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ABSTRACT

The use of rhetoric as a focus in teaching writing, working for understanding, not obedience to rules is discussed and illustrated. Rhetoric is defined as the art of making choices among available means of expression. The major implication of the definition is said to be that rhetoric, as the art of selection, is primarily concerned with anticipating effects. It is suggested that all that the teacher can do honestly is to try to give students the kind of information that will help them anticipate effects and therefore choose usage intelligently. To promote understanding rather than dictation, it is suggested that writing be looked at as a flow or continuity. To understand the experience of writing, it is stated that teachers of writing should write. (DB)

Rhetoric: How Do You Carve an Elephant?

Robert M. Gorrell

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You carve an elephant, of course, by taking a block of wood and cutting away everything that isn't an elephant. You write a novel by taking an unabridged dictionary and cutting out everything that isn't a novel. I'm not very handy with a pocket knife; I can imagine myself taking a block of wood and ending with a toothpick instead of an elephant. Roy Campbell ends his poem "On Some South African Novelists":

> You praise the firm restraint with which they write—
> I'm with you there, of course:
> They use the snaffle and the curb all right,
> But where's the bloody horse? [1]

In Africa or India Pegasus might have been an elephant.

I suspect that one cannot write solely by amputation, however judicious. But much teaching of writing seems to assume that one can. It focuses on excision—of dangling modifiers and sentence fragments, of initial *buts* and final prepositions, of slang and jargon and cliché, of *likes* for *ases* and *lays* where *lies* should be. Although I recognize therapeutic virtues of the red pencil, and although I cringe as painfully as anyone at *between my wife and I*, I suggest that the primarily negative approach produces few wooden elephants and fewer good essays.

The tendency of instruction in writing to become mainly the enforcement of prohibitions is understandable. It grows partly from admirable zeal. English teachers are notoriously conscientious, and proscriptive rules provide something tangible to teach, something comparable to formulas in mathematics or dates in history. The tendency grows also from a pedagogical fallacy—that direct attack educates—students are unpatriotic so we establish a course in patriotism; students make mistakes in writing, so we go after the mistakes. The method lends itself readily to framing behavioral objectives. But it confuses education with indoctrination.

I am aware that by this time attacking rules with red pen-

cils is flogging a dead horse—or a dead elephant. Most of us these days are ready enough to deny that negative drills and corrections should dominate the intellectual life of the teacher of writing. But we have not filled the vacuum left by our condemnation.

One solution is to fill the vacuum with whatever happens to be at hand. We give up sentence diagramming and drills on the evils of dangling modifiers—which constituted the old way of not teaching writing—and we substitute discussions of how to choose a profession or how to reduce pollution in Lake Erie, or we turn to producing films or collages or scrapbooks—which constitutes a new, and perhaps more relevant, way of not teaching writing. This procedure seems to me just surrender. I doubt that anyone can carve an elephant by speculating about his social life.

Another solution is to leave the vacuum. The way to carve an elephant is to give somebody a block of wood and a knife and get out of the way. There is much to be said for this solution. A first obligation of the teacher of writing, it seems to me, is to free the student from inhibitions and restrictions so that he can learn more and more about the possibilities of language as a means of self-expression. Our major obligation is not to equip a student with a set of particular competencies, directed toward what we assume to be the practical requirements of the world—how to produce a paragraph in a certain pattern, how to make an outline, how to talk politely on the telephone, how to write the kinds of papers that will be demanded in college, how to spell. These may all be desirable skills, but teaching them can be suffocating. Our purpose must be to help the student grow through language, play with language, use language to develop insights and to stretch the imagination. Discipline is meaningless unless there is something to discipline. Probably more harm is done by too much teaching than by too little.

But since we are teachers and are likely to try to earn our salaries one way or another, I want to suggest another alterna-

tive. I suggest that we can give up the old pattern of teaching composition as rules—mainly negative—or as drill on usage, but I suggest that the alternatives do not have to be either substituting another subject or staying out of the way. The alternative I suggest is that we teach understanding. This solution is so obvious that I may seem to have been building to an anticlimax. Understanding is the goal of all education. Perhaps the main hazard in considering it is that we all begin by agreeing—in general. But notice that teaching for understanding is widely different from what we tend to do in teaching composition—different from prescribing procedures and proposing formulas, different from enforcing prohibitions. When we consider the implications of teaching writing as understanding, the approach is not so obvious. It requires entanglement in the difficult questions of how we compose and how communication with language works. How *do* you carve an elephant? Do you start with the head or the tail? Do you carve by formula? Somehow all the wooden souvenir elephants exported from India look the same. Do you use a model? Should the surface be rough or smooth? Do you use a knife or a scalpel or an axe? Or does everybody have his own method?

