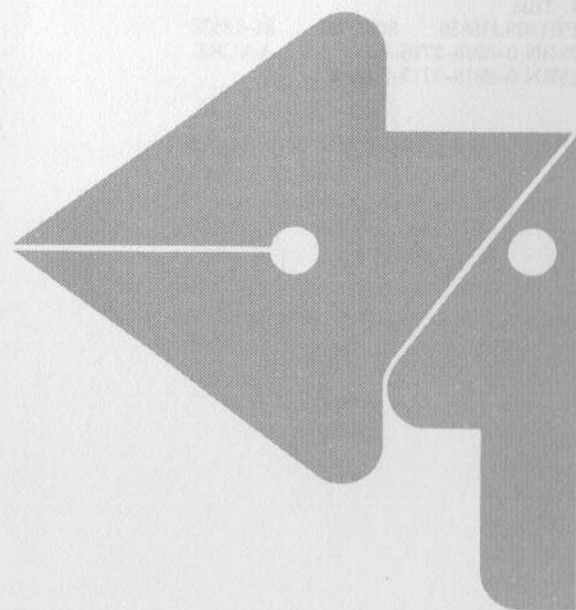


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Thinking Through Writing



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patient relationship will be totally wiped out. This is a perfect example of dehumanization.

Technology must not bring about bewilderment, dehumanization, depersonalization. And it does not have to. Technology must work with society if we are to survive.

3

What Is a Concept, and What Do Concepts Have to Do with Writing?

We have talked about what writing is, and what it does for us, and about what an essay is. We have looked at a few bits of essays and talked about what makes them essays. We have said that writing essays makes possible, and produces, a certain kind of thinking. But what kind of thinking produces essays? Obviously, it is a rather specialized kind of thinking—we do not usually use words like *nature*, *function*, or *source* in our everyday conversations with friends, and it is a rare occasion on which we challenge or explore in more than a very casual way the assumptions of our culture, in writing or in talking. But this specialized kind of thinking is certainly not foreign to you, and in this chapter we begin the first of many thinking and writing exercises designed to allow you to watch how it works. Understanding what you read is made much easier if you understand that other writers are thinking in this same way. Writing essays becomes easier once you see that this kind of thinking is largely a natural extension of what you already do. Writing compositions is something people want to do, and can do, in part because people *are* compositions. Below is what I used to call my “Composition Manifesto.” It is as concise a statement as I can muster of the way I think thinking works, and of what I see as your own relationship to that thinking process. I have tried to condense the entire world of thinking into a few pages, thus you should expect that you may not understand all that is said in these pages. But you might regard them as a

kind of blueprint for the work you will do throughout the book. Whatever puzzles you as you read through this “Manifesto” will become clearer as you continue to do the exercises throughout the book.

1. You *are* a composition. That is, you are made up of (or composed of) concepts that have been defined for you in a particular way. You were told, or you learned from watching the behavior of those around you, that *normal* “means” X and Y, but not Z, that *success* “means” X and Y, but not Z. A concept, then, is a conception: *a way of seeing* something in the world. When we say that normal “means” X and Y, we are defining that concept. Definitions are not absolutes, however, and what you find in the dictionary are only approximations of the way some people in a given culture tend to see a certain concept. Concepts have no “real” definitions; instead they have uses. They are our way of coming to understand the world and deciding how to behave in it. In every instance, what we *call* something and how we define some concept depends entirely upon what our needs, our interests, and our experiences have been. Nearly any word can be defined in very different ways, according to this principle. The folksinger Woodie Guthrie once said, “To a five-year-old boy who doesn’t want to go to sleep, a lullaby is propaganda.” Defining a lullaby as propaganda makes perfect sense, given the child’s point of view. This is what we mean when we say that concepts have no “real” definitions.
2. Not only are you a composition, but you contain a whole set of *copula*, or connectors that connect any one of those concepts you carry around in your head with another or others in very specific ways. These connections determine, quite as much as your separate concepts, your thinking and behavior. Success in business *precludes* sexual happiness for a woman. Maturity *excludes* spontaneity. Money *ensures* happiness (or misery).
3. Obviously, if you want to think in new ways, to be more aware of how you think now, to be more flexible in how

