

The Freshman at Composition

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At the first meeting of an English 1A class, in February 1948, I asked the thirty students to write a half-hour essay on their home town. I did not discuss the problem except to say that by an essay I meant a brief and unified exposition which would make clear to the reader the student's town as he saw it.

The following paper on Pittsburgh represents the work of two-thirds of the class.

I

It has often been said that if Pittsburgh, New York, and perhaps two or three other cities were bombed until their industry was rendered useless that the United States would be powerless and at the supreme will of the enemy. Such a statement is possibly very true.

My home town is Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and I take great pride in the fact that Pittsburgh is my hometown. The great steel industry gave my family a very comfortable living. I was able to develop in the city in a way that I had pride in my town. Pittsburgh—a city of about 700,000—seemed to me a small town where I had interest in the surroundings and events in every part of the city.

Pittsburgh is not merely a memory of smoke and soot to me, but more as a place that recalls memories of gay and colorful times. Picnic grounds, city parks, zoos, and even the smoke stacks of other cities will never have the appeal to my eyes as those of Pittsburgh.

* * *

The reader will note that each separate paragraph makes a separate point, the first about the vulnerability and importance of large cities, the second about the familiar comfort of Pittsburgh as a town to grow up in, the third about the memory of good times despite smoke and soot. In no way do these three points make a whole. The student has taken no responsible point of view; he has not thought of the city as a whole;

he has not thought of his essay as a unit.

This lack of responsibility, characteristic of most of the members of the class, seems to me the central serious problem in the teaching of composition. Matters of sentence and paragraph structure, of agreement, reference, and transition, all seem to me subordinate to, and indeed dependent upon, the matter of the student's responsibility for his own guiding ideas. Sentence-making is predication, and to predicate is to assert an idea, selecting and treating facts from a point of view. Paragraph-making is the development of such ideas and the relationship between them. Composition involves an individual responsibility of thought. The student from Pittsburgh does not compose.

The best single summary one could make of this essay would say that though Pittsburgh is important as an industrial center it is also pleasant as a home; but this statement does not really reflect the student's intentions. When, at the next meeting, I asked each student to write one sentence summarizing his essay, this student wrote, "My home town is one of the greatest steel centers in the world situated around the point where the two rivers join to form the Ohio." Most other sentences were equally far from their essays and equally unuseful as even possible ideas for development. It seemed to me therefore that the students had almost no concept of the problems involved in stating and developing an idea, the central process in writing exposition.

Subordinately, the unease in putting words together may be noted as typical. The first confusion of *thats*, the repeti-

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tion of "home town," the difficulties in the "I was to develop" sentence and the "surroundings and events" sentence, the misused *as*, show that the lack of organization in thought makes for a difficulty in phrasing as well. The student was probably trying to write as simply as possible, yet the chaos of his thought made even simplicity of sentence structure impossible.

The next paper, on Boulder, is typical of a smaller group.

II

Boulder Colorado is a city of fifteen thousand people. The University of Colorado is located there and most of the city's activities and functions are closely related to the college. The college is actually the main industry of Boulder, and without the school the town would have little life.

During the summer months many tourists stop or pass through Boulder. It is one of the gateways to the Rocky Mountains which are a great tourist attraction. The town is built on the edge of the great plains with its back to the rising range of the Rockies. Within a few minutes of Boulder you can be high in the mountains or far out in the flat plains.

In winter months skiing and ice skating are the main attractions. Hundreds of students and local citizens flock to the frozen lakes or to one of the many ski runs.

As in any small town you soon know practically everyone you meet. It is hard to realize the value of many friends and the feeling of being known which is hard to obtain in a larger city.

* * *

This is a little more smoothly written. It has, moreover, a good useful central idea in its first paragraph, the second sentence; and such a helpful beginning is relatively rare. Yet the development of this idea again shows no responsibility of point of view or plan. The second paragraph tends to undermine the first by its emphasis on the importance of tourists. Perhaps a contrast between winter and summer characteristics is intended, but the point of contrast is never stated or made clear in

relation to first or last paragraphs. The concluding idea of friendliness is again a new and unassociated one. In phrasing, the difficulties though present are milder; the whole essay, like a half-dozen others, sounds fairly easy and pleasant; yet it is merely a series of scraps of thought.

