

Saturday Review

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How to Write Without Thinking

OUR COLLEAGUE, *The New Yorker* magazine, recently sent one of its men to Princeton, New Jersey, to look in on the Educational Testing Service, an organization that periodically assembles large numbers of teachers for the grading of College Entrance Examination Board papers. On this particular occasion, 185 English teachers from all over the country were on location, and were reading 68,000 essays by high school students. The assigned subject in the essay was a quotation from George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*:

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.

The New Yorker did a straightforward, reportorial account of the event in typical "Talk of the Town" fashion. We confess we read the item with mounting horror, not because there was anything untoward in the way *The New Yorker* reported the story, but because of the basic facts that pertained to the essay question.

We were bothered first of all by the nature of the assignment. Taking an aphoristic, paradoxical syllogism by G.B.S. and attempting to expound or speculate on it can succeed only in spoiling it. Aphorisms, like any form of wit, are not meant to be broken down or hashed over. They derive their beauty from their economy of line and their ability to produce a collision in the mind between two separate trains of thought. There is something

highly inartistic and presumptuous about opening up an aphorism, dissecting it, and reassembling the parts into a much larger non-aphoristic whole. You take an aphorism as it is; you don't fool with it or do dissertations on it. An aphorism is like a soufflé; once you start to poke or prod it or take it out of its frame, it falls apart.

This is not all. The notion that the way to test writing ability is to assign a subject gives us the willies. Good writing is something that begins in a man's gizzard. An idea grows inside him until it is ready to pop. The process can be painful or satisfying or both, depending on the idea; but it is a process. We should suppose that the function of the creative teacher is to encourage the student to select his own subject from among the things that are coming to life in his mind. He will never learn to write well unless he develops the ability to dream, to stew, and to be possessed by all sorts of notions that are itching to be expressed.

WHAT is most disquieting of all, however, is the fact of an arbitrary time limit of twenty minutes for writing these essays. What goes on here? A student deserves a high grade if he can think of a good title for an essay in twenty minutes—even before he writes one word. And if it takes two hours or even two days to think through the main points he wants to make in his essay, he will be developing the good habits that go into good writing. What the CEEB does, however, is to separate writing from thinking.

Twenty minutes. Words are not tins of

chipped beef to be assembled at so many per minute. The significant thing about a sentence is not how long it took to be written but whether it has its proper place in a sequence of ideas and conveys its message with reasonable clarity and, if possible, style—difficult though it may be to define anything so amorphous as style. The surest way to destroy good writing is to have a clock ticking away in a man's mind. Thomas Mann felt he had done a good day's work if he produced a single typewritten page that said what he wanted to say—not approximately, not passably, but precisely, with the words turning just right, the weight and the accent where he wanted them, and the contour and texture providing the desired effect.

Would we eliminate the essay altogether from English examinations? Certainly not. What might be done is to get the checking questions out of the way on a separate paper, then ask the student to write an essay of an approximate length—on a subject of his own choosing or one he can select from a fairly long list. He would be substantially free of time limitations; that is, he could spend the rest of the day on his paper if he wished. And he would be free to take time out for consulting books or other materials. Even this approach is somewhat squeezed, but it is far better than the twenty-minute straitjacket.

SOMEWHERE in this favored land there must be English teachers who not only do not commit the literary sacrilege of setting a time limit on an essay but who allow and indeed require their students to spend several days thinking about an idea before presuming to commit it to paper. These teachers are as interested in providing the proper environment for creative writing as they are in the writing itself. They encourage the widest possible reflective reading. They recognize the dangers that come from conditioning students to deal in easy, glib answers. These teachers—and we are convinced there must be many of them—ought to go to the mat with the people at CEEB. Perhaps they might even say that if CEEB persists in its twenty-minute essay requirement, they will instruct their students to skip the question—not because they lack respect for the examining body but because they have too much respect for the English language.

Finally, we quarrel about neatness requirements on English examination papers, wherever such requirements exist. The more crossing out, the more reworking and transposing and inserting of second thoughts, the greater the evidence that a student is fully engaged in that painful but also infinitely rewarding exercise of the human intellect, good writing.

