

SMELL THE ROSES OR SMELL THE COFFEE: REFLECTIVE WRITING ON EXPRESSIVE WRITING, EXPOSITORY WRITING, AND THIS THING WE CALL MECHANICS

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I do not understand how any system of interconnected structures works as well as I understand how language works. I know people who can look at the pieces of something and quickly figure out how the pieces fit together; I cannot. I never read instructions because they only irritate me. Schematic diagrams are beyond my ken, and exploded diagrams are even worse.

Give me a sentence, though, and I can break it down with relative efficiency and put it back together again, too. I under-

stand how pieces of English fit together, and I understand the explanations of their interrelationships in most handbooks. Though I would not presume to call myself a grammarian, I can do grammar pretty well.

What this means is that, though I can't connect a VCR to a television, I can connect a participial phrase to an independent clause. I would think long and hard before attempting to jump-charge the battery in my car, but I fearlessly revise sentences for parallelism. With an hour's opportunity to brush up on the terms, I can even label most parts of speech and most parts of sentences accurately. While schematic and exploded diagrams of mechanisms make my head swim, traditional and tree and even Chinese sentence diagrams strike me as ingenious and enlightening representations of language.

None of this mechanical aptitude, however, makes me a writer. I could write before I could see and talk about linguistic structures. Though I believe that my awareness of structures may make me a more *efficient* writer, it has not enabled me to write. This awareness of structures, in fact, may have taken something away from me as a writer. Architects never just see buildings; they see structures and tensions and materials. I would wager that it takes an architect at least a moment longer than a layman to be surprised and delighted by a beautiful building. Once we see the structures, they become the first things we see; we deconstruct so automatically that the whole is held back from our consciousness for a time.

So I am not sure that I am as surprised and delighted by any text as I used to be before I understood language structures; I *am* sure that I am quicker to be annoyed or even disgusted by text than I once was. This quickness has not improved my relationship with texts overall. I want too much to fight with them, to sort them out and slap them into shape. Most of my own language, as I produce it, seems too loose and sentimental and soft-edged. I look for hard clean lines and find none; I am discouraged and slowed down by the weight of my own judgments.

In a presentation at CCCC in Atlanta in 1987, Janet Emig said that when she sat down to write, she believed that she would produce text, and that this belief was one of the things that enabled her to write successfully. We have advised students

who lack faith in their ability to communicate their thoughts to suspend their judgement of text while they are composing. "Reserve your editor's view," we say, "until you have your thoughts down on paper." Is misplaced editorial rigor a problem for our students, or a lack of Emig-like faith? Why is it that so many student writers do not write well? Because they are not good language architects? Because they do not believe hard enough, or often enough, or in the right places?

Post-Shaughnessey, none of us has any reason to believe less than what common sense should tell us: no one makes errors on purpose. Errors are created in the belief that they are *not* errors. Grammatical error does not emerge from character flaws or cultural preconceptions but from misconceptions, or perhaps alternative hypotheses, about the structure of language.

A paradox: when working a computer lesson connected with a popular basic writing textbook, I was told by the software that I was deficient and needed to take a basic writing course in order to learn and reinforce some fundamental concepts. Though I'm always willing to review fundamental concepts, I daresay that I *know* how to write a sentence. I *am* a competent writer. Is the curriculum represented by the software and its accompanying textbook sending me a mixed message? Is the software suffering from alternate hypotheses about writing competency, or perhaps *mistaken* hypotheses about people like me?

I conduct my professional life on the belief that writing is a complex and interesting and immeasurably worthwhile human activity. It is possible to do it well, and it is possible to do it badly. It is my understanding that in a dance performance or a musical performance or in the execution of a sculpture or a painting, it is possible to be technically perfect but uninteresting; nothing bubbles up from the unconscious in these instances. The performance is cold, soul-less, dead. It is also possible for there to be plenty of bubbling but an off-putting lack of technique. To perform well, both the creator and the technician must be in operation. In fact, the creator must be a technician and the technician must be a creator.

All of this is true for writing. We look at student writing and we try to get the bubblers going by freeing students from mechanical and other technical constraints. We ask students to free write. We ask them to write what they feel. We assign

them to smell the roses and to write about the odors, the colors, and the attendant sensations of the experience. We encourage them to dip into the deep well of the unconscious and to let their writing explain what they did not know that they knew. Some of us exercise a kind of divine legislative right (which I don't believe anyone possesses) to suspend certain rules of language for the benefit of our students' invention. Some others of us, operating under mistaken hypotheses, create rules that do not exist and feed them to our students like Lucy Van Pelts glibly misinforming hapless Linuses. We advocate expressive writing for students so that they can be in a place in writing where they can be engaged and produce engaging, readable texts. We explain the efficacies of expressive writing in *expository* articles and books; however, eventually some among us draw themselves up and huffily pronounce expository writing to be the privileged form. We try to empower by imparting privileged language and privileged forms; we try to liberate by suspending privilege and permitting autonomy.

