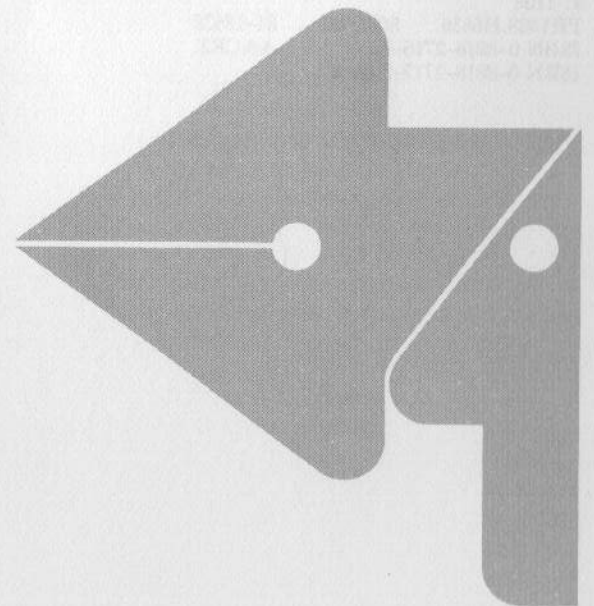


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Thinking Through Writing



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4. correct/proper
5. suggest/imply
6. deviation/difference/variation
7. accident/mistake
8. intellect/intelligence
9. mood/emotion/sentiment
10. difficulties/puzzles/problems

You will find a very good discussion of some of these pairs or sets of words in Martin, Ohmann, and Wheatley's *Logic and Rhetoric of Exposition*.

11

Discriminating

In the last few chapters we have seen how central a part forming, defending, and sharpening our ways of seeing—conceptualizing—plays in writing essays and, of course, in thinking in general. Sometimes whole books or essays are written to do nothing but create a new concept: one thinks of Charles A. Reich's *Greening of America*, or Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*. But as I have said before, “writing” is not so easy to separate into separate “parts” or “kinds.” When you define concepts, you are also automatically involved in making distinctions, because when you say that X *is* Y, you are also and necessarily saying X *is not* B, C, or D. When you did Exercise 68 for example, distinguishing between closely related concepts, you defined *suggest* by setting it off from and distinguishing it from *imply*. You defined *correct* by telling your readers how it was something different from *proper*.

In this chapter, then, we shall make distinctions and focus our attention on exactly how that process works. What does it mean to make distinctions? This is not so difficult to explain. It means that we announce that something that appears to be *one* thing is actually not mostly that, but something else. No one can give you a list of procedures to follow to discover a distinction, but I can suggest that what is necessary is that you look closely at something, take it apart and analyze its parts, and in that way you can discover something about it that does not fit usual ways of thinking about it. Sometimes, of course, to make distinctions is also the same thing as to compare and contrast, if you say that what has been regarded as an A is really a B, because it shares more of the properties of B than it does of A. But sometimes making

distinctions simply involves pulling something out of a category in which it has been placed—the concept it has been thought to be a part of—and it is not necessary to put it anywhere else.

How will you recognize, as you read and write, that a distinction is being made? Simple. Most times, the language markers will tell you: “Not this, but that.” “Not only, but also.” “Not merely, but instead.” As a reader, you may often find yourself delighted and relieved to discover that a person who has written something saying “Not this, but that” has clarified an issue in a way that you always vaguely realized was necessary; in a way that makes you see why you were always convinced something “wasn’t quite right” about the way people were thinking of that issue. For instance, I like Margaret Mead’s saying that adolescence is not caused by physiological changes, but by pressures put on a child that are beyond human capacity to handle. And I like William Henry’s saying that Donald Duck is not just another cartoon character, but “an emotion and a circumstance, apoplexy looking for a place to happen.” For that matter, I like my own distinction making throughout this book: writing well is not a matter of knowing rules and following outlines, but of understanding how thinking and writing work.

The following are some distinction-making sentences or paragraphs, about half from student essays and half from other sources. In each case, notice how the distinction sharpens the way we see, and takes a concept out of one category and puts it into another that the writer finds more accurate, helpful, or relevant.

1. Miss Whetall has also realized that correct testing of deafness in a child depends not only on the loudness of the sound, but on its relevance. A deaf child may not flicker an eyelid at a loud bang behind him, for it is only one more meaningless sound, yet it may turn round to investigate if a teaspoon is tinkled in a cup. (Irene Claremont deCastillejo, *Knowing Woman*, p. 23.)
2. The popularity of Cain, or the outlaw figure, stems not merely from a recognition and affirmation that killing one’s brother or breaking the law would bring about social disorder, but from the fact that Cain poses an alternative to the traditional lifestyle of the hero. In spite of the seeming opposition of the two figures, there are many similarities.

Just as the hero, such as Odysseus, breaks away from society to begin a journey where he must rely upon himself to face the perils of the world, so too does Cain leave society to cope with the world alone. However Odysseus returns home to set his household aright, whereas Cain remains outside society and forms his own nomadic tribe. Although we can readily see and understand the appeal of Cain over a static figure like Abel, it is a pessimistic view of society, that we cannot live by our own convictions within society, but can only do so outside, on our own. The popularization of the outlaw or outcast is in keeping with the prevalent feeling in America that we cannot really do anything to change society. But the decision to conform, or to live outside the bounds of society, is sliding back into a much weaker alternative than the hero presents in returning home to correct what has gone awry.

3. For a story to hold the child’s attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. In short, it must at one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality—and this without ever belittling, but on the contrary, giving full credence to the seriousness of the child’s predicaments while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and in his future. (Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 5.)
4. What has caused South Boston to oppose busing forcibly, primarily, is the chance to have a good fight; the idea that South Bostonians pride themselves on being Number One because they are Irish and from Southie gives them an attitude of superiority and they will go to any lengths to prove this point. The busing issue serves as a way for them to prove to everyone that the people of South Boston are rough, tough, and from a strong neighborhood-oriented group of people. Just as the politicians are making names for themselves in order to further their political careers

over the busing issue, so is Southie making a name for itself by proving to everyone that it is Number One.

5. People often make statements that are half-truths. Through their deceptive rhetoric, they try to hide their true feelings and possible shortcomings. When someone cries in rage, "He deceived me," he's really saying he was outsmarted. Instead of admitting I was embarrassed I might indignantly say, "I was appalled by her questions." If a person tersely states his interests are very concentrated, he might very well be trying to cover for the fact that he knows very little about anything outside his job. When a friend tells me he's getting tired of his girl, I hear "We've been fighting a lot lately." These people don't want to see the truth so they try to paint it to suit their cause. Like the student who tries to downplay his poor math grade by nonchalantly talking about how he hates the subject, or the novice who claims ballet bores him, they are all saying more than they realize.



69. For each of the excerpts above, explain in one sentence what concepts are distinguished from what other ones, if that is what you find being done in each case.

70. From anything you read in the next few days, collect one or two fine, sound distinctions. Copy them or cut them out, put them in your writer's log, and then try to create your own distinction in the same form as the one you found.

71. Write a short essay in which you make some distinction *you* think the world needs. The subject matter will be entirely your own, but you might want to write about an issue in the newspapers, or about something in your own experience. You may have noticed that in several of the distinction-making excerpts above, there are certain sentence forms that carry the distinction. Here are two:

"Just as the _____ can be seen as evidence of _____, so also _____ suggests _____."

"Although the _____ of _____ may suggest _____, one might say that if we see that _____ in combination with _____ and _____, it may rather suggest _____."

See if using these sentence forms helps you formulate your distinction.