• • •

The second collage essay was on a topic of the student's choice though I had required that there be an essay as a culmination of some independent thinking, writing, and research into his own learning.

Science Is a Verb Not a Noun
by BILL MCNAUGHTEN

When I was younger, still going to grade school, I had the good fortune to spend 4 years at a junior high school where the "doing" of science was given equal footing and emphasis with the "knowing" of science. The scientific inquiry process of Problem, Hypothesis, Experiment, Data, Conclusions, provided a logical framework within which we explored a vast number of physical phenomena.

I've built this pendulum down in my basement, you see. I built it to see if the earth really does turn underneath it like it's supposed to. I've made it from a 500-gram brass weight, some old fishing line, and a piece of bent wire which hangs as a pointer on the bottom. It's not very big, and the air slows it down pretty fast after I start it swinging. But, in twenty minutes it'll move 5 degrees on the circle; I usually go upstairs and eat dinner when I wait that long. Then, when I come back I measure it to see how much it's changed since I started it.

Three nights ago I tried to figure out which way the pendulum was supposed to be moving based on the positioning of my house. I'm not sure what happened, but I came to the distinct conclusion that either the earth was "turning backwards," or something was very wrong with what I had been reading about pendulums. Both prospects seemed highly unlikely, and I tried orienting myself again and again. . . . "OK, that's east and that's north, now the sun rises in the east so therefore I'm moving towards it from the west. Therefore, the earth should turn under the pendulum *that* way . . . but it's not, it's going the other way!"

Conclusion: No need to worry though, I finally figured out that I had been visually imagining the earth as rotating the wrong way. So, at least for the time being, pendulums and the earth still move the way the textbooks say that they do, but it was fun for a while half-seriously thinking that I had discovered an inconsistency in the physics they were teaching us in school.

I now own several gray lab notebooks full of questions, possible answers, details of testing those possibilities: pictures, graphs, descrip-

tions of procedure, and finally, the implications of what we had found; those books are a reminder to me of how learning science can be, delightful and fascinating. Later on though, things were different:

Subject: Chemistry exam—endless pages of information: electron orbitals, valences, radical ion transformations, pH, redox reactions, carbon bending, polarity, etc., etc.

Problem: Why is studying this stuff simultaneously fascinating and boring, science used to be so easy for me?

Hypothesis: Facts, Formalism, Theory; *Reading* about *other* people's ideas and experiments. This is all science "knowing," with no science "doing."

Experiment: Watch what's happening.

Data: Phil, Jack, and I had been studying for the Chemistry exam all day. We had gone over our notes again and again looking for pieces of information not yet memorized. If there was one thing I had learned about Machemer's Chem exams it was that you simply had to know every word he ever said in class. Phil and I had started taping class lectures and then transcribing them back at the beginning of the semester; we were now glad we had. It was the only way you could survive in that class.

Into the night we quizzed each other until we could spout forth information on any subject; mental knee-jerking. Finally, we, Prof. Machemer, and the exams arrived in Lab Science 203, Saturday, December 18, 9 a.m. Silence; nervous pencils, calculators, and slide rules dance and skitter across the desktops.

Two hours later; we emerge, some comparing answers, some staring into space and moving silently off, probably to another exam at noon or three. I consciously pull the flush handle on my mind and drain away all thought of Chemistry from it; I have an English and Philosophy exams on Monday, French on Tuesday, and Calculus on Wednesday morning. I suppress the urge to reward myself for yesterday's hard work; there is too much yet to memorize, and too little time.

Later on, while studying I hear through my window: "Science is the root of all evil. It has destroyed our land, poisoned our streams and wildlife, polluted our air, and threatened our very existence on the planet. We must cease our dependence on this menace to our lives and return to a natural state such as our ancestors knew." As I listened to her speak, I noticed the small pink scar of a smallpox vaccination on her arm, I guess she'd forgotten that it was there.

Conclusion: Two worlds have grown up where there once was just one,
Two worlds co-existing in space.
There peoples divide, then turning walk away,
Only to wind up face to face.