Fifteen thousand people . . . importance of the University . . . location and tourist attraction . . . winter sports . . . friendliness, these are all bits from a commercial folder. They do not represent a habit of thought. They do not represent a sense of composition. They indicate neither the awareness of community which Social Studies aim for, nor the awareness of technical skills which the study of English as a tool would make plain; they show indeed by their very confusion the need for greater integration of methods.

The reader may wonder whether there was no adequate paper among the thirty, no essay which did simply develop an idea about the character of a town. This one on Oakland comes closest to adequacy, I think, though it makes troubling omissions. At least it takes an attitude, a negative one about size and interrelation, and develops the idea of dependence through three clear paragraphs to a fairly summary conclusion.

III

Oakland is my home town although it is more a fairly large city than a town. Its chief characteristic seems to be that it covers a large area and thus makes transportation very difficult.

The city is apt to depend upon San Francisco, its neighbors, rather than to have a more or less independent existence as do other similar cities. Many Oakland residents work across the bay, and Oakland is known as San Francisco's bedroom.

Just as occupational activities are concentrated in the other city, so are cultural matters considered almost second class in Oakland. The Oakland Symphony orchestra is not the equal of the San Francisco Symphony orchestra; the

museums and art galleries and the theatre are slighted in Oakland. Thus, what goes on in Oakland must be considered in the light of its proximity to a larger and more important city.

Industry in my home town is growing, in fact, growth is everywhere, and the city holds more promise at the moment than it does actual accomplishment. The port promises to become very important in the future. Army and navy installations should play an important part in this development. Oakland is the western terminus of the railroads, and will not be bypassed by expanding industry for this reason.

My home town then is this. It is a large city, but it is not like similar cities because of its relation to other cities of the bay area. It is one of a network of towns and cities which have grown up around San Francisco bay.

* * *

This was the only paper which seemed conscious of the problem of exposition: the need to make a statement, to develop and substantiate it through the selection and arrangement of pertinent detail, and to reconsider it finally in the summary of detail. The fact that the author of this paper is the one who in six weeks of practice has managed to progress to C and B grades would indicate that the first-day exercise had some representative merit. The fact that he is the only one is not, I hope, representative of freshman classes as a whole. My 1A section may be this time an especially unfortunate one. Even so, its members come from all parts of the country, from all sorts of teaching systems, from Berkeley, Oakland, Piedmont, San Francisco, Los Angeles, as well as Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and it is the more surprising that all the difficulties center at the same focus: at the making and developing of statement.

I have an idea about the reasons for this difficulty, and I am not sure of its truth, but I shall propose it tentatively. It is that a sort of inert materialism, a sort of trust in data as data, uninterpreted, and a counter mistrust of human thought, has led Americans to

teach facts rather than ideas and accumulation rather than composition. When I ask students what sort of practice in writing they have had in high school, they say they have written "descriptions" or "reports," and when I ask by what principles these were organized, they look blank. When they bring me high school exercises at which they felt themselves successful, I find that they are indeed well organized, and always chronologically, as in the description of a trip, or a brief biography in the style of the encyclopedia; yet the students have copied, and have not consciously been aware of this chronological order or what use it was or to what purpose they were putting it. And of other logical orders, like implication, alternation, exemplification, they seem unaware.

It may be that we are so unaware ourselves of how to choose, how to coordinate and subordinate, how to generalize and exemplify, above all how to compose, that we cannot teach a younger generation. We may be, as the scientists have suggested to us, the victims of sheer uninterpreted data, as meaningless as can be. If so, if we have no attitudes for our facts, we shall have no predicates for our subjects, no themes for our essays, no points for our remarks, no responsibilities for our actions.

