistic options, heuristic strategies, and ways to match their prose style with the needs of their readers. The commonplace book, a term reflective of Aristotle's ancient suggestion that one go to a list of common *topoi* or "places" to find information to strengthen persuasive discourse, encompasses the modern dialogic and academic journal in part—but adds something more. In classical rhetoric, the word *argument* is defined broadly as proof of a position, development of a point, or support for an opinion. Aristotle included twenty-eight topics in his list of *places* in the mind where an orator can go to find support for an argument.

Ancient rhetoricians believed these places to be intrinsic to the human thinking and language-making processes. According to Sharon Crowley,

The word “place” was originally meant quite literally. Lists of topics were first written on papyrus, and students who were looking for a specific topic unrolled the papyrus until they came to the place on the roll where that topic was listed. Later, this graphic meaning of “place” was applied conceptually, to mean an intellectual source or region harboring proof that could be inserted into any discourse where appropriate. (49)

The commonplace book—in its classical sense—is quite distinctive from the journal in terms of *places* in the mind, heuristic strategies, and the development and/or study of style. In the sixteenth century, and in most of the seventeenth, pupils were required to keep a blank notebook, called a “commonplace” book, which was divided into headed sections for the purpose of recording short passages from books studied in class or read at home. The headings covered a wide range of topics, though most often the topics had some sort of moral importance. These headings were the *places* where collected passages sharing a *common* theme were organized for use in students’ writing. The arrangement of the headings, or places, varied considerably. Most often they came in alphabetical order, but at other times in a complicated scheme of related subjects and subdivisions of subjects or in patterns of similars and opposites. Ultimately, the arrangement was left to the author or collector. This advice for arranging commonplace books given by Erasmus was typical:

Prepare for yourself a sufficient number of headings and arrange them as you please, subdivide them into the appropriate sections, and under each section add your commonplace and maxims; and then whatever you come across in any author, particularly if it is rather striking, you will be able to note down immediately in the proper place, be it an anecdote or a fable or an illustrative

example or a strange incident or a maxim or a witty remark or a remark notable for some other quality or a proverb or a metaphor or a simile. This has the double advantage of fixing what you have read more firmly in your mind, and getting you into the habit of using the riches supplied by your reading. (*De Copia* 638)

Regardless of the arrangement, the purpose of keeping a commonplace book was still the same: pupils were to draw on the matter stored in the books to produce and strengthen their own compositions.

Commonplace books of this time were linguistic storehouses. They included quotations, examples, parallels, synonyms, epithets, aphorisms, and various tropes and figures to be inserted into one's own work in order to vary it and make it—in the words of Erasmus—"a magnificent and impressive thing, surging along like a golden river, with thoughts and words pouring out in rich abundance" (*De Copia* 295). Erasmus encouraged students who wished to become educated to begin by making a "full list of subjects" on which they might read or write (*De Copia* 636). He suggested that their lists "consist partly of the main types and subdivisions of vice and virtue, partly of the things of most prominence in human affairs which frequently occur when we have a case to put forward" (636).

The concept of the commonplace book was not relegated solely to the classroom. Not only did the educated person keep one for private use, but there were countless printed versions to aid memory and, most importantly for this study, to improve one's writing. Commonplace books make concrete the assumption that readers are potential writers. Unfortunately, the commonplace book lost favor as a pedagogical tool for improving one's writing with the coming of seventeenth-century rationalist philosophy. Taste and style fell by the wayside in light of Descartes's assertion that the closest parallel of the codification of the "law of nature" could be found in mathematics. However, many great writers adopted the Renaissance practice of keeping a commonplace book, including W. H. Auden, Thomas Jefferson, Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy, Wallace Stevens, Henry David Thoreau,

George Gissing, and E. M. Forster. I share these professional writers' commonplace books with my students to show them that keeping a commonplace book is not a busy work task (an attitude often associated with journal keeping), but rather a time-honored writing tool used both as an heuristic device and as a means for developing a sense of personal style—most often acquired by studying the works of others.