The polarization between science and the rest of human study has many roots, not the least of which are the post-Sputnik math/science push in education, and the technological utilization of the results of scientific inquiry for destructive and inhuman purposes. With technology tooting science as its parent, it is easy for those who see the destruction resulting from the misuse of technology to point at science as being innately amoral or evil. And yet, I have experienced science as a joyful and beautiful thing. Is there something different (wrong) with me? Is there something about science that makes it easier for some people than others? What's wrong here?

Problem: What is science?

Hypothesis: Exploring, observing change, suggesting reasons for change (and testing them).

Experiment: Looking under a rock; watching the night sky; leaning out the air/fuel mixture on a car getting poor mileage.

Data: The process takes asking, takes time, takes patience, takes encouragment, takes taking time to find the right to ask.

Conclusion: Science is the way that we think:
Problem: What's in (under, behind) this?
What will happen if I change this?
What needs to happen to make this better?
Hypothesis: Let's try this and see what happens.
Experiment: "making changes."
Data: getting feedback, experiencing what happens.
Conclusion: what was there, what caused what.

Problem: What to do next?

Hypothesis: How about this. . . . ? . . . etc.

Problem: Is this true? How do we think and learn in "the arts" (which tend to reject science as rigid and uncreative)?

Hypothesis: Science and the arts both involve two directions of study:

1. Outside to Inside—technique, theory, training, discipline; dealing with thought, ideas, and logic; intellectual.

2. Inside to Outside—self-awareness, creative, intuitive, unconscious: dealing with feelings, images, and *doing;* expressive.

Experiment: Observe the "Expressive Arts."

Data: Movement Class: Contact Improv—Starting slow, starting still, unsure partners. Hands held out, fingers almost . . . and then touch; Contact: a single finger tip. Eyes closed, touching only allowed. Neither leading nor led, swaying starts, contact remains: one finger, . . . two, . . . three, . . . one again. One hand swaying, no-see mirror; deep swinging slows at height of reaches then hands fall fluttering. Arms touch and turn, both hands now match each other in motion. Fingers sliding; contact remains, shifting: arm to arm, arm to shoulder, shoulder to back, to hip, to leg, and return. Now back to back, lean and hold; extend and be held; pushing, giving way. No thought, just sensing the contact making itself move or not move; we follow it. Sliding past and around now, maximum contact, interweaving flow, body touch body, waves of motion tumbling across one another, and finally . . . subsiding, slowing, gentle touch of sitting close, only hands moving: together, almost still. One finger touching: Contact.

Concert Choir: "Learn it until you don't need the music anymore, then we'll sing it together." First, we all sing alone reading each note, one by one, trying to "get" the bass (alto, soprano, tenor) lines from the piano into our heads. Stopping repeatedly, individual parts being played, difficult transitions being repeated and emphasized. Now, sing it together; stop: "Altos, measure 24 to the end, bases, top of page 3." Again, together; David wants us to look at him, we want to look at the music; we feel too unsure yet to give up looking at the notes.

Rehearsal again, new music, old music. "Oh, not that one again!" Once through with the music; surprisingly, we do alright with it, well balanced, most notes right. Checking in with David: "We don't know that measure, how does it go? . . . Standing, heads up, no music this time; I begin to listen and hear the others around me. We are "coming together." David marks the pace, but we make the music. Listening to each other we are simultaneously performers and audience, correcting pitch, tone, and rhythm, and reaching for how *this* song should feel. And when we sing for others we don't stop listening to one another, but there is a difference. We become no longer a group of individuals singing together, but a choir, an instrument that plays itself. In that moment, if we have

learned it well, we cease to sing the song, for the song has begun to sing us.

Writing: I didn't plan it, in fact I didn't know the concluding idea and final brilliant point of the paper until I wrote those last two sentences which simply sprang from my hand. I had gotten involved in the writing, I wrote and knew that the writing was going somewhere but I didn't know where. I was spinning a web but I couldn't really see it all until I anchored that last corner and then stepped back to take a look.

