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How well do you Write?

Some Implications Of Teaching Composition

By Rudolph L. Braithwaite



The problems of writing have been a central focal point on many university campuses. This is clearly demonstrated in the number of "mini" courses offered in composition, in the grave expressions of college administrators about the standard of English at their institutions, and in the spate of text books written in an effort to tackle writing problems.

It has been argued that the modern tendency to promote the watching of television at the expense of the reading of books has been a primary contributory factor to the decline of writing skills. Another argument is that the turn towards the purely "literary" view of composition (that is, the teaching of composition through literature) has also influenced this decline; that the traditional method of emphasizing grammar as an inevitable constituent of the teaching of composition was sacrificed with resultant disadvantages to the student.

Whatever the causes of writing deficiencies, no instructor of English—indeed, no instructor in any discipline—can ignore the problem.

One often wonders whether the growing interest in poetry is not symptomatic of the students' disenchantment with prose composition. At Howard University, an increasing number of students are turning to the writing of experimental poetry. On the surface of it, this ought to be an encouraging sign. It may be that such students believe that poetry provides them with the opportunity for introspection, that it has a liberating influence not found in prose composition. Yet poetry, if it is to be genuine, is just as demanding as—perhaps even more so than—prose composition.

The flowering of this poetic sense must not be stifled, but then the virtues of prose composition must be equally emphasized for we live in an essentially prose environment. An obvious implication for the instructor of composition—and for those in the humanities in general—is to utilize this zeal for poetry in the enhancing of

As Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* points out, a poem contains "the same elements as a prose composition," the only difference being in the combination of these elements in keeping with the differences in purpose. A poem, after all, is made up of words, syntax, sound—in short, of many of the elements inherent in prose composition. There is no reason why the instructor of composition cannot attempt to quicken the student's appreciation of prose composition through poetry. It ought to be remembered that much of the aesthetic pleasure derived from a poem resides in its syntactic combinations.

Viewed in this light, poetry can be a useful auxiliary of prose. The student, of course, should never be allowed to view the writing of poetry as an escape from the writing of prose composition. The characteristics of such "escape" poetry are rather obvious: the writer, under the guise of what he/she calls "invention," abandons all principles of grammar, diction, rhetoric, syntax, etc. and concocts a piece which only he/she can interpret; there is no rule of composing except the writer's own. Such a view of poetry cannot amount to much, and will surely not help in the understanding of prose composition. Therefore, instructors of composition by skillfully emphasizing those elements in poetry that are akin to prose composition can do much to promote the level of writing.

But even if instructors succeed in amalgamating these, as far as possible, they will still have much work to do. It seems, more and more, instructors will have to turn to a semantic view of writing. By this it is meant that instructors will have to move beyond sentences that are grammatically satisfying to a sharper analysis of word implication.

A knowledge of the semantic possibilities of verbs, for example, will enable instructors to define with greater precision such terms as "awkwardness," "weak diction," and "illogical." It seems that very many of the errors so labeled spring from

"Stricter gun control laws will *select* to whom guns are distributed."

Although this may be one of the grosser errors of this nature, such sentences are not uncommon. Why is this an incorrect sentence? The answer is usually that "laws cannot 'select'," that the diction is "awkward," or that the sentence is "illogical." And why? The answer to the second question is much more difficult. The problem becomes more complex when it is seen that if "dictate" is substituted for "select," the sentence is acceptable. Both verbs, "select" and "dictate," are used with a personified subject, and yet one cannot be used. Quite clearly, there is something intrinsic in the make-up of the verbs that make one of them accept "laws" as subject and the other reject it.

The peculiarities of verbs, how they react in certain sentences, what words they accommodate, and how they influence the total meaning of the sentence—all these provide a useful study.

Sometime in the future, there will be a need of a grammar of semantics to which students can turn. This approach will go a long way towards solving writing problems. □

The writer is an instructor in English at Howard University.