

## A BRIEF NOTE ON READING AND WRITING

### Some comments on comprehension & composition

Often, it has been assumed that if one reads vast amounts of materials that he/she will become better at writing papers. Back of this argument stands a vital truth; that literary consumption will produce greater flexibility of the mind. This is not always the case though. In my youth, I was in possession of a set of new illustrated Columbian Encyclopedias. Published in 1978 in 24 volumes, I, literally, pored over each page with an appetite rarely seen in young boys. However, the accumulation of data and the acquisition of varying departments of knowledge did not prepare me mentally for the aims of penmanship, that is, scribal labor with a skillful hand. Orthography, best understood here as writing correctly, is not developed by possessing voracious reading habits alone.

The truth is, you need a keen eye to discern what the essay is all about and also to see 'how' it is composed & structured. Then, and only then, can you gain momentum in the facility of writing. Turning words into phrases of a nice quality is an on-going process. And you must learn to pay strict attention to the 'little things' such as grammar and etymology when easing toward your goal of clarity and reader comprehension.

Having spent time studying vast amounts of Semitic material and getting my feet wet in the shallow ends of Greek & Latin pools of literature, from time to time I have taken a whirl at translation; this essentially is what writing is all about, taking simple and complex thoughts of the mind and laying them out for a reader to interpret them. Indeed, equivalent reproduction is a form of poetics because it involves wordplay, which in the hands of the right person conveys meanings (in its strict technical sense).

Each and every paper written is designed with the author's mental objectives; to incline (or bend) the reader's mind toward a position, idea, and/or even in the direction of an argument. It is nothing more than a disciplined form of scribal persuasion; that is, the art of upsetting the mind in order to firm it up on 'other, sounder' principles. The faster you grasp an author's motive & intent the sooner you can gravitate toward reading analytically. In the meantime, you just may overlook some smaller issues of relevance on each

page. I can prove this by way of a simple example. Most tourists that are visiting the Louvre museum in Paris stand in crowds around the Mona Lisa painting and gaze at its beauty.

Few notice 'how' she is framed or step close enough to observe the texture of the canvas upon which she is painted. Color mixtures are even ignored. Her picture is in the foreground but the *ignored items* are in the background where our attention is least focused. It is not that these irrelevant things are not present at the time of viewing; it is that they are neglected. But, in reading articles, essays & papers, one should not only read the words before the eye, but ,also, observe the manner in which punctuation is flung about, how the author has taken words and syntactically joined them, forming phrases that stimulate 'how' you see from what you are reading.

Since certain authors carefully craft their sentences for maximum effect upon the mind & ear of the reader/listener, *especial attentions* should be given to reading *g s l o w l y a n d c l o s e l y*. By taking time to really read an author's words you put yourself well on your way to felicity in language usage.

There still, remain a few more things to say about reading. There should also exist in your mind some sort of disconnect between modern standard literary English and that of colloquialism and of how to use the two together, if needed. Writing is a personal endeavor and the guide books are meant to be just that! Guide books (as much as they try) can't prescribe daily conversation but they are able to assist you in the proprieties of good, better, and the best kinds of speech.

*In writing (and this is my personal opinion), one should read to be able to write on a level that far exceeds his or her daily speaking patterns.* It will be an advantage, surely to be appreciated, in the long run. So learn the various *genres* of literature in general, and of essay writing in particular. There are a good many to study and in the following paragraphs I will mention only a few.

There is an *official manner* of writing. As in the military habits: "SHARP, EXACT and EXTREMELY PROFESSIONAL. He exercises force with tact and has gained respect from his peers and subordinates. Sgt. Sutton's appearance and military bearing are commonly far above the standards and always picture perfect. Sgt. Sutton's loyalty and Esprit De Corps are uncommon and contagious. His potential is limitless. His attitude and

maturity are far above Marines of his age and grade.”  
{From an actual fitness report sec. ‘c’ USMC doc.}

There is a *polemic* style of writing. When (if ever) is it necessary to combine combustible texts with inflammatory words? Caustic rhetoric, if rightly employed, is full of the type of verbiage that enables you to manipulate folk’s emotions. Although, this type of writing usually prohibits any real dialogue between opposing parties since it use verbal stimulants.