Forster, for instance, recorded in his commonplace book his responses to both literature and “to life, ranging from the dry notation of absurdities overheard in conversations or read in newspaper to passages indicating [his] sense of alienation in a twentieth-century landscape increasingly mechanized” (*xvi*). He made full use of the large pages of his commonplace book by underscoring or accentuating important sentences, quoting poems side by side, making comments in the margins, using diagonal lines to link related passages, enlarging and bolding words for emphasis, using different colors of ink to code his entries, isolating poignant passages from the rest of his text, and illustrating key passages. Forster's book illustrates ways students can use commonplace books to examine their own opinions and to glean paper topics from their random entries.

Oscar Wilde's biographers describe his commonplace book as a place where he preserved “significant passages, important and shaping ideas, which he would later consult and review as he prepared to write” (4). Many of Wilde's published works contain passages that directly correspond to his commonplace book entries concerning theoretical questions of science, history, philosophy, and art—subjects which characterize his writing. For example, in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” (1889) Wilde's narrator refers to a Greek phrase from the writer's Oxford days which appears as one of the “two Greek ideals” in Wilde's commonplace book (4).

George Gissing's commonplace book is perhaps the most all-encompassing of the extant examples. His entries include summaries of readings, quotations, excerpts from book reviews, possible titles for his own stories, comments on the behavior of his first born son, a glossary of unusual words with definitions, a listing of his favorite books, transcriptions of snatches of

conversations he overheard on the street, criticism of his society, and his opinions of women. Like Gissing's work, our modern students' commonplace books should be a combination reader's notebook, writer's notebook, linguistic journal, and scrapbook. Ultimately, all commonplace books should serve the same primary purpose: to provide a wealth of information to both substantiate and improve communication.

With the twentieth-century revival of classical rhetoric in the writing classroom, composition texts that reintroduce the pedagogical practice of keeping a commonplace book to strengthen personal writing are now available. Although teachers and students are more familiar with the term *journal* than *commonplace book*, a few texts committed to principles of classical rhetoric are reclaiming the concepts and terminology associated with the ancient commonplace book. Unlike contemporary advice on journal keeping by well-known scholars such as Chris Anson, Toby Fulwiler, and Nancie Atwell, writing texts advocating the use of commonplace books rarely include expressive writing assignments typically associated with modern journal keeping. Rather, these texts are based on the five canons of classical rhetoric—*invention*, *arrangement*, *style*, *memory*, and *delivery*—and the commonplace book suggestions (all based on this canon) encourage students to become aware of the rhetorical principles of language use and the stylistic options available to them. At every opportunity, the commonplace book suggestions make concrete the Greek terms most commonly associated with persuasive classical rhetoric—*logos* (appeal to reason), *pathos* (appeal to emotion), and *ethos* (credibility exhibited by speaker or writer). These commonplace book assignments also help students understand how to put into practice Aristotle's advice for adapting the written message to the needs of the audience.

For example, Win Horner's freshman writing text, *Rhetoric in the Classical Tradition* (1988), offers these commonplace book suggestions based on principles of classical rhetoric, which she introduces to students:

- Ask several friends what they mean by *rhetoric* and record their answers. (22)
- Keep a list of mnemonic devices. (22)

- Notice when you hear particularly effective phrases or words and record them in your commonplace books. (22)
- Record in your commonplace books the use of logical and rhetorical proofs you encounter in your conversations with friends, family, and classmates. Analyze their validity, truth, and persuasiveness. (173)
- Copy and label examples from your reading of as many of the figures of speech identified in the chapter as you can. (335)
- Keep a list of figures of speech you hear in conversations or song lyrics. (335)

These assignments encourage students to discover for themselves how their commonplace books may prove useful, and also provide students with an opportunity to review informally many of the principles endorsed in each chapter of the text. However, the teacher should warn students against becoming restricted by these prompts and remind students to use them only as points of departure for their collecting. The commonplace book should become a record of each student's individual experiences, thoughts, ideas, and reactions to language—not a place to file rote homework exercises or to engage in purely expressive writing.