Skating class, private instruction:

Kathy Wainhouse, skating instructor: "OK, that's enough time to warm up, now let's see your flip jump."

Me: "Well, let me just practice the beginning a few times so I can remember it and get the sense of it."

KW: "OK, one's enough, now do it this time."

Me: "Well, OK. . . ." (Shaky takeoff, arms flailing, bad landing; I fall and slide on the ice.)

KW: "Your arms were all over the place. Do another one."

Me: "Let me just practice the arms for a second. . ."

KW: "No, just go ahead, you can do it."

Me: ". . . all right (mumbled) . . ." Thoughts racing, ". . . stroke, arm change, turn, down, poke, arms in, head up, then land, arms out, leg back." (Again, shaky, rigid takeoff and fall.)

KW: "Do another one, you're trying too hard and its making you stuck."

Me: To myself, "OK, OK." Few thoughts this time; anger at being pushed . . . turn . . . jump . . . land.

KW: "That was better, you were higher and the takeoff was good. Remember your arms; bring them around."

Me: To myself, "Allright, lets do it, 1, 2, 3, . . . arms in! out! . . . whaaaa! (falling)."

KW: "Bill, You're thinking about it too much, your arms were so strong that you overrotated and fell. Do it again and try to remember how the good one felt. Relax, you'll get it!"

Me: Talking to myself while skating around the rink a few times, ". . . I can do this, and even if I fall it's OK. Whatever happens is just fine; I'm doing this because I want to." One more lap around the rink, not too fast, then turn, poke, jump, land. Without a pause, I skate around for another one: turn, poke, jump, land.

KW: "Good, do another."

Me: No thoughts, . . . feeling the rhythm: swing leg, turn; down, swing, poke; up, spin, land; arms out, leg back.

KW: "Do one more and bring your arms in more this time."

Me: Lapping the rink, images running in my mind I see myself jumping: . . . "arms in" . . . and then turn, poke, arms in, arms out, land.

KW: "Good, keep working on it, don't stop to think about it."

Later—People whizzing everywhere, doing spins, flying camels, lutzes, axels, flips, double flips and loops, and an occasional double lutz or double axel. This is the club practice session for competitive junior skaters. I, 23, self-consciously practice my loop and flip, trying, sometimes unsuccessfully, to stay out of the way of these younger people flashing around me. I do a loop: mohawk, down, spring up, around, land, . . . fall. A skater I had smiled at earlier when she fell laughs and calls to me encouragingly, "I've seen you do those better than that!" I accept her challenge and throw out my self-consciousness. Music comes on, I skate. "Hop, hop, flip," Hmmmm, good. "Hop, hop, flip" . . . better! "Hop, hop, flip" . . . alright! Again and again I jump, no longer isolate, but in concert with those around me, reveling in flight over ice.

Conclusion: Creative expression requires a degree of both external training and internal awareness. Too much emphasis on training results in great flexibility within the limits of a stylized form; too much emphasis on internal processes results in chaotic or simplistic effort with no defining framework.

Essentially, then, scientific exploration is artistic exploration; both are creative. Both say, "Look what's here (inside me or out there); let's look at it; see what it is, does, and feels like; how it acts, moves, responds, and changes. Both need logic, both need intuition (intuition is usually quite logical anyway, even if we cannot immediately see the logic we can usually sense it and how accurate it is). Creativity, as I have come to find, is a very conscious, but only partly intellectual process. To create we need both sides of the brain working because creativity is the melding of details (intellectual) and overall concepts (expressive) to form a specific, accurate, and uniquely human response to the environment.

Problem: What does the writer, dancer, sculptor, musician, artist seek? What does the scientist seek?

Hypothesis: The greatest art begins within human consciousness

and is a response to the universe saying, "*this* is the order, truth, beauty, simplicity that I see underlying all human and natural existence."

The greatest science begins within human consciousness as a response to the universe saying, "this is the order, truth, beauty, and simplicity that I see underlying all human and natural existence."