you think, you need to *identify* the constituent parts of your categories. To take a close look at what you call what and decide whether you might not want to consider a new conception: a new way of seeing. I have heard many beginning writers say they have “writer’s block.” But “writer’s block” is not a helpful conception, not a helpful way of seeing the problem. Because a “block” cannot be gotten around. If those people would try reconceptualizing their problem, renaming it, they could have a chance of solving it. What is writer’s block? Is it a fear to be heard? A fear to be challenged that prevents writers from saying anything? An inability to know “how I think” that results in an inability to put words on paper? A simple failure of discipline that makes it impossible for them to sit down long enough to compose? A failure to have enough self-esteem and confidence to believe they have anything worth saying? Renaming is not simply a matter of exchanging one word for another. It is a matter of changing the reality.

4. You cannot say anything new until you see something in a new way (Margaret Mead saw adolescence in a new way, and William Henry saw Donald Duck in a new way). You cannot see something in a new way until you let go of your old ways of seeing. But the struggle is well worth the effort; reconceptualizing creates new worlds and new ideas. As Robert Ornstein says in *The Psychology of Consciousness*, we most often say “I’ll believe it when I see it.” But, he says, it might be more accurate to say “I’ll see it when I believe it.” Newspaperman Herbert Bayard Swope created the concept “cold war” before World War II. In doing so, he gave the world a way of seeing, and I would venture to say that it is impossible for any of us *not* to see the world as engaging in “cold war.” Because of Winston Churchill, all of us “see” that there is an “iron curtain.”
5. You cannot understand any writer—philosopher, psychologist, novelist, political historian—until you understand that a book is nothing but a structure that conveys a writer’s conceptualizations: the relationships he or she

sees between one concept and another. Stephen Crane's story "The Blue Hotel" can be seen as a piece of writing that explores the assertion "Deception generates violence." One of Bertrand Russell's essays asserts that "Western progress is really only a veiled quest for power." Both are statements of a relationship between concepts. You cannot respond to a writer's work intelligently unless you understand that what happens in reading, writing, and thinking is almost entirely a confrontation between the writer's set of conceptualizations and your own.

6. When I say these things, I am not suggesting that the world is "arbitrary." I am suggesting that the world presents us with infinite opportunities to explain and make sense of what happens in it, and discourse is exploring those different ways of making sense: comparing our ways against other people's ways of making sense. In an interesting book called *Explanations*, Gwynn Nettler gathers together all of the explanations for the assassination of Robert Kennedy that she can find. The murder was "carried out to impede the process of social change now going on in America." It happened because Sirhan Sirhan "grew up in Pasadena, a center of the John Birch Society, a center of radical right reactionaries. . . . Sirhan simply accepted the way people in Pasadena think. He decided that Bobby Kennedy was evil and he killed him." It happened because men like Sirhan "are plainly weak and suggestible men, stamped by our society with a birthright of hatred and a compulsion toward violence." It happened because "the assassin had schizophrenia, [and was] a paranoid type." These and other explanations are quoted by Nettler on pages 51 and 52 of her book. You will notice that some of the conceptions seem to contradict one another, and others seem quite compatible. You will notice that in each case "thinking" involved trying to categorize some phenomenon in the world around us.
7. To the extent that this is true, the writer's job is no different from the scientist's job. Both observe and then make sense out of what they see. The only difference is that scientists are more likely to be able to test their

explanations to see if their conceptualizations are the most fruitful ones. But for both the writer and the scientist, the initial task is simply to try to *see* what is there in front of us. Recently, scientists were inspired to ask why animals lick their wounds, and why when we smash our fingers in a door, we immediately pop the hurt fingers into our mouth. The answer is that saliva contains a substance called nerve growth factor (NGF), which speeds up the healing process. Obviously, that substance can be used to help trauma and surgery patients. But it took us almost 2,000 years of watching animals lick their wounds and of popping fingers into our mouths to really *see* what we were doing. When we compose we first *look* at the world and then make sense of what we see. That is, we make meaning of the world. In *Reflections on Language*, Noam Chomsky calls this process of putting bits of knowledge together "science-making."