In all of these actions we are hoist by our own petard. When we "empower" we reinforce the notion that there *is* special power and that we are the ones who *have* it to give out, a notion that I think breaks down quickly in an examination of the power English teachers have to influence communication in the world at large or even within their own academic institutions. When we liberate we suspend rules over which we have no control. Of *course* writing is autonomous. We don't *make* it that way by pronouncing it to be so—to say that we do is in itself contradictory.

As teachers we parcel out concerns lesson by lesson, across the weeks of the semester and the semesters of the years that students spend in school. Some of this parcelling occurs within the context of sophisticated research on the cognitive stages of learning, but much of it occurs by our own intuitive division of writing into steps, stages, modes, aspects, forms, and so forth. There is nothing inherently wrong with such parcelling; no one can say everything there is to say about anything without breaking it apart in some fashion. The error is in mistaking the parcels for the wholes; the error is in embracing some parcels and rejecting others; the error is in stopping before the big picture is in evidence.

Some people refuse to teach grammar and turn their heads painfully away when the five-paragraph essay is mentioned (and I am among them). I laughed scornfully at an article in the *Chronicle* in which a discontented literature professor, confined against his will in a composition classroom, described himself pulling out his lecture notes on the comma splice. The fact is, however, that though there is no one way to teach writing, there are many paths to text. Every writing task is at one time an exercise in grammar and syntax and style and rhetoric. Every time we put words on paper we create structures, and all these structures are important. If a lesson on grammar or a lecture on the comma splice is a text, then, at the very least, it models what a text is. Who among us has the power to say, this is it! This and this alone is the way to text! Follow this path and you will be saved!

I look to my students. I try to shift some of that load of judgement on to them; "Think the way I do!" I exhort. "Be fussy and picky and unsatisfied, the way I am." Is this a true vision of the mind of a productive writer, or a mistaken hypothesis? Am I creating prose craftspersons or fusspots?

Or am I creating anything at all? The notion of teacher as creator and destroyer is a powerful one in the field of writing, yet I'm not sure if we are fully aware of what it is we create and destroy. Students speak of teachers tearing into their prose with razor-edged red pens. Teachers endeavor to reconstruct sentences and texts from the rubble and ashes of an unsuccessful attempt at composition. Are we *truly* capable of such heroic acts, or are we actually creating and destroying our *own* texts as we see them reflected in the words that students put on paper? Isn't that what we're trying to get students to *see*, that as writers they have the power to create and destroy and recreate word, syntax, text?

As a writer I feel myself in this piece moving from one can of worms to another, peering into each, remarking, "Yes, that certainly is a can of worms," and moving on to the next can. That is, in fact, what I would probably *write* on this essay were it presented to me for comment: "Yes, this is all true and very nice, but what's your point? Where is your structure? There are quite a few interesting ideas in this essay, BUT. . . ." I would say these things because I invariably expect my students, the

people who write for me, to smell the coffee, not the roses. Noodle around with ideas, yes, by all means, but before you are finished, *cook* those noodles and put them on the table. Does this expectation about writing represent a valid hypothesis about what writing should be, or is it only another alternative, or mistaken hypothesis? I don't know. You've read this reflective essay this far. You tell me.

What is a teacher of writing? (There's a new and much bigger can of far more hopelessly entangled worms. In my mind's pedagogy department, lights are flashing and alarms are going off: NEVER INTRODUCE A NEW IDEA IN THE FINAL PARAGRAPH!) Like any writer, a writing teacher is a technician and a creator, a creator and a destroyer, a smeller of roses *and* coffee: a *thinker*. I am left here at the end feeling more amorphous and expressive than ever, provoked to exhort myself and my colleagues simply to be *writers* when we are teaching writing. But to *be* writers we must operate on hypotheses, possibly correct, possibly mistaken, about what writing should be. Every time we try to peddle a new hypothesis, someone exposes it for the thin tissue of misconceptions it really is. In writing. Perhaps *that's* the activity we should be cultivating in our students — to take hold of their writing and to use it *against* us in a continuing battle of will and intellect.

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