Experiment: Part #1 Ask questions, observe, draw conclusions, question your conclusions and ask more questions. Observe, make changes, observe some more.

Part #2 Find something that you feel needs changing; change it, see what happened, change it again. Stop, go away; come back in a minute, a day, a year, a life time and see how it looks (feels, sounds, is still working) then. Change it again if you want.

Part #3 Take a thought, image, idea and write it, play it, paint it, make a picture of it, build it, dance it, try it, but *do* it. Don't worry, just *do* it! Better yet, *do* it first without knowing what you're doing it about. Now, *do* it again; keep it the same, organize it, scramble it, move it, reverse it, change it, rearrange it. Then, *do* it again. Quit when you're bored or tired and come back to it later; or push ahead past the boredom and see what happens.

Data: Part #1 This is scientific inquiry.

Part #2 This is how people live their lives.

Part #3 This is how "self-expression" works.

Conclusion: Human beings are creative and think creatively regardless of whether they are involved in doing art, science, or cleaning the bathroom; the process is the same. The ability to do abstract/intellectual creative thinking, and the ability to do expressive creative thinking are not mutually exclusive. They both involve questioning, exploring, testing, observing, making a response, and coming to a conclusion.

For many people, science as they have experienced it in school and in their lives has failed to live up to its creative potential. We have stressed the techniques developed for scientific exploration over the exploration itself. As any dancer knows, too much technique without putting in time to finding out how your body *wants* to move frustrates and stifles the joy of movement. Creativity *is* the nature of our thinking. Let us acknowledge it in ourselves and rejoice in our schools and in our lives at the power of our minds to think, create, respond, and love.

• • •

Because I saw an earlier version in the form of a conventional expository essay with no blips of experiential writing, I think I can see some particular benefits that resulted when he adopted the collage form. The presence of experiential writing seemed to improve his conceptual or "essay" prose here. His language was much more abstract and dead in the earlier draft. And the collage form also seemed to improve his thinking. In the earlier draft he had succumbed to the temptation of almost denying any differences between science and the arts in his eagerness to press home his point about creativity inhering in both of them. Here, the experienced blips, even though a vehicle for his main point about creativity-in-both, nevertheless forced him to do justice to the differences.

15

The Last Step: Getting Rid of Mistakes in Grammar

I suppose I shouldn't talk about "getting rid of mistakes in grammar" because I'm not just talking about grammar strictly defined but also about punctuation, spelling, and mechanics; and because these things are really conventions of usage rather than matters of absolute correctness or error. Whether a given usage is a "mistake" or not often depends on the audience and the situation. But I would rather talk crudely about *grammar* and *right and wrong* since that is the way most of us experience this whole business and that is the way we are going to have to come to terms with it.

Like it or not, there is a deep psychic importance to that whole set of rules and conventions for writing which we tend to sum up loosely as grammar. Grammar is glamour. They are the same word. Like *channel/canal* or *guard/ward* or *porridge/pottage*, the two words just started out as two pronunciations of the same word—a mere matter of regional accent. For grammar *was* glamour. If you knew grammar you were special. You had prestige, power, access to magic; you understood a mystery; you were like a nuclear physicist. But now, with respect to grammar, you are only special if you lack it. Writing without errors doesn't make you anything, but writing with errors—if you give it to other people —makes you a hick, a boob, a bumpkin. Grammar school used to be a special gateway into privilege for a select few. Now grammar school is the lowest, simplest, least special school there is.

The result, oddly enough, is that now grammar often preoccupies people *more* than when it was glamour. People who don't know grammar are liable to think about it all the time when they

are writing. They have only to pick up a pencil and their attention is almost entirely occupied with the question of whether things are right or wrong. They are even liable to feel nervous when they speak—at least if they are speaking to strangers. In addition, lots of people who *do* know grammar well cannot see a mistake in their reading without being completely distracted from the meaning of the words. And it's not just people who know grammar well: everyone gets distracted. The only thing that's different about people who know grammar well is that they find *more* mistakes. (English teachers may be hawk-eyed about mistakes, but actually they are better than most people at paying attention to the meaning of words while still noticing mistakes in grammar.) Grammar is writing's surface. When you meet strangers, you can hardly keep from noticing their clothing before you notice their personality. The only way to keep someone from noticing a surface is to make it "disappear," as when someone wears the clothes you most expect her to wear. The only way to make grammar disappear—to keep the surface of your writing from distracting readers away from your message—is to make it right.