But I think the teachers of composition are the very ones who need not be so lost. They know that the subject is what the predicate makes it, and that the theme is what its development makes it. They know that the human mind can take a consistent responsibility for what it has to say. They know that the selection and arrangement of materials to a purpose, a purpose weighed and evaluated, is as serious a task as can be conceived of.

For both pieces of writing she attempts to project the scope of the whole piece and, indeed, does. What she says she will include in "Terpsichordean Greetings," for example, she does include (see page opposite); and in the order she describes:

This morning I had an idea to write about this thing we got from my sister who is on vacation with our cousins. She sent us from, it might have been Disneyland, a two-foot-high cut-out of Snoopy, the Peanuts dog dancing, and my mother set it up in the middle of the living room so you see it when you walk in the front door. And I thought it might be interesting to write about people's reactions to it, there have been quite a few. And I was thinking of, I had two extremes in mind. This one boy when he walked in the door sort of curled up his nose at it, and I could just hear him thinking, my how gauche can you get. (laughs) And one of my girl friends came and she picked up the thing and she said, "Oh I love Snoopy," and she hugs it, this piece of cardboard. (laughs) Those are two extremes and my mother had a suggestion, well what about the adults who walk in and pretend not to see it, and that might be interesting.

Lynn's approach to "Simplicity, Please," the only poem in this sample, differs in one major way from her approaches to her prose pieces in that she engages in no planning, oral or written, for the poem. In this respect, her practice—or nonpractice—matches that of the professional poets cited in chapter 1. Since many poems, particularly lyric poems, have fewer than 500 words, perhaps the factor of length is more significant than the factor of genre in accounting for the absence of planning.

Starting

For Lynn, starting to write presents a paradox. Her *decision* to begin is a *swift*, and seemingly *painless*, one. Her *enactment* of a first sentence, however, is an arduous, even a tortuous, matter; and the actual time expended upon its formulation with both prose pieces is as long as that spent on any sentence—ten minutes for "Terpsichordean Greetings," seven for "Profile of a Smile."

For "Profile of a Smile," after a digression designed to assure the investigator and/or herself that she is intelligent (an evaluation the investigator had already made independently), Lynn says simply, "I think I'll start chronologically. Should I sort of read what I'm writing?" For "Terpsichordean Greetings," once she has established the scope of the piece, she begins:

... this Snoopy [thing] might be interesting if I could think of enough

Terpsichordean Greetings

One of the last things someone would expect to find in a livingroom with walnut-paneled, book-lined walls would be a very large cardboard statue of Snoopy, the Peanuts dog. But in our livingroom anything is possible. He dances with an expression of utter bliss on his face, his arms held open in greeting directly in the path of anyone entering the front door.

Since he is unavoidable, all visitors to our house must register some sort of reaction. My girlfriend Barbara, who also holds her arms open in greeting to the world, embraced Snoopy in all his cardboard cuddliness and cooed, "Isn't he sweet?" The cardboard did not hug her back. My youngest sister does not lavish affection on him although they do carry on some rather interesting, if one-sided, conversations about their mutual enemy, the cat.

Friends of my parents pretend that they don't see Snoopy, politely ignoring what they consider sloppy housekeeping on my mother's part. On the contrary, it was she who put him there, and when she proudly draws attention to his presence the women coo like Barbara and think, "How quaint" and their husbands mutter an embarrassed, "Well, isn't that nice."

The only person who gave a completely sincere reaction was my current beau Marc who stalked into the house, stopped, curled his lip, gave Snoopy his best Jonathan Brewster stare and haughtily said "How gauche can you get!" Alas, poor Marc, you and all the others will never observe Snoopy's credo "To dance is to live; to live is to dance." There are very few dancers in my world.

From:
EMIG, SARIT. 1971. *COMPOSING PROCESSES*.
JERUSALEM: A.C.T.E.

SHAUGHNESSY, JIM. 1977. ERRORS AND EXPECTATIONS. NEW YORK: OXFORD UP.