We don't know all the answers, of course, but we need to exploit what we do know. And to begin with, I suggest that the focus of instruction in writing should be what I am calling rhetoric. I do not mean that in the fifth or ninth grade we start trying to lead students through Aristotle and Hugh Blair and Kenneth Burke—although probably worse things happen. I mean rather that rhetoric as a discipline provides the logical subject matter, the logical direction for instruction in composition. I am defining rhetoric as the art of making choices among available means of expression.

This definition does not restrict rhetoric as a neat discipline; it leaves rhetoric embracing almost everything under the sun. The second part of the definition, "available means of expres-

sion," establishes the pertinence of almost any study of language or its uses—grammar, semantics, logic, philology, examinations of communication media. The first part involves sociology, psychology, ethics, or aesthetics as relevant to the bases on which we make choices. The definition, however, does have two advantages. It provides a way of distinguishing rhetoric from other disciplines. Grammar, for example, is a study of the structure of a language, and its findings are obviously useful for rhetoric, but it is a different subject with a different purpose. Grammar may distinguish between the active and passive voices, may explain the passive sentence as a transform of the active, may formulate the rules whereby a passive sentence can be produced. Rhetoric, on the other hand, is concerned with whether to use an active or passive sentence in a particular context, is concerned with choice. The definition also provides a way of focusing the teaching of writing, of giving it some identity, of picking what should be emphasized.

The major implication of the definition is that rhetoric, as the art of selection, is primarily concerned with anticipating effects. The writer, in order to choose wisely, predicts results. Partly, of course, the prediction depends on the writer's purposes and the context of the writing. Is the elephant intended to amuse children or guard a temple? Is the block of wood hard or soft, large or small? Was the figure commissioned, or do you just like to carve elephants? But even with clear purposes, if we know what we want to do for whom, rhetorical choices present problems. How do we do what we want to do? What can we expect for different alternatives? What will the reactions be if we give the elephant wings or a peg leg, if we paint it pink? W.S. Gilbert drew elephants skating.

The writer, of course, makes most of his choices automatically. If we weighed each alternative for every word, we would doom ourselves to silence, or a long stutter. The choices are made, however; and the function of rhetoric, and of the teaching of

writing, is to help people make these choices wisely. At first glance, it seems that the obvious way to provide this help is to tell people what to do and what not to do—to provide rules and principles. This, of course, has been the major use of rhetoric as it has been adapted to pedagogy, although I think it is not what Aristotle or George Campbell intended. In the eighteenth century, and then with a vengeance in the nineteenth, teachers solidified and simplified rhetoric into principles. Some of these were the kinds of proscriptions and prescriptions I have lamented already; others were more sophisticated. But I think that we need to question the assumption that the function of rhetoric is to produce principles or concepts.

It is difficult to establish the validity of any generalization about writing that is precise enough to be useful. One way to establish validity would be to show that the principles "grow organically out of the biological nature of man," to use a psycholinguist's phrase, to show that they reflect human nature. Rhetoricians have long assumed that they were describing human behavior. George Campbell's purpose was to exhibit if not "a correct map . . . a tolerable sketch of the human mind." [2] He could not provide scientific evidence for even the tolerable accuracy of his sketch, but he did rely on the plausibility of his conclusions and on common sense for authority. Modern psycholinguists, exploiting advances in both linguistics and psychology, have worked toward more precise information about the relations between mind and language, but have not, I think, attempted to provide authenticated principles for behavior.