There is also a *direct & informative* style. Sentences are normally short, crisp and terse. It feels like one is taking the most direct route yet, still finds ways to enjoy the view; “at 3 o’clock today, it was announced on TV, by the White House, that the nation is in a recession.” Or, along a different line.. William F. Buckley’s intro to *Climbing Parnassus*, A new apologia for Greek & Latin:

“Our author is greatly learned but he rebuffs any suggestion that he is a scholar or an academic..Whatever it is that he chooses to call himself, we, (I, certainly) might wish we could qualify to call ourselves. He is of course the teacher but also the journalist and he sets out in this book to write about the classical heritage informatively and unpretentiously. And I should stress, readably; which he succeeds in doing, probably without noticing the odes he brings to our attention by sharp-eyed scholars who have acclaimed, for instance, a mastery of Latin because, in part, it engenders a verbal sensitivity and dexterity that lead to good writing and, prospectively, fine writing.”

Then also, there is a *higher literary* type which might favor eloquence and may even be bedded in an archaic form. Such as in Boswell’s life of Johnson:

“He had no settled plan of life, nor looked forward at all, but merely lived from day to day. Yet he read a great deal in a desultory manner, without any scheme of study, as chance threw books in his way, and inclination directed him through them. He used to mention one curious instance of his casual reading, when but a boy. Having imagined that his brother had hid some apples behind a large folio upon an upper shelf in his father’s shop, he climbed up to

search for them. There were no apples; but the large folio proved to be Petrarch, whom he had seen mentioned in some preface, as one of the restorers of learning. His curiosity having been thus excited, he sat down with avidity, and read a great deal of the book.”

One, certainly, cannot be too dogmatic about categorizing all of this. We have to admit, there is a degree of subjectivity involved in these procedures and we all tend to feel like oracles empowered with ‘special insight’ when classifying any and all types of things that share particular qualities or features; in this case words. My abilities along these lines are certainly limited and in some ways, stunted, but an awareness of good reading and writing habits is a necessary ingredient in living a well formed life.

At this point, let me add a few comments about the above examples: More than likely, you will rarely use a *military style* of writing. Since I was formerly in the United States Marines, some of that scheme is still residue within me. Official documentations are always needful; especially now when so few are interested in ‘performing’ well syntactically.

*Polemical pieces* are enjoyable in a few contexts but be careful not to degrade your positions by denigrating people. Verbal abuse & name calling is not only destructive on paper but also, in the heart of the penman.

The above note from Buckley’s *informative approach* is good but it contains extremely long sentences where the punctuation is intensely difficult. Few people today are able to unravel a twisted skein of wording like that without, in the end, graduating as a professional wordsmith. So take note, and be careful how you illustrate and annotate your pages. Use descriptive terms that provoke learning and lead to a well developed mind.

Of the *higher literary* type little needs to be said. Some complain if archaic wording is used because it is not as proper a thing as it once was years ago. Personally, I feel that Shakespeare’s English needs greater emphasis, if for no other reason than the opportunity to grasp Old English verbal structures and word meanings. A generation of poets would spring up again if children were drilled to think as men & women thought in olden days. To find a paragraph like Boswell’s is refreshing. The need to reach for a dictionary and fumble through the pages actively seeking to acquire knowledge is a boon to any and every reader. NOTE: THERE WERE NO LEXICONS IN ANCIENT TIMES, YET, FROM THE ANCIENT QUILL CAME EPIC POETRY, SATIRE, HISTORIES AND OTHER NOTABLE WORKS! Therefore, enjoy the tools available for your betterment. The same books available to students in colleges and universities are also accessible to you online, in second hand stores and other places if you will take time to do some research.

Enough with all of the rambling, allow me to add one final note. Reading bad writers will lead to bad habits. So take the time and train for verbal & literary excellence. If it is feasible, and at all possible, build (for yourself) a library of wholesome, quality writings. If you do not know where to

start, let me at least recommend you begin with some volumes in the Folio society literary series; the books are beautifully designed, the authors are normally at the top of their game in writing and the volumes are varied enough for most anyone's personal tastes. Each writer tends to compose like a person who knows where he or she is going and is trying to carry a busload of passengers along for the ride.

PS. If in the process of reading this little paper you have found a multitudinous amount of errors, just remember that I also am a writer under construction.

Darrell Sutton

Reading & writing far too much in South Central Nebraska