7 Introduction

student writing begins, that I explain more fully why error figures so importantly in this book.

Some views on error

For the BW student, academic writing is a trap, not a way of saying something to someone. The spoken language, looping back and forth between speakers, offering chances for groping and backing up and even hiding, leaving room for the language of hands and faces, of pitch and pauses, is generous and inviting. Next to this rich orchestration, writing is but a line that moves haltingly across the page, exposing as it goes all that the writer doesn't know, then passing into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer's eyes, searching for flaws.

By the time he reaches college, the BW student both resents and resists his vulnerability as a writer. He is aware that he leaves a trail of errors behind him when he writes. He can usually think of little else while he is writing. But he doesn't know what to do about it. Writing puts him on a line, and he doesn't want to be there. For every three hundred words he writes, he is likely to use from ten to thirty forms that the academic reader regards as serious errors. Some writers, inhibited by their fear of error, produce but a few lines an hour or keep trying to begin, crossing out one try after another until the sentence is hopelessly tangled. The following passage illustrates the disintegration of one such writer:

Start 1 Seeing and hearing is something beautiful and strange to infant.

Start 2 To a infant seeing and hearing is something beautiful and strange to infl

Start 3 I agree that seeing and hearing is something beautiful and strange to a infants. A infants heres a strange sound such as work mother, he than acc

2. Unless otherwise indicated, the writers of sample passages are native to the United States, where they have had from twelve to thirteen years of public schooling, mostly in New York City. The topics of placement essays, from which many of the samples come, are given in the Appendix. In this essay, an initial class essay, the student was attempting to contrast the ways in which infants and adults see the world. Each of the "starts" in the present sample was crossed out in the original.

Start 4

I agree that child is more sensitive to beauty, because its all so new to him and he apprec

Start 5

The main point is that a child is more sensitive to beauty than there parents, because its the child a infant can only express it feeling with reactions,

Start 6

I agree a child is more sensitive to seeing and hearing than his parent, because its also new to him and more appreciate. His

Start 7

I agree that seeing and hearing have a different quality for infants than grownup, because when infants comes aware of a sound and can associate it with the object, he is infedeaying and the parents acknowledge to this

Start 8

I agree and disagree that seeing and hearing have a different quality for infants than for grownups, because to see and hear for infants its all so new and mor appreciate, but I also feel that a child parent appreciate the sharing

Start 9

I disagree I feel that it has the same quality to

Start 10

I disagree I fell that seeig and hearing has the same quality to both infants and parents. Hearing and seeing is such a great quality to infants and parents, and they both appreciate, just because there aren't that many paneters or musicians around dosen't mean that infants are more sensitive to beautiful that there parents.

So absolute is the importance of error in the minds of many writers that "good writing" to them means "correct writing," nothing more. "As long as I can remember," writes a student, "I wanted to be an English teacher. I know it is hard, keeping verbs in their right place, s's when they should be, etc., but one day I will make them part of me."

Much about the "remedial" situation encourages this obsession with error. First, there is the reality of academia, the fact that most college teachers have little tolerance for the kinds of errors BW students make, that they perceive certain types of errors as indicators of ineducability, and that they have the power of the E. Second there is the urgency of the students to meet their teachers' criteria, even to request more of the

SONYNA PERL 1979. "THE COMPOSING PROCESSES OF
UNSKILLED COLLEGE WRITERS." *ETC* 13: 317-36.