In a more recent classical rhetoric text designed for use in freshman writing classes, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (1994), Sharon Crowley offers the following commonplace book prompts:

- What positions do you take on issues that are currently contested in your communities? (47)
- Find a half-dozen short pieces of professional writing from a variety of sources. How does the author of each piece establish an ethos? (115)
- Examine a few speeches and essays produced by professional rhetors. Can you find examples of insinuations, narratives, partitions, perorations? Examine enough pieces of discourse to determine

whether modern rhetors feel it necessary to use any or all of these parts of discourse. (185)

- Try your hand at composing sentences that contain figures and tropes. Find a passage of your own writing and examine it to see whether you unconsciously used any of the figures or tropes discussed in this chapter. (219)
- Revise a passage you have written in the plain style so that it is appropriate for a more formal rhetorical situation. (219)
- When you find figures or tropes that you admire, write them down in your commonplace book. (219)

Crowley's suggestions, like Horner's, correspond to the content of the chapters within her text. But more importantly, embedded within these writing suggestions—based largely on classical rhetoric—are specific exercises for improving contemporary students' acquisition of style in many ways, including the recognition and emulation of a public style, revising in order to learn stylistic options, studying literary models as a way to develop personal style, and analyzing recurring patterns in their own writing.

James Golden and Edward P. J. Corbett succinctly describe the role of style in the classical canon:

[Style] was concerned with the actual expression or verbalization of the arguments that had been discovered and judiciously selected and organized. Here students were instructed in the choice of apt, precise, decorous diction, in the disposition of words into perspicuous, graceful, arresting, rhythmical patterns, and in the uses of figures of speech. (4)

In every age, a few well-known rhetoricians have devoted their attention exclusively to style, divorced, for the most part, from the other canons of rhetoric: Gorgias, Demetrius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and Longinus; the eighteenth-century English elocutionists; and, in our day, Joseph Williams, Strunk and White, and Winston Weathers. Unlike traditional journals or the exercises typically found in texts committed to teaching

style only, commonplace books provide teachers and students a way to teach and study style integrated with the study of other equally important components of rhetoric. Consider this commonplace book assignment: students (along with their teacher) first study selected entries from the extensive list of tropes and figures found in Richard Lanham's *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*. Then, in their commonplace books, students identify and imitate tropes and figures from published authors. Finally, they analyze why, and under what rhetorical circumstances, these elements act as persuasive stylistic devices.

Joseph Williams tells teachers that

exercises in imitation are directed specifically toward developing a mature style . . . [S]tudents don't have to imitate the model sentences word for word; they have only to imitate the stylistic point being discussed. If they have problems thinking up things to write about, suggest some topics parallel to the subject matter of the model sentences.  
(iv)

Although I agree with Williams, in the commonplace book students can take imitation one step further by analyzing the ethos of the author, and the logic and pathetic appeal found in his or her choice of words. With repeated practice in their commonplace books, reinforced by classroom discussion, students become surprisingly effective critics of style and the motives behind stylistic choices. More importantly, students learn how to incorporate their new knowledge of style into their own writing; students not only engage in imitation, but also in analysis of rhetorical elements accompanying any writing situation—including their own.

Although the primary aims of classical rhetoric were to defend and persuade in the context of the forum and the law courts, "all rhetoric, ancient and modern, is potentially empowering, giving power to find a voice, power to put ideas into words for an audience, power to gain willing belief and acceptance, and therefore, power to affect, and perhaps even change the world" (Horner 18). Modern students can gain

confidence in their writing ability by experimenting with style and in their power to persuade others as they examine how their word choices and phrasing should, at every turn, take into account the reader. Yet, often this concept of examination is foreign to our students because they are ingrained with timed, product-centered writing. They find close examination of an essay's arrangement and style, and analysis of the development of an author's ethos to be new and sometimes awkward tasks. By keeping a commonplace book, these beginning writers develop an understanding of the concept of style and an appreciation of the writing process that is not confined to the limits of an academic quarter or semester. These students begin to think as writers; they see how vital the practice of observation and collection is to producing a final written product.

In his commonplace book, Charles P. Curtis, Vice-President of the United States from 1929-1933, describes the process of writing as "lighting a candle of understanding. Not a flash," he explains, "not a searchlight, nor a floodlight . . . . A warm light, lending grace and beauty to what it is making visible, and giving presence to what it leaves obscure." He asks, "What has our language done to the meaning of this word 'understanding'? Why have we confined its meaning to the completion of a process, and left ourselves with no word for the process itself?" Curtis believes that we are actually "understanding something when we are on our way toward comprehending it." These observations on the process of understanding aptly apply to the act of collecting for composing. By keeping a commonplace book, students become closer readers, critical thinkers about the nature of ideas and language, and adept manipulators of words and stylistic options. Their writing becomes illuminated by a "candle of understanding."

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