—N.C.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

New Look in Los Angeles

IT TOOK KATHARINE KUH [SR, Apr. 3] to help Los Angeles show our snobbish Eastern friends that Los Angeles is not just a huge, sprawling, cultural five o'clock shadow. That this city boasts more commercial art galleries than any other U.S. city except New York should be equalizer enough for even the most hard-headed of critics.

Probably the main reason Los Angeles's contributions to the world of art go unnoticed until multimillion-dollar splashes wet the East Coast is that the bright lights, the palm trees, the traffic, and the whole air of relaxed excitement that prevails here are too much to digest in one or two visits. The result is that our musicians, painters, sculptors, *et al.*, are either ignored because of the overwhelming variety of other things to do when in Los Angeles or else they slip quietly away to cities that have less to offer.

MICHAEL PARKHURST.

Hollywood, Calif.

I WAS VERY PLEASED with the splendid article by Katharine Kuh about the opening of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and I wish to congratulate you for reproducing on your cover that well-nigh perfect masterpiece by Degas, *The Bellelli Sisters*. My only regret is that Dr. William R. Valentiner was not mentioned, for it was under his directorship of the Los Angeles County Museum that *The Bellelli Sisters* and other treasures were brought to this now famous collection.

EDWIN GILL, Treasurer,
State of North Carolina.

Raleigh, N.C.

Backward Glances

MY BELATED COMMENDATION on your enjoyable new series, *CLASSICS REVISITED*, by Kenneth Rexroth.

The articles recognize the need of your readers to reacquaint themselves with old masterpieces as well as to struggle to keep abreast of significant new works.

SR continues to make a valuable contribution to my liberal education.

BETTY ECKGREN.

Los Angeles, Calif.

Music to Edit By

HATS OFF TO YOUR Jerome Beatty, Jr., for his joshing comments on Seeburg Background Music [SR, Feb. 13]. But he missed the central idea.

Background music is a pleasant way to lead people to do what you'd like them to do—relax on your premises, buy more merchandise, or work with greater efficiency and less tedium. The "tailoring" of Seeburg Background Music simply means we do not provide a factory with a record library designed for cocktail lounges, or suggest that a bank project a warm, friendly spirit with music appropriate to keeping an assembly line on the qui vive.

SR/May 1, 1965



"Sir, I've decided I'd rather wait for a group charter flight!"

Who knows? Maybe someday we'll create a music library for editorial offices! We're working on it.

JOSEPH F. HARDS,
Vice President,
Background Music Division
Seeburg Music Library, Inc.

Chicago, Ill.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Good idea. As a start, we'd suggest that old favorite, "Ghost Writers in the Sky."

Newer Than New

I BEG TO REPORT, from various sources, five experimental combinations with "than" which are entirely new to me and, I hope, to you:

Barely than: Barely had he plummeted into the water than he would twist like an eel around the base of the rock and start climbing up again.

Changed than: Foreman, George intimates, is in a vastly changed mood than the one in which he produced *Guns of Navarone*, a captivating thriller.

Hardly than: Apparently acting on this belief, he had hardly assumed office than he "read the riot act" to the United States and the USSR for their intransigence in international politics.

Half than: About half the calories on the average than a bowl of any other kind of cereal.

Three times as much than: When Elizabeth Taylor is making a movie, she is given

three times as much for her living expenses—apart from that million dollar guarantee—than husband Richard Burton.

Together with *scarcely than*, *preferred than*, *opposite than*, and *twice than*, which I have also observed, these supply new if unwelcome flexibility to the language.

JOTHAM JOHNSON,
Professor of Classics,
New York University.

New York, N.Y.

The Anguished Language

THE BEST EXAMPLE of the misused apostrophe [TOP OF MY HEAD, Mar. 27] I have seen appears in a sign on the wall of the Monterey Coffee Shop, 50 Lafayette Street, in Manhattan. It reads: "Delicatessen—Sandwiche's."

WILLIAM J. MARLOW.

New York, N.Y.

Reprints Available

IS IT POSSIBLE to obtain reprints of N.C.'s recent editorials on Vietnam?

EDWARD HENRY.

Wilmington, Del.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Combined reprints of "Vietnam and the American Conscience" and "How America Can Help Vietnam" are available at the following rates: 1 to 25 copies, 10 cents each; 26 to 100 copies, 8 cents each; more than 101 copies, 5 cents each.