JAMES WITHEY'S ADVANCED WRITING COURSE

A faculty great of small stature, a slender, smartly-dressed spectacled man, one of Notre Dame’s unmarried teachers (“bachelor dons”), he dwelled just inside the main entrance of Walsh Hall where he led an eremetical life struggling with a rheumatic ailment that caused frequent severe headaches. He did his best to keep this from interfering with the life of pedagogical dedication that marked his contribution to Notre Dame. “No one on this campus ever taught writing better.”—Edward Fischer, Notre Dame Remembered, 95

More than an instructor of writing—as an art or craft—Mr. Withey (as students called him) was a coach striving hard to bring out the best in each of the “players” sitting before him on the “benches” of 361 O’Shaughnessy Hall, never tiring, ever enthusiastic, constantly drilling his art. Jim Withey (as his colleagues called him) saw writing as an intrinsic element of human character and its formation: “Good writing requires strong character.” A combination of human virtues is what produced good writing; he built up those virtues by insisting on improvement from paper to paper. No textbook could have served his purpose. More than teaching his students to write well, he was engaged in the noble art of forming young men, guiding them toward maturity, showing them how to accept (apparent) failure, and to press on beyond it. The kind of writing exercises he assigned and carefully (sometimes brutally) corrected, the encouragement to put those exercises through multiple drafts in a search for perfection—these are other indicators of the moral education he imparted, conscious of how it would complement the moral education the same students were receiving simultaneously in other liberal arts courses.

What follows are one student’s notations of Mr. Withey’s classroom lectures, for the most part direct quotations, in Journalism (later Communication Arts) 52; it met at 10:30 MWF in the 1954-55 academic year in O’Saughnessy 361.

[PART I—Purpose and Kinds of Writing: “Lay it out plain and pleasant.”]

A mass, mixed audience demands plain and pleasant writing.... Be sincere; respect the dignity of the readers; avoid pretension.... Write quietly, coolly, simply, directly.... Set the tone early; feel it yourself; then write rapidly and easily; edit later.... Anticipate the reader’s questions, and answer them.

FOCUS on the problem.... HANDLE it pleasantly, plainly in tone, organization, phrasing, pace.... TAILOR for the particular audience.
Location: state early why this is written at this particular time (maybe understood).... Raise the curiosity or interest of the reader; keep him with you, moving rapidly.... Satisfy this curiosity at once.

Never be stiff, heavy, sludgy. Tires reader. Portentous.

Difficult writing problem—to offend the reader but keep him reading (giving advice). A tender area always.

Say it neat and brief, crisp and precise.... Make the reader’s mind turn over fast.

heavy—stiff—portentous (fancy)—OK—natural—direct—sharp
trite—stale—stale-ish—OK—fresh—rare—sharp
wordy—OK—economical—sharp

Here is what I have to say on this now.... Write cool, cautious, prudent.

Ideal: When given a topic, decide what the problem is. At that moment, spend 2 minutes loose, fixing on the area, thinking on all possibilities, not rejecting any. Then forget it for 24 hours. Then re-ponder it, dredge it up from the subconscious. It will have collected good material along with the ideas. Think on it 15 minutes, then write it quick—half and hour—letting you flow onto the paper. Try it under pressure. After it is all down, edit in 20 minutes, always anxious to cut out the sludge and pull together into a neat bundle.... This method is best for the calm writer.

Second method may work better for the moody writer, especially under nervous tension or emotional strain. Ask yourself: What have I, a valuable and special person, really got that is all mine on this to say now? Then don’t worry or fuss—just try it. Then fix on the area for a loose two minutes, as in the first method.

Don’t seem doubtful or confused, overly polite, to the reader.

He need not be courted around—lay it out plain and pleasant. Never stuffy.

Judging—criticism:
subjective—my reaction to this. What I feel.
analytical—here is what this has got, what it does, and why. What I see.
evaluative—here is what this is worth in itself, according to a stated standard. What I think. Why.

What’s in it, what’s done, how it’s done.

Analytical—a weighing, investigation. Looking at tone, method, structure, traits. All impersonal. Define, compare, contrast. Discriminate. Boil down, see parts, implications.

These 3 types of judging can be isolated or interwoven.