Induction provides another obvious means of producing principles about writing. We examine a reliable sample of prose, make a generalization from our findings, and turn the generalization into a principle for behavior. The final step, producing the principle, is the precarious one. Analysis of bodies of prose has been popular in recent years, partly as a method of testing some venerable principles, and has produced interesting generalizations. Most

of these have not been very practical if converted to advice. For example, it is easy enough to investigate the occurrence of topic sentences in paragraphs. I am confident that if we examine a substantial number of selections we can conclude that a considerable proportion of the paragraphs in modern prose begin with some kind of topic sentence. A student of mine in a study a couple of years ago found some 80 percent, although he had problems in identification. But what kind of rule does this sort of information support? Does it justify the principle common in textbooks—"Always begin a paragraph with a topic sentence"—or "usually begin . . ." or ". . . unless you have good reason for an exception"? Or we examine the ways of beginning sentences in modern prose and find that about 75 percent begin with the subject; only a fourth of the sentences have modifying constructions or something else preceding the subject.[3] This evidence certainly should be adequate to annihilate a precept that turns up frequently in the books—"Vary sentence openings; avoid beginning most sentences with the subject." But does it produce any more sensible counter rule? Is it helpful to say, "Begin 75 percent of your sentences with the subject"? Or to say, "Use verbal constructions sparingly as sentence openers"? A major difficulty with rules is that they are likely to be wrong, or partly wrong.

We have tended to reduce rhetoric to a series of principles, and the principles have proved hard to validate and not very useful anyway; but we are not therefore justified in dismissing rhetoric as useless. It is my contention, in fact, that rhetoric can supply the subject matter to fill the vacuum left when we remove the drill books and the rules. Rhetoric, viewed as a study of choice, directs the teaching of writing toward understanding, of both the means of expression and the problems of choosing among them.

There is nothing revolutionary about suggesting that we teach rhetoric or that we aim teaching toward understanding. I doubt that anyone questions the virtues of understanding. I think,

however, that what I am suggesting is more than a quibble, more than laboring the obvious. I hope I am suggesting the basis on which we can give up the approaches in teaching writing which have proved inadequate without in the process giving up teaching writing. To demonstrate that there is a distinction, I want to consider two specific applications.

I begin with the vexing question of usage. I think nobody any longer takes seriously the notion that there is something called pure English and that the English teacher's destiny on this planet is to protect it from desecration. I suppose also that most of us have lost any faith we ever had that right-wrong drills have much effect. I remember once privately challenging myself to influence at least one usage habit in a class, and I tried valiantly to eradicate confusion between *lie* and *lay* in one freshman section. Every day I managed somehow or other to devote five minutes to explaining or demonstrating or drilling on the difference. The business became a joke and then a ritual. The students got so that they could fill in the blanks in my sentences in the conventional ways. Then on the final examination I contrived, with a good deal of ingenuity as I remember, to work in a question that would require using the two verbs. And just as they had at the beginning of the semester, about half the class had the books laying on the bed.

I am not sure that anything will or should delay the demise of the verb *lie,* but I am sure that it is both more interesting and more honest to treat usage variations as rhetorical and linguistic matters, rather than as demons to be exorcised. Students can be interested in a study of dialects. They are perfectly capable long before college of studying dialects seriously, studying textbook materials and making their own observations. They can also be helped to use their reading as a way of collecting information about speech differences. I remember once in grade school having difficulties when I wanted to read *Huckleberry Finn* for a book report—the kind that got rewarded with points. The teacher

suggested that Jean Stratton Porter would be more suitable and agreed to my choice only reluctantly, expressing her fears that I might be corrupted by the nonstandard English in it. I think those days are gone, and students compare different usages and speculate about their effects.

I should point out also that what I am suggesting is not a one-day lesson based on a chart outlining levels of usage. Even if the chart is made more accurate by the inclusion of functional variations as well as social or other levels, this sort of approach is likely to be inadequate. It is hard to combat the implications of the notion of levels, that the top is the best and the bottom worst. Furthermore, the implication of the levels approach is that expressions can be classified and labeled and one need only keep the categories separated.

In other words, usage seems to me to provide one illustration—probably not very important—of the need for a rhetorical approach. All one can do honestly is try to give students the kind of information that will help them anticipate effects and therefore choose with open eyes. The information may be fairly obvious—say that an instructor is annoyed by *contact* as a verb or *wise* as a ubiquitous suffix. The student may decide either to annoy or not to annoy, but he knows what he is doing. Or the information may be much more extensive—a year-long study of a dialect, for example, which may produce some feel for which choices to make. The implications of surveys of usage, of samplings of dialects, of polls of panels of experts like those used to advertise a recent dictionary—the implications are not that we pick a certain locution because other people do—either because most people do or because the best people do. The surveys provide one sort of information we can use in deciding which locution will get the effect we want. We carve an elephant with a knife rather than a potato-masher not because other carvers—even the best carvers—do, but because it works better.

