

Mr. Franklin's Secret

Michael Robertson, director of Princeton's remedial-writing course, finds that imitating good writers "can be a valuable step on the path of developing one's own prose style." Robertson provides students with a list of established 20th-century writers who have produced "particularly distinctive prose"—from George Bernard Shaw to Woody Allen. He asks the students to choose passages they like, then to follow the example of Benjamin Franklin, who described, in his "Autobiography," how he taught himself to write. Excerpts:

About this time I met with an odd Volume of the *Spectator*. . . I thought the Writing excellent, and wish'd if possible to imitate it. With that View, I took some of the Papers, and making short Hints of the Sentiment in each Sentence, laid them by a few Days, and then without looking at the Book, try'd to

compleat the Papers again, by expressing each hinted Sentiment at length and as fully as it had been express'd before, in any suitable Words, that should come to hand. Then I compar'd my *Spectator* with the Original, discover'd some of my Faults and corrected them . . . By comparing my work afterwards with the

original, I discover'd many faults and amended them; but I sometimes had the Pleasure of Fancying that in certain Particulars of small Import, I had been lucky enough to im-

prove the Method or the Language and this encourag'd me to think I might possibly in time come to be a tolerable English Writer, of which I was extremely ambitious.



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shrug is telling: it means he will do it my way, because I'm the teacher, and do it somebody else's way next semester. He will abide by the last rule he is given, doing whatever is necessary to get over and get out. I fear that too few students understand why English teachers seem intent on confusing them. It is because writing is ultimately such a personal thing. The only way to get it right is to do it, and the only rule that matters is that their writing should work. It must communicate their meaning.

Another problem, which goes beyond writing, is that too many students seem unwilling to think. Some may have passable writing form with little content. Others may have compelling ideas and fresh perceptions, but no idea how to impose any order on their thoughts. Both weaknesses derive from an almost willful failure to submit to the mental discipline necessary for good writing. In the latter case, students seem to believe that a good idea is enough. It doesn't occur to them that a good writer, like a successful pizza maker, must deliver his product; if a reader doesn't get the idea, he remains hungry.

Form over content: Empty prose is quite a different matter. Some students have developed that way because their teachers, much like diving judges, awarded points for form. It didn't always matter if they said anything. Tragically, some students have come to believe that they don't have anything to say, so they often don't bother trying to think of anything.

Such modesty does not extend to other

endeavors. Even the most reluctant writers, the ones who must be begged for insight and elaboration, are perfectly confident of their competence in other areas of study and frank in their desire for success. But they have been allowed to believe that writing is at best marginal to that success, that architects, engineers, veterinarians, attor-

Students seem never to have been exposed to writing as an art form rather than a science. They look for answers, instead of guidance

neys and businessmen have little need for written communication. A grade on a chemistry exam matters to them in a way that writing a clear introduction never will.

For that reason, as I now understand, one of the great frustrations of writing instructors is the academic segregation of fundamental skills like the one we teach. "Writing across the curriculum" has become a rallying cry of many educators, but students, in practice, rarely get the point. It seems clear that most of my students' writing breakthroughs occur during the final weeks of the semester. I would like to believe that this is because my instructional

wisdom has finally taken root and borne fruit. In fact, that last-minute flowering owes much to the schizoid priorities we force upon students. After the last round of major midterm exams, they may feel free, at last, to concentrate on writing. Their semester clocks tell them it's time to get down and lock up these nuisance credits before they shift into all-nighter gear for the really major stuff.

I have also learned, however, to take my breakthroughs whenever I get them. It may mean threatening an engineer with the prospect of repeating the writing course every semester or delaying his rise into the hierarchy of Dow Chemical until he can craft a coherent paragraph. That's all right, because when it happens, it's like hearing a child speak his first sentence. Unfortunately the college student, unlike the child, doesn't always appreciate the magnitude of his accomplishment; he just wants to know if he will pass.

Unfinished business: That reaction is understandable. Young people, after all, don't write except in school. When they are finished with school, therefore, they believe they will be finished with writing. The job of a writing teacher is to convince them that writing is thinking. Of course, they may not believe that, either, but that's my problem. Teaching writing, like teaching most things in our educational system, is a process of preparing people to do things they are certain they will never have to do again. We keep at it because we know better, and because sometimes it works.