8. You should think, then, of both thinking and writing as a kind of "science-making." Think of thinking and writing as composing the world—or at least some small part of it. You can only live in an ordered world (If you did not classify speeding trucks as things-to-stay-out-of-the-way-of, you would have been dead long ago), and it is much better to live in a world that you order than in one that someone else has ordered for you.
9. You compose, however, not only for yourself, but for others. That is, you compose either to make clearer to some audience how someone else composes the world (Marx, Freud, Nixon, Shakespeare, Woody Allen), or to convince others to accept *your* composition of the world. Debate, argument, dialectic, analysis are written and carried on because people disagree about how they see—conceptualize—phenomena, people, facts, events. Joining in that exploration is the only reason any of us have to write. We may write to make ourselves feel better. We may write just for fun. We may write because we "have" to write a paper. But any other kind of writing will concern itself with exactly what I have described.

10. When you write, you define. That is, you set limits on words. You announce that *this* word shall be used to delineate this much or this part of experience, and nothing more and nothing less. You can watch this being done by other writers, and do it yourself, when you read Chapters 5 and 7. Once you define these concepts, you link them together with words that express some kind of connection between one and another. *Is*, *is like*, and *causes* are kinds of connectors you might use, but there are all kinds of others that you might watch for as you read: *embodies*, *generates*, *retards*, *inspires*, *supercedes*, *justifies*, *requires*, *precludes*, *exemplifies*, and hundreds of others. Finding just the right one will clarify—or maybe even create—a thesis statement for you. What relationship exists between a society and its schools? Do the schools *embody*, or *reflect*, or *ameliorate* the frustrations of a society? The right word creates the idea: creates the thesis statement. And, just by the way, when you have discussed one aspect of a concept, you have also written a paragraph.

Below are more writing exercises, designed to get you to feel at ease with concepts and to allow you to see how they work and can work for you.



8. In this chapter we have said that changing the word for something often serves to change the reality as well, or at least serves to change the way people think and behave toward some reality. Therapists who do psychological counseling tend to call the people they work with *clients* rather than *patients* these days. What changes occur as a result of that name-changing? Can you think of another situation or case in which changing the name for something changed your or someone else's reality? Think about and then discuss one of these two questions.

9. Think about conceptions of the world that were conveyed to you by your family when you were a child, choose one of those, and try as much as you can to explore how that conception has affected the way you think or act. One woman student I know was told as a child, "You can do anything you want to do." As a result, she finds herself overwhelmed and afraid to try anything. Another was told, "You are brilliant, but you are not working up to capacity."

When she has trouble in her courses, she seems to make one of two judgments: she must *not* be brilliant after all, but pretty dumb; or, she must be terribly lazy and not know it. What were *you* told, and what have been the effects of those conceptions of yourself that you were given?

10. When there is more than one child in a family, often families have a very specific conception of each child: Susie is the aggressive, self-directed, responsible child. Patty is the sweeter, soft child who craves approval and attention. Jani is the whimsical, funny child. Often those conceptions tend to become, as Hayden White said, "hardened into a hypostasis": we tend, that is, to behave in ways that confirm those conceptions of us. Is this true of you and your family? Describe how this is so. What conception of you is held by your family?

11. In this chapter, we have said that nearly all writing is done to define concepts (determine how a certain word should be regarded and used) and to connect concepts. In the next few days, be alert as you read—textbooks, newspaper articles, or any other things—for such an assertion or statement of a relationship. Summarize (put in your own words) the assertion in one paragraph.

12. We have said that most debate—in politics, in legal cases—hinges on and is caused by different conceptions of an issue. As you read the newspaper, watch for one such issue that involves conceptual disagreement. Clip the article from the paper and write a short discussion in which you do not solve the problem, but discuss what conceptions are at issue. That is, talk about *what conceptual analysis is necessary if we are to solve the problem*. Recently, for instance, a suit was filed by Eastern Airline flight attendants as a result of the airline's automatic grounding of pregnant flight attendants. The flight attendants contended that this was a case of discrimination. The airline contended that the grounding was necessary to ensure that all flight attendants on a given flight were working at optimal efficiency. The flight attendants insisted that those who were pregnant had sufficient ability to perform their duties. What conceptual issues are involved in this case?