As a second illustration of what I mean by trying to pro-

mote understanding rather than dictation, I suggest looking at a quite different aspect of composing—at writing as a flow or as continuity. One of the few facts so obvious that it can hardly be disputed is that ultimately writing comes to putting one word after another. Whether preceded by extensive pre-writing or projected spontaneously in a burst of feeling, writing becomes a string of words and sentences and paragraphs. It is also, of course, a string of choices—automatic or studied, unhappy or happy. Commenting on the virtues of the valentine he has composed in Mr. Pickwick's name, Sam Weller pronounces, "She'll vish there wos more, and that's the great art o' letter writing."

Skills in making choices depend on the writer's knowledge of both possibilities and limitations. Sometimes, especially as they concern individual words, choices are fairly closely regulated by characteristics of the language. The order of prenominal modifiers, for example, is firm enough to eliminate many alternatives in any position. If it is leading toward *book*, *the green* cannot be followed by *only* or *old* but can be by *cook*: the grammatical pattern requires *the only old green cook book*; any variation from that order is probably ungrammatical. Psycholinguists have estimated, in fact, that if you stop a speaker at any randomly chosen moment, "there will be, on the average, about ten words that form grammatical and meaningful continuations. Often only one word is admissible and sometimes there are thousands, but on the average it works out to about ten." [4] This does not suggest any significant limitation on the possibilities of producing sentences in English; the number of possible different sentences approaches the infinite. But it does suggest the possibility of considering *kinds* of restrictions and possibilities. And I suggest looking at units larger than single words, where grammatical limitations have not been worked out.

I think that it may be possible to isolate restrictions on the order of clauses or sentences which are similar to grammatical regulations on words. That is, extending grammatical studies

to units of discourse longer than sentence parts may be productive. But in the meantime, let me suggest a less precise observation. Every sentence pattern makes a commitment, in some sense limits what can follow it. At the same time, it makes a response to something that has preceded it. A look at the following, chosen almost at random, the opening sentences of a George Orwell essay, illustrates the back-and-forth movement of ideas in a sequence of sentences.

> [1] The function of the machine is to save work. [2] In a fully mechanised world all the dull drudgery will be done by machinery, leaving us free for more interesting pursuits. [3] So expressed, this sounds splendid. [4] It makes one sick to see half a dozen men sweating their guts out to dig a trench for a waterpipe, when some easily devised machine would scoop the earth out in a couple of minutes. [5] Why not let the machine do the work and the man go and do something else. [6] But presently the question arises, what else are they to do? [7] Supposedly they are set free from "work" in order that they may do something which is not "work." [8] But what is work and what is not work? [9] Is it work to dig, to carpenter, to plant trees, to fell trees, to ride, to fish, to hunt, to feed chickens, to play the piano, to take photographs, to build houses, to cook, to sew, to trim hats, to mend motor bicycles? [10] All of these things are work to somebody, and all of them are play to somebody. [11] There are in fact very few activities which cannot be classed either as work or play according as you choose to regard them. [12] The labourer set free from digging may want to spend his leisure, or part of it, in playing the piano, while the professional pianist may be only too glad to get out and dig at the potato patch. [13] Hence the antithesis between

> work, as something intolerably tedious, and not work, as something desirable, is false. [14] The truth is that when a human being is not eating, drinking, sleeping, making love, talking, playing games or merely lounging about—and these things will not fill up a lifetime—he needs work and usually looks for it, though he may not call it work.[5]

The opening sentence commits the writer to a direction, although it does not limit him very strictly. The reader is led to expect something more on the relation between work and the machine, some justification for the appearance of the opening sentence. Sentence 2 responds by restating the notion of the opening sentence more specifically and thereby moving the thought in a more precisely defined direction; "to save work" becomes "leaving us free for more interesting pursuits." Sentence 2 also commits the writer to proceed in justifying the opening sentence, and 3 responds, not with a specification of what precedes but with a more general observation, a kind of conclusion, about 2, that the idea sounds splendid. And 3 obviously commits the writer to say why it sounds splendid, as he does with a specific response in 4 and then a more general evaluation of the example in 5. Sentence 5, phrased though not punctuated as a question, commits the writer to do something more with the splendidness of the proposal, suggesting that there must be some reason for not letting the machine do the work, and 6 responds by turning the discussion, introducing a new aspect of the topic, an exploration of the final phrase of 5, "do something else." The question in 6 commits the writer to an answer or to fuller presentation of the question, and 7 responds by making the question more precise and leading to another question in 8. In a way, the movement of the thought from 6 through 8 is like that from 1 through 3; the writer develops one part of each succeeding sentence to move to a new approach—from "what else they do" in 6, to "something not