Analytical requires understanding; evaluating requires reasoning.
Critical comment: a statement of weighing without much evidence.
Criticism: a statement of weighing with enough evidence for particular readers to demonstrate, show what is stated. Maybe no need to demonstrate—if it’s obvious.

The minimum standard of a good rector is— (major premise)
This rector must resort to force— (minor premise; analytical)
This rector is not a good rector— (conclusion; evaluating)
Simple analytical traits will suggest the conclusion without stating it.

Don’t accuse a writer of evaluating when he is merely analyzing.
How do you like this? (subjective)
What’s it like? What’s in it? How’s it built? What do you see as an understander?
How good is it? What do you think as a reasoner? (evaluating)

EDUCATION—Want to change and realize you can. (Needs curiosity, mind power)
Reach further than it is easy for me to reach. Bleed a little. (Needs perseverance)
Then stop—let it sink into subconscious. It will come up fresh, and part of you.

[PART II—Critical Writing: “Don’t be trapped by emotion.”]

When to summarize—If story is long, recap major points.
To stress a point you want to be sure to get across.

Critical comment and position:
Critical comment is a statement unsupported by reasons behind it.
Position is: 1) an opinion, a judgment (usually a weighing);
2) the reason(s) for it expressed or surely implied (by facts given or tone);
3) the context in which opinion appears (angle of takeoff), the completeness of the case.
Positions must be explored before they are weighed. First must know what is there.
Critical comments are not to be attacked because they are not positions.
If exploration of a critical comment reveals a position behind it, then you may proceed on it. People have a right to their own critical comments. Only their positions may be argued responsibly.
In criticizing positions, merely demonstrate it is wrong; don’t try to prove it so incontestably. Imply that you may not know all the facts, etc. Imply that more may be said for the position: “I, who may easily be incomplete or wrong, see this about such and such a position.”
Given a critical comment, explore it to see if it makes a case. If it does, then here is my case, an opposite or different position. Support your weighing with reasons why. Don’t attack boyishly. Judge fairly: “Do you mean by what you’ve said, this, this, or this? If this, here’s how you’re off. If this, you’re on, but it’s perfectly obvious anyway. If this, then I certainly agree.”

Irresponsible writer tries to prove or attack when demonstration or exploration are in order. Confronted with a mere critical comment, you can state your own counter comment, but don’t attack the other one. Characterize positions by analytical criticism. List its traits. Don’t accuse its writer of saying something that is only implied.

Always remember everyone is entitled to their opinion even if exploration shows it to be defective. Don’t be trapped by emotion or provincialism. First, see if you are objecting merely because this position has never occurred to you before. Then, Analyze deductively without getting confused: Here are the traits of this position.

**Critical comment:** a weighing judgment or a weighing opinion without support. Explore it: “That’s interesting. Tell me why you say that.” If there are reasons, it is a position and may be analyzed critically. Here are its traits. If the position is fuzzy, state your unsureness. If this, this, etc. Analytical criticism is the heart of weighing.

Never attack anyone because of their taste—liking or disliking for something. Traps in weighing: to criticize a taste; to misunderstand or misrepresent the traits that are there; to take an incomplete position for a complete one; to make it mean one thing when it might mean something else.

Don’t weigh with ferocity: criticize constructively and quietly. Don’t go out of the way to bother weighing something that might mean several things. Don’t try to be impressive or shocking, noisy and disagreeable. Be sensible, modest. (Also avoid warm approval.)

First judge whether something is worth weighing. Don’t be satirical or abusive in tone. Don’t reject a thing from the start because you think you already know all there is to know about it.

Responsible critic:
1) Should I attack, weigh, or leave alone?
2) If this is just his taste, I can weigh but not attack.
3) Inquire what the traits are before attacking.
4) Don’t attack for being incomplete. Ask if there isn’t more.

In making a responsible, cool weighing of something on which I feel strong emotion, a good way is to lump your emotions and state them openly at the beginning. Don’t sprinkle them all through—blinds the reader from your weighing.

When standards can be several, pick one and make it perfectly plain to judge by. Also say that you know there are other standards. Very important at the beginning.
Don’t criticize somebody according to one standard if he used another.
In a weighing: 1) lump and state your emotion, especially if strong; 2) point out all the possible standards and state your own; 3) be modest in tone and phrasing. Underplay.