So what follows from this peculiar power of grammar to monopolize people's attention? from the nasty fact that grammar, like sex and money, can only be ignored when it's fine?

Perhaps the most obvious thing that follows is the desirability of learning grammar if you don't know it. (Not the theory of grammar, though that is an interesting subject, but how to write right.) Learning grammar well would free some people from a gnawing if sometimes unconscious insecurity and enable them to hold their heads up in some arenas where they now feel they can't. Happily, it's not hard to find good instruction in grammar. There are lots of courses for people of all ages and lots of good programmed textbooks from which you can learn it by yourself in six months of diligent slogging. For many people, a class brings up intolerable feelings of "Oh, I don't know grammar, I'm an idiot." But a class is probably the best method for ensuring that you keep going. If you take a class, try to shop around to see if you can find a teacher who suits you.

But you can't learn grammar overnight. If you want your words to be taken seriously you have to find some other way to remove the mistakes from your final draft. Mistakes in grammar lead readers to notice other weaknesses. And most readers cannot keep

from assuming, even if unconsciously, that you are stupid if they find mistakes in your grammar. If you weren't brought up to speak and write standard, middle-class, white English, you'll probably be twice penalized for any mistakes in standard written English you make—and not just with white middle-class readers either. Removing errors may well be the most "cost effective" of all revising activities.

You can learn lots of grammar in six months, but it would take two or three times that long to learn everything you need. I, for example, even though I have a pretty good knowledge of grammar, cannot remove enough errors from my final draft to make readers take me as seriously as I want to be taken. I get a friend or two to help me by proofreading. You can't see your own mistakes. Learning grammar is a formidable task that takes crucial energy away from working on your writing, and worse yet, the process of learning grammar interferes with writing: it heightens your preoccupation with mistakes as you write out each word and phrase, and makes it almost impossible to achieve that undistracted attention to your *thoughts* and *experiences* as you write that is so crucial for strong writing (and sanity). For most people, nothing helps their writing so much as learning to ignore grammar as they write.

Short-Range Goal: Getting Rid of Mistakes

I know no other way than to get the help of a proofreader or two for any piece of writing that you want taken seriously. It is best, of course, if you can find someone who is good at finding mistakes. But if none of your close friends has that skill, you can use acquaintances or even find a competent person you don't know. You need to pay back whoever helps you. It won't take long for someone to get rid of mistakes in your final draft—*if* you get rid of all the ones you can find, *if* you provide a clean copy, and *if* you make it clear you don't want feedback on style or content, only correction of grammatical mistakes. (If you pay to have something typed, you can usually find a typist who will also fix mistakes at the same time.) And three careful friends, even if they are shaky in grammar, can get rid of *most* mistakes if you give them a neatly typed copy and use a good handbook for difficult cases. (There are many such books on the market that are designed for easy reference. They are usually called "writers' guides" or "writers' handbooks"

or "writers' indexes." I like one that is put out for secretaries: *Reference Manual for Stenographers and Typists*, Ruth Gavin and William Sabin, 4th ed., New York, 1970.)