work'' to "what is work." Sentence 9 offers a string of specifications of the question in 8, and then 10 generalizes, concludes, in a direct answer responding to the commitment of the question. The remaining sentences continue a pattern of generalization and specification. Sentence 11 broadens slightly the conclusion of 10; 12 offers specific illustrations of 11; 13 moves to another generalization and 14 illustrates it specifically.

Such analysis indicates roughly how sentences link ideas, how they move thought in a sequence of commitments and responses. But I am not primarily interested here in techniques for analysis; it is relatively easy to assign roles to various sentences in existing prose, after the roles have been played. I am more interested in examining the movement of prose for any definable characteristics which may provide knowledge about making choices. The analysis above suggests three general observations: (1) Prose moves through a series of linked ideas; one thing leads to another. (2) Commitments vary in scope and purpose; for example, the influence of one sentence may end with the sentence that follows it or may extend over several sentences. (3) Responses also vary, but seem usually to specify or generalize from what has preceded.

All of these need investigation, but I want to comment here on the last of the observations. Usually when we put one sentence after another, the result is one of the following: (1) specification, (2) generalization, (3) diversion, (4) response to an earlier commitment. I think that these account for the sentences in the Orwell selection and for most of the sentences in modern prose. Specification is probably the most obvious—and the most useful. Sentence 2, for example, is a specification of 1, and sentences 4, 9, 12, and 14 are more obviously specifications of the sentences preceding them. Sentences 10 and 11 show the writer working in the opposite direction, generalizing from preceding sentences. Sentence 6 illustrates what may be called a diversion, in which the writer turns from the preceding sentence, usually signaling with *however,* or *but,* to consider a new aspect of his

topic. Sentences 6 and 8 turn the discussion as diversions, but they also, in a sense, return to the commitment of the opening sentence. A sentence like the following, which could appear somewhere along in the middle of the selection, would illustrate the return to an earlier commitment more obviously: *The function of the machine is also to produce more.* This, of course, would also shift the direction of the argument.

My purpose here is only to illustrate how I think we can use rhetoric as a focus in teaching writing, working for understanding, not obedience to rules. We cannot do it all at once. How do you wash an elephant? You have to do it a little at a time, by the square foot. Using rhetoric to approach usage and continuity from sentence to sentence gets at only a small portion of the understanding necessary to anyone making wise rhetorical choices. Many questions remain. What voice and tone does a writer choose? What kinds of questions stimulate invention, help call up ideas for developing writing? How can one arrange material to produce different effects? And so on. I picked the sentence-to-sentence continuity as an illustration, however, because it is not much considered and because I think we write from sentence to sentence—more than we write by following an outline or planning a paragraph with a particular kind of development.

I picked this illustration for another reason; I cannot prove much of what I say about it. I am relying fairly heavily on experience and subjective opinion. Which brings me to what I want to make a kind of parting shot—a defense of the subjective in the teaching of writing. In spite of psycholinguistic and other research, we still know very little about the composing process. We need to rely on the experience of writers and of ourselves. We need, for example, to remember that things happen as we write, that new insights may flash from the search for a word and new interpretations from the problems of fitting two sentences together. Even a slip of the knife may begin an entirely new expression for that elephant's face. This is part of the ex-

citement of creation, the sense of movement, of growth. Students should have a chance to experience it. One obvious implication of what I am saying is that teachers of writing should write.

Aristotle's views on rhetoric have survived with more authority than his views on natural history; he among others of the ancients expressed the view that an elephant has no joints, that being unable to lie down he sleeps against a tree. Hunters spot favorite trees and saw them almost through, then wait for an elephant to start a nap against one of them. As he dozes he leans more heavily on the weakened tree, finally falling with the tree to the ground, where he is helpless. I am not much concerned to correct this error for hunters of elephants; I rather wish they persisted in the old confusion. But in carvers of elephants I am more interested. I prescribe understanding.

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