[His criticism of my writing: Biggest faulty tendencies—writing thickly, heavily, obviously, fancily, stiffly. Heavy handling. Thin (lacking sparkle). My stiff phrasing flows along “impressively”; content comes close to zero because of the noise of the rolling.]

[PART III—Active Writing: “Shapely sentences. Neatly pictured. Quietly put.”]

Editing—things to watch out for: wrong words (for the purpose intended), wrong spelling, trite phrasing (freshen it), heavy and pretentious phrasing (make it simple and direct), wordy phrasing (economize), parallel structure for parallel material, wrong punctuation.

In editing look for what is violently off. Don’t suspect everything as bad. Avoid being tight and scrupulous. Let is slide by if you’re not sure. The word “prevalent” is always heavy. Also “the latter” and “the former.”

There are many heavy connections, such as “in the event that.” Use shorter, more informal connectives, such as “if.”

Especially avoid sounding impressed with yourself (overbearing). Write quietly. Replace the 1892 Victorian heavy style with directness, crispness, edge, pleasantness. But don’t go too far and get into slang.

Sometimes it helps to get rid of heavy phrasing by writing just as if you were talking with a friend.

VERBS—in making writing livelier, less dull and sludgy:
A dead, slow, dull piece can often be made more alive and faster by asking what proportion of the verbs is alive. A live verb names an action. A dead one names a state or condition, or a passive action. In a live sentence the subject acts, does something. If this is he case in at least two-thirds of the piece, it will probably seem alive.

Use simple, plain, active verbs. (not overly “vivid” ones—too gushy)
If the majority of a piece is composed of dead verbs, the piece will seem sludgy and slow, no matter what else it’s got. (bland, edgeless)

The “to be” family, the “looks,” “seems,” “appears” combinations, and the “become” family are state or condition verbs. “To have” family is on the borderline.

The doing can be in past, present, or future. Can be a quiet action.
Sometimes there is a slight action in state or condition verbs. If so, let them pass.

“Is” can often be replaced by “get,” “make,” “fix,” “manage,” “occur,” “has.”
A simple verb can usually liven up a sentence better than a real pictorial one.
A really dead passage: several words like “is” in a row or cluster.
Action verbs are not a cure-all. They merely help. Some passages are naturally stuffy, but live verbs can help them.

Pallid action verbs: “represents,” “includes,” “totals,” “accounts for.”

Sometimes convention necessitates dead verbs. It’s OK then to let them go.

It is more important to get rid of passives than to convert “state” verbs.

In conventional fact writing it’s better to go very by verb, freshening individual dead verbs.

In idea kind of writing (criticism, features) it’s better to look for patches, places where groups of dead verbs are conspicuous. Dead verbs, even passives, won’t hurt if they are few and well scattered.

OK to use “is,” but not in patches.

Don’t try to switch all dead verbs. A piece would sound thick, stiff, unnatural.

Let 7 or 8 slip through per typed page (usually 20 verbs to a typed page).

Every passive should be looked at, however. Change them all unless there is a real reason for them. Fix passives first, then check the state and condition ones.

If too many verbs of state, change the ones that are easiest to change. Leave the knotty ones alone.

In cutting out wordiness, many dead verbs will fall out by themselves.

Framing the sentences is half the pleasantness. Shapely sentences. Neatly pictured; quietly put.

Always start writing in a relaxed, free and easy mood. Very important.

Don’t design written stuff for the ear, but for the eye. For example, in speeches, many “ises” are necessary to shove elements far apart so the audience can grasp them; not so in reading.

Seventeen words—average sentence length in a bright, quick piece.

[PART FOUR—Sentence Building: “Shove things around in the tail.”]

KITE-TAIL SENTENCES. In trying to get rid of dead hunks, try a sentence that hooks several little facts onto the central core. This works for both ideas and physical detail. The core: the idea or location of central impression. The kite-tail: list of details, one by one; a series of appositives; combining. Even if a long sentence, it moves swiftly, clearly, easy-toned. This method is much better than just substituting for individual verbs of state. Roll the tail on out, as long as you want, not trying to be impressive, but just building it easily, naturally, pleasantly. It can express many tones sharply. Each tail element can be a different construction, but phrases are better than clauses. No fussy verbs to bother with. But don’t wear it out. Use it sparingly among normal sentences—to bundle a group of observations or traits. Start it out using 1) with..., 2) its..., 3) adjectives, 4) genuine appositives. Mix big with small ones. A good easy base sentence is important. Work with patience, slowness, good temper in building the tail, each element built differently. Let the sentence run easily and smoothly—not overdone and portentous. It’s hardest to write
the core sentence and the first detail. Shove things around in the tail, dropping bad elements. It’s usually best to have 2, 3, or 4 details. Don’t pile on. Keep the sentence straight and simple, not fancy.