Writing Sample
TONY
Session 1
W2

All men can not be consider equal in America base on financial situations.¹ Because their are men born in rich families that will never have to worry about any financial ~~difficul~~ difficulties.² And then they're are / another type of americans that are born to a poor family.³ And This is the type of Americans that ~~will~~ / ^{may} alway have some kind of financial difficulty.⁴ Espeical today ~~today~~ ^{the} new york The way the city has fallen ~~has fallen~~ into fin—debt.⁵ It has become such a big crisis for the ~~people~~ ^{working} people, in the ^o If the working man is able to find a job, espeicaly ~~for~~ / ^{with the} city ~~a~~ city The way ~~the way~~ ^{the} city / fin—sitionu is set up now, ~~He~~'ll probly lose the job a whole lot faster than what he got it.⁷ When he loses his job he'll ~~pr~~ have even more fin—difficulty.⁸ And then he'll be force to ~~got~~ to the city for some fini—assi—.⁹ So right here you can see that all men in America are not create equal in the fin—sense.¹⁰

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THE "CLAY MODEL" PAPER
DAVID ISACHALOMAE, "INVENTING THE UNIVERSITY" (1986)

were easily and comfortably one with their audience, as though they were members of the academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists; they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language. Or they must dare to speak it, or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is "learned." And this, understandably, causes problems.

Let me look quickly at an example. Here is an essay written by a college freshman, a basic writer:

In the past time I thought that an incident was creative was when I had to make a clay model of the earth, but not of the classical or your everyday model of the earth which consists of the two cores, the mantle and the crust. I thought of these things in a dimension of which it would be unique, but easy to comprehend. Of course, your materials to work with were basic and limited at the same time, but thought help to put this limit into a right attitude or frame of mind to work with the clay.

In the beginning of the clay model, I had to research and learn the different dimensions of the earth (in magnitude, quantity, state of matter, etc.) After this, I learned how to put this into the clay and come up with something different than any other person in my class at the time. In my opinion, color coordination and shape was the key to my creativity of the clay model of the earth.

Creativity is the venture of the mind at work with the mechanics relay to the limbs from the cranium, which stores and triggers this action. It can be a burst of energy released at a precise time a thought is being transmitted. This can cause a frenzy of the human body, but it depends of the characteristics of the individual and how they can relay the message clearly enough through mechanics of the body to us as an observer. Then we must determine if it is creative or a learned process varied by the individuals thought process. Creativity is indeed a tool which has to exist, or our world will not succeed into the future and progress like it should.

I am continually impressed by the patience and good will of our students. This student was writing a placement essay during freshman orientation. (The problem set to him was, "Describe a

From Visiting Emily, Sheila Cornhill &
 THER TAMARRO, 675. (2000)

Emily Dickinson Attends a Writing Workshop

JAYNE RELAFORD BROWN

why plural?
 And why all the Caps? (- And dashes?)
 Title??

* ① My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun - why a "loaded gun"?
 In ~~Corner~~ - till a Day the day?
 The Owner passed - ~~loaded~~ - Had the gun been
 And carried No Away - lost or missing?

watch the repetition →
 * ② And now We roam in Sovereign Woods -
 And now We hunt the Doe - x ← Rhyme scheme breaks
 And every time I speak for Him - down here - this isn't
 The Mountains straight reply ← even slant.

* ③ And do I smile such cordial light
 Upon the valley glows -
 It is as a Vesuvian face
 Had let its pleasure through -

* ④ And when at Night - Our good Day done - why good?
 I guard My Master's Head - might help day
 'Tis better than an Rider-Duck's by creatin.
 Deep Pillow - to have shared - why don't
 you share a pillow?

End here. → ⑤
 To foe of His - I'm deadly for -
 None stir the second time -
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye - neat
 Or an emphatic Thumb - images!

omit
 (too confusing)
 Though I than He - may longer live
 He longer must than I - ← omit
 For I have but the power to kill,
 Without the power to die -

* I suggested a re-ordering of stanzas that might help day by creatin. sense of chronology

Emily Dickinson

→ stanza 2 suggestion:
 Now we roam throughout
 the woods,
 And now we hunt the deer
 Every time I speak
 for him,
 the mountains turn to
 hear.

Emily - Nice language here, but lend this poem feeling confused. We need to see the speaker's "Master." Who is he? why does "He" own the speaker? why is her life like a "loaded gun"? You seem to be alluding to some anger, yet the cause is never explored or revealed to the reader. Is there another poem behind this one that still needs to be written? I'd like to see you bring this through workshop again.
 ←