13. Below is a short excerpt from Roger Brown's book *Words and Things*. He talks about the process of conceptualizing that we have been talking about here. Read Brown's "The Uses of the Named Category" and then compose a summary and an analysis in response to what he says. That is, you will put in your own words what he says, and then you will consider whether you agree with him, what prompts him to say the things he says, and what the implications of what he says might be.

Roger Brown.

"The Uses of the Named Category."

From *Words and Things*

The usefulness of named categories is not particularly obvious. Why should we group objects and events and, having grouped them, why should we give names to the groups? Suppose it can be shown that categories and

names are important for the formation and transmission of trustworthy expectancies. The usefulness of the expectancy will probably be granted. If we can correctly anticipate what is going to happen we are better able to act so as to preserve our lives and satisfy our desires. It seems to be the chief cognitive business of every kind of higher animal to acquire trustworthy expectancies. It is not the chief business of lower animals because their simpler needs and more predictable experiences make useful instincts possible. . . .

Unless we categorize, it is useless to form expectancies for there will be no recurrences. An event, in all its detail or even all of its discriminable detail, does not repeat. There is no use in remembering that event A was followed by event B because event A will never come again. However, types or categories of events do recur. It may be worthwhile knowing that an event of type A led to an event of type B because there may be new instances of both A and B.

The repertoire of categories, which is an important part of the cognitive branch of culture, consists of principles for grouping experience used in one society and its antecedents back through many centuries. When we learn all of these grouping principles we are equipped with many alternative ways of categorizing any experience. Suppose dog A bites me on the ankle. I should like to store that experience in such a way as to avoid further bites. There will be many possible forms in which to store it. I may decide that: a) chow dogs bite; or b) sleeping dogs bite (so let them lie); or c) on a hot day any dog may bite, etc. These alternative categorizations, one or more of which may be useful, are available to me because I have learned the referents of *chow dogs*, *sleeping dogs*, and *hot dogs* and can recognize new instances of any of these. However, my one experience affords no basis for preferring one categorization over another. I might learn which is the best categorical rule from many encounters with dogs and a number of bites but since the various categories have names there is another way.

I can bring my tentative rule to someone with a large experience of dogs and get his opinion. Do chow dogs bite? He may know that the chow is no more likely to bite than any other dog unless it is startled and then it is almost certain to bite. He suggests, in effect, that I make a new conjunctive category and learn to avoid *startled chow dogs*. This verbal advice can benefit me only because I already know how to recognize the referents of its critical terms. Because I have learned categories and their names this other man's greater experience of dogs can usefully guide my behavior. More generally I can use the accumulated knowledge of my culture only because I have learned to identify the referents for the terms employed.

Everything in the world is susceptible to multiple categorizations. When something important happens, a parent will often name the person or objects involved and, thereby, select for a child the particular categorizations believed to be most relevant to the event. Suppose one man punches another while a child looks on. A parent may label the aggressor as an

Irishman or a *cop* or an *old man* or a *redhead* or something else. All of these can be attributes of the same man. The selection of a name is also the selection of an attribute supposed to be predictive of aggressive behavior. The child who hears the man identified as a *redhead* will have different expectancies from the child who hears the same man identified as an *Irishman*. They will agree on what is to be expected of redheaded Irishmen but disagree on individuals who are one of these but not the other (pp. 224-26).