Here are the steps that make most sense to me:

- Try as hard as you can to put off till the end of the revising process any attention to grammar. It may take you months to learn to put aside your grammar itch as you write, but it's worth the effort.
- If you have difficulty getting things correct, make sure you write out a fresh copy of your piece at this point. It's much harder to find mistakes if you work with your battle-scarred draft with its crossings-out, tiny words cramped in tinier spaces, and arrows lassoing words back from the margins.
- Take a break so you can come back to this clean copy with fresh eyes. Morning is a good time for fresh eyes and proofreading. Reading it out loud will also help you find mistakes.
- Type your final version or write it out neatly on good paper. Don't use both sides of the paper unless there is some special reason. Avoid thin onion-skin typing paper: it makes reading much more difficult. Your goal is to make your writing easy to read. The physical appearance of your writing has a big effect on how people experience your words.
- Proofread for errors. This is essential, even though you may be sick to death of this piece. Mistakes in copying and typographical errors are almost inevitable. And you will notice some mistakes in mechanics as a result of seeing the words set out neatly in a new placement on the page. Use a friend or two to help find errors. Corrections should be made neatly, but they needn't be absolutely invisible except in the case of very formal or legal documents. Most readers will be pleased, not bothered, to see evidence that you worked right to the end to remove distracting errors.

Long-Range Goal: Learning Grammar

Unless you have an expert secretary always at your disposal or an infinitely patient friend who proofreads well you will probably want to learn grammar. It will not remove the need for proofreaders altogether since it's so hard to find your own mistakes. But you don't have to feel so dependent since their task will be minimal.

Don't make an all-out assault on learning grammar unless you are already very secure in your writing; or unless you have decided for some reason to take a rest from working on your writing. Or unless you are so bothered by your problems in grammar that you can't stop yourself from thinking about them all the while you write, no matter how hard you try to concentrate on your meaning.

But to learn grammar you don't have to make an all-out assault. Lou Kelley* suggests a useful way to learn grammar slowly in a fashion that will not be too distracting. It is, in effect, a way to sneak up on grammar. I have slightly simplified her procedure as follows:

Each time you revise a piece of writing and get help in removing mistakes, pick a few of those mistakes that were most troublesome—especially ones you repeated. Just pick four or five. Don't try to learn everything at once.

For those few errors, try to understand why you made them and what the rule is for getting them right. Your handbook should help you with the rule. Perhaps it is a misspelling that results from the way you tend to hear and pronounce the word. Perhaps it's a grammatical usage that's all right in talking, but not for correct writing (such as "ok" or "everyone got their reward"). Perhaps it is a mistake in punctuation, such as with commas, where there's not a clear rule and you simply need to *feel* what's right. Record these mistakes in a notebook or file, along with the correction, your theory of why you make this mistake, and your best understanding of the rule.

When you next correct a piece of writing, pull out your file or notebook and refresh your memory on the mistakes you are likely to make. This will help you to find them as you correct. But as this list of errors grows, don't look at more than the most recent ten or fifteen. You can't hope to remember everything. You are simply trying for a list of *recent and correctable* mistakes so your mind can be chewing them over—both consciously and unconsciously. You can even throw away old pages after a while since you're not trying for some huge complete catalogue of errors. Your handbook provides that. Your file or notebook should be like a muddy pond with

*See her helpful book on writing, *From Dialogue to Discourse* (Glenview, Ill., 1972).

water coming in one end and spilling out at the other—but getting clearer and clearer over the months and years.

If you are interested in a readable study of the mistakes most often made by people with difficulties in grammar, and an analysis of why they are made, see Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*, New York, 1977.

16

Nausea

Revising is when it may hit you. Revulsion. The feeling that all this stuff you have written is stupid, ugly, worthless—and cannot be fixed. Disgust.

Nausea hits some people at the beginning of the revising process. They have successfully produced pages and pages of words, fast and furiously, or perhaps (unaffected by my preaching) they pondered every word and continually corrected as they went along. But either way, when they turn back to revise, they find *nothing* of value in all they have written.

Nausea doesn't usually hit me at the beginning of revising. I seem to be cheered and reassured just by having managed to produce a pile of writing at all. Besides, I haven't yet put lots of work into the words. Nausea hits me most at the end. I have taken a piece of writing through the entire writing cycle—days and days, perhaps weeks or months. I have revised with great care: gotten into messes, gotten out, cleaned things up, made new changes, and again cleaned up the mess. Finally I am done and I am making a few final corrections or else typing it over when now, after all that work, I find myself completely revolted by my piece of writing. It seems wrong, stupid, trivial—and irredeemable. Especially after all that work. It almost seems as though the more I have invested in it, the more likely that these feelings will hit me.