PARALLEL VERBS also help clean up flat and wordy stuff—several verbs completing a single subject.

STRAIGHT LINE CHARACTERIZATIONS—should be able to handle 1) live verbs, 2) kite-tail sentences, 3) parallel verb sentences, 4) respect for very short sentences.

Editing: Move with sureness into stripping out and pitching away to make what is left sparkle solidly and easily. Learn to discriminate. Make it crisp and unimpressive to delight readers. Get the best effect with the least amount of words. Eliminate stuff as you go. Clear out the brush. Have confidence in your judgment. Trust yourself. Drop the second-rate stuff. Make it seem easily written and thrown down with no work at all. Try saying what you’ve said by using half as many words.

Write suggestively. A reader will love the piece if it lets him draw out your Implications without having it said in so many words.

Look at your stuff objectively, honestly. Let nothing be too dear to throw away. Bundle up the obvious. Make it leaner. Leave out the less good. Result: solid and crisp. Don’t keep stuff just because it is good in itself. Shift stuff around. Do it while relaxed, so the piece will seem the same. It helps to type various versions of short pieces and use the best of several. Consider decisively. Overcome the pain and indecision.

In characterizing something or someone, pick out the single trait that sticks out above all the rest—what gives it its character, out-yells other traits, blinds me to the other traits.

Observation, reflection on qualities of life:
One (a powerful one) is tragedy. To be tragic, something must 1) involve persons, 2) be a big disaster, 3) must happen to sane, sensible, worthy people, 4) be at least partially unpreventable by the victim.

Another: that people must pay for the good things of life.
Another: people never get all of what they want; what they do get doesn’t satisfy. People who get upset, resentful over these facts of life are emotionally immature. Unwillingness to accept losses. Made irritable, self-pitying, sad. Immature, emotional responses to qualities (normal ones) of life: I can lose; I must pay for what I get, sometimes much more than planned.
Sentimentality as an immature emotion—having emotions where none (or some other ones) are called for; having emotions out of proportion to the importance of the thing that causes emotion. Sentimental emotions cause the subject to do unreasonable things: external acts, fostering useless emotions, clinging to useful but unused emotions, having further useless emotions, adopting a false judgment.

(All writing aimed at making a serious point generally requires more good examples than are available just offhand. They must be collected over a period of time. Mingle the analysis and theory with neatly chosen examples of all kinds, easy and tough, obvious and deep. Give the right amount of space to all of them. This way your point will be made plain, not blurry, to the reader; will seem easy and pleasant for him.

Try different patterns and different tones.

Examples of patterns: Get interest in first sentence—making an unusual statement or asking an appetizing question. Then back it up with a cluster of real quick and easy specimens. OK, reader is interested, but wants to know what you’re driving at. So present the theory and analysis. Follow with 2 extensive, difficult, yet sure specimens that are really good. Conclude quickly, now that the reader has all his questions answered.

Example: Initial interest-getter. Presentation of theory. Presentation of 2 or 3 easy examples. Presentation of 4 or 5 more subtle ones. Example: Mystery that shocks. Start out with some extreme examples. Then give the theory involved. Then smoother, less shocking specimens.

In these ways coolly combine theory (the point you are making) and/or instruction, with exemplification that really supports the point—well chosen. The only way to do a serious piece and hope to keep a “fly-away” audience.)

Provincialism—what is dear to me, what I like (taste), the class I belong to (is without defect, is the best there is, cannot be said to be imperfect by an outsider, cannot be said to be less good). If this attitude leads me to do unreasonable things, it is sentimental provincialism.

Provincialism is an attitude that strangely combines a judgment and a feeling: “What I’ve experienced makes me on everything about this righter than you could possibly be.” Contempt for one who differs from me in some way: “What I am (have) is better—because it’s mine (me).” Attachment, irritation, self-pity, resentment, impatience—easy to spot sentimentality.