14. Brown's writing may be a bit difficult for you to follow, if you are not used to reading what is actually a fairly usual kind of "academic discourse." You may also find it a bit difficult to summarize and analyze what he is saying, because doing those things requires that you, too, engage in that same kind of discourse: discuss concepts, abstractions; where they come from and what they do. Becoming able to do this kind of writing with ease simply takes time and practice, and enough discipline to read and reread patiently until you are sure you understand what is being said. As I have said, learning to do this kind of writing also requires a certain kind of attitude: a drive to be absolutely clear and accurate. This clarity and accuracy begins on the sentence level. Read through the following excerpts, all of which were written by students who were asked to analyze Brown's passage. Look at each excerpt with a sharp eye. Decide which ones are accurate, and which are not; which are awkward, and which are not; which ones stay so close to Brown's own wording that they would not really qualify as proper summaries (many beginning writers, when they feel unsure, fall into using almost the exact words of the writer about whom they are talking). As you do this exercise, pay attention to how it is that grammatical awkwardnesses are almost always the result of a fuzziness in thinking. Pay attention also to the ways in which some of the writers try to obscure their lack of understanding about what Brown is saying by retreating into long words that unfortunately do not work. Because I am hoping that what you do here might well teach you something about your own habits in writing, you might record in the "self-study" part of your journal what you are learning about your tactics for responding to this kind of writing. Might you be, for instance, one of those writers who, like some of these, spends more time trying to shape an impressive sentence than trying to understand the ideas they are writing about? The student sentences immediately follow.

1. Roger Brown starts this piece seriously stating that in order to anticipate what is going to happen, a person needs to categorize events, the principles for grouping and categorizing being culture bound. He illustrates this with a dog bite on the ankle.
2. Brown explains that one's whole learning experience is made up of categorization. Therefore, our reaction or behavior in situations will determine how categorization itself is formed.
3. The author seems to be debating the usefulness of categorizing certain experiences, yet seems to hesitate as to how and why.
4. In essence the essay is saying that the phenomenon of formation and transmission of trustworthy expectancies can only come about when

- they are put into categories, for without categories expectancies will not recur because they are not recognized as having occurred before.
5. These multiple categories, however, leave many possible interpretations open to the individual, leading to differences of opinion on the same phenomenon.
 6. It appears that in this article that the writer is trying to explain the different ways of categorizing groups and objects in different formations.
 7. In conclusion categorizing can be beneficial in order to recur, but many terms have analogies and are difficult to differentiate their meanings.
 8. The naming process is, in fact, the instrument by which man, over the years, has found cause to make decisions that have dictated the completion of civilization, determining the course of history.
 9. Categorizations are important in bringing up children, interaction between people, and to recognize certain recurrences of former experiences.
 10. Each daily event must be analyzed in detail and handled as an individual event, with the interpretation being left up to the individual doing the analysis.
 11. No matter what happens to a person in life he should be able to categorize an experience whether it is good or bad.
 12. The margin of error in this so-called faulty rationale can be infinitesimal depending on the given set of circumstances that make up the topic in question. In short, the essay points out the inherent danger of professed misconceptions when people fail to limit themselves to an objective base when analyzing an incident, object, or person.

4

How Does Your Mind Work?

In the last chapter we began to talk about concept formation, which I take to be the major process by which minds make sense of the world. If, as Roger Brown suggested, we are bitten by a dog, or watch a red-headed Irish policeman attack another man, the first thing our minds try to do is make sense of our experience. We do that by trying to fit what we see with our eyes into some structure that explains what we have seen. That structure is a structure of categories, and those categories are concepts. What we see, what we encounter in the world around us, we incorporate into our conception of the world. If what we encounter in the world *resists* incorporation into our conception of it, we work harder: we look for further clues to help us understand what we see; we compare what we see with things we have encountered in the past to see if or how the “new thing” may be related to what we know; we imagine a situation or a context in which the “new thing” would begin to make sense to us; we separate the experience into parts to see which part helps us to understand the whole experience. In Brown’s example, we try to decide whether it is *hot dogs*, *chow dogs*, *startled dogs*, or some combination of things that causes us to get bit.

Because *analysis*—the kind of thing people do in essays—is simply a matter of going through exactly the procedures I just described, you can learn a great deal about how you now think by watching what you do when you are confronted with something unfamiliar and are asked to analyze it in writing. Below is a series of exercises designed to allow you to try to make sense of—or analyze—a photograph, and then inventory what you do when

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