Provincialism is an attitude that prohibits me or anyone else from seeing or saying that there may be defects in . . . any class I belong to, any group I admire . . . and that makes me insist with myself or with you that
these can have no imperfections (or perfections if the attitude is opposite to admiration), that everyone should have the same attitude. Set up a law for all.

I refuse to examine for possible defects. I refuse to change my standards by recognizing that they might advantageously change somewhat. My own knowledge or experience is so dear to me that I refuse to look at or admit incompleteness or defects. Provincialism is thus a kind of close-mindedness, intolerance.

(An unreasonable action isn’t sentimental if done through ignorance or fear.)

A provincial person has a closed mind, is closed to the possibility of even examining fairly any other position or the possibility that his position may be incomplete or altogether wrong. (even if suspected)

Rejection of every threat to my closed position.

(A big writing problem: to present my open-minded finding so that closed minds will take it in.) Caution: not every unreasonable act or intellectual position is sentimental or provincial. It can simply be bad reasoning, poor logic.

A provincial person WON’T EVEN CONSIDER . . . “Leave me in my ignorance,” or “I already know it all.”

All this is necessary background for discriminating writing, judging.

[PART SIX—Skillful Writing: “A little irony colors the whole piece.”]

LUCIDITY—all 3 together: unmistakably clear at the moment, cool and easy sounding (no signs of author struggling), right stuff comes just as reader needs, wants it (and in just the right amount).

Caution: The more you refine your writing, the fewer who will appreciate it (only technicians will; the majority will take it for granted).

Flexibility—ability to write with several tones, even opposite. gentle amusement, sharp ridicule, etc. from mild to severe. Sarcasm, contempt, chumminess

Indirectness—say something cleverly by implication. Usually must repeat more directly for those who didn’t get the implication. Discerning reader will appreciate. Do it double—demanded by lucidity (clearness).

In being clear, avoid several figures of speech close together, vagueness, knotty writing, double meanings. Write plain in details. In a lucid piece, at each point what is being said is unmistakable. Must be gauged for a particular audience.

Indirect writing takes a chance—that implications, irony will be under-
stood. To make sure, do it straight right afterwards—clear up implications not intended, as well as making your point clear.

Neatness—lots said and lots implied in a small space. And what is said is worth saying, lucid. Conspicuous economy.

* GOOD, NEAT WRITING has worthwhile stuff, economy, lucidity.
Fake neat writing (Life editorials) has the first two and only apparently the third.
What is neat and lucid for one audience is flat for others. For mixed audience, put in both the sharp and the dull (difficult to do).
To know what you’re doing is most important quality of a communicator.
Write for reader, not self—to entertain, interpret, instruct, imply, correct, recommend. Writing is a work of mercy. The skill painfully acquired in learning to write well is really a skill in acquiring a merciful attitude toward others.
Good writing requires strong character—discipline of will, ability to make wise Choices, decisions.
When giving a bunch of specimens, don’t run them in a continuous narrative, but in little individual hunks.
Using irony. Saying the opposite of what you mean. Can be either mean or kind. Useful in implying. Get in real deep good points for readers who can dig them up (but also be sure to be clear)—by writing straight right after.
Irony is more vigorous, less gentle than straight writing—more likely to hurt the provincial and make them miss your point. Ridiculing, writing with a tone of scorn or sarcasm is most severe if done ironically.
Avoid using irony for a mass audience. Many will think you are trying to be cute or hurtful to them. Use it only for audience largely unprovincial. Even then you take a chance.
A little irony colors the whole piece. Can be placed first, at the end, in interior hunks, or sprinkled all through.
Irony plus exaggeration has a result all its own. Be careful with it, especially if these two are coupled to a tone of ridicule or other elements. A hard effect to gauge.

FIRST LOCATE THE AUDIENCE.

Putting things down when reader is ready to consider them is part of lucidity.
Must know first if audience is provincial, or ignorant, or what.
Lucidity—saying stuff that for the particular audience comes just the way it must to get considered.

Use tables when it is easier for reader to grasp the material that way. May be more lucid than straight text. But tables must be simple and clear to follow.
Make it pleasant looking, inviting.

“To know what you’re doing is the most important quality of a communicator.”—James A. Withey

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November 2006