But I have finally learned that nausea need not ruin everything. If you are a victim you can learn to fight it in various ways. First of all, recognize it for what it is: a stupid game you play with yourself,

a sneak attack by demons, a bad habit. Gradually you will learn to see the pattern in it, a trick your feelings play on you as they try to keep you from being effective. First the demons try to stop you from writing at all. If they fail, then they try to stop you from making some passages strong. If they fail again, then as a last ditch effort they try to trick you into *thinking* that what you have is garbage. They try to trick you either into throwing it away in disgust or else into taking the whole thing apart again and thereby luring you back into the swamp where you will finally give up in exhaustion.

Once you come to understand the pattern of this recurring nausea, you can deal with the feelings: do a freewriting in which you let go and tell how disgusted you are by everything you've written and how worthless it all is. When you give the feelings full rein, it's easier to see them for what they are. Or you can scream or cry the feelings out to a friend or a mirror or a closet. And it may help to turn back to some already completed writing of yours that you know is good—to reassure yourself of your powers.

Finally, learn to be prudent about what you *do* to your writing during these attacks. Acknowledge that when these feelings are upon you, you are in an intellectually and emotionally weakened condition. Don't let yourself engage in taking the whole thing apart again for major revising even though your feelings say, "This thing must be *completely* done over, it's worthless."

That way lies the swamp. Settle for cut-and-paste revising or quick revising. Get done. Don't make any major changes. Get rid of what's absolutely impossible, sweep the extra pieces under the rug, touch up the blemishes, and wipe up the blood and be done with it. Have the courage—the wisdom, really—to settle for something less than terrific, perhaps even something second rate. If you insist that everything you write be your best work, that tells the demons they can shut you down whenever they feel like it.

Besides, suppose it really is as terrible as your feelings say. It's still a mistake to use thorough revising when you are beset by nausea. To go back and unleash the chaos of major overhauling would make sense only if you have lots of time and a deep commitment to the piece. Yet if you have time and commitment there's no point in revising now. You'll do much better to put it all in a drawer and forget about it for a week or three. When you come

back to it you may discover it doesn't need thorough revising, or if it does, you will have the fresh view and energy you need.

Now when your mind is clear you can make a simple rule to cling to later when your mind is clouded: never do major revising when nauseated by your writing.

IV

AUDIENCE

INTRODUCTION

Not paying enough attention to your audience is a problem inherent in the nature of writing itself. After all, in speaking we have our audience right there, hearing each word as we speak it. We can scarcely forget its needs. But writing is solitary. The readers aren't with us as we put the words on paper so we are liable to use only our own frame of reference and ignore theirs. By the same token, of course, readers are solitary, too. They don't have us with them as they read and they lack all those cues they would get from watching our movements and hearing our tone of voice and emphasis. In writing we must get the words on the page so clear that there's no need for audio-visual aids. Thus, readers in their solitariness need more of the very thing that writers in their solitariness are most likely to omit. The moral of the story is obvious: pay lots of attention as you write to your audience and its needs.

But there's another story. For some of the best writing comes from writers not really worrying so much about audience—even letting readers flounder a bit—while they pour all their attention into what they are saying. Look, for example, at the opening of Virginia Wolf's *Mrs. Dalloway:*

> Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.
>
> For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach.
>
> What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her,

> when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising and falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said . . . [and so on].

As readers we get little help in knowing what is happening—we are just plunged into the middle of we're not sure what. More striking still, we get little help in realizing that the beginning of that third paragraph is a flashback (on the sound of door hinges) to thirty years earlier. She is willing for us to flounder for a while and only gradually realize that the location and point of view were changed without warning—and even more gradually figure out what these new locations and points of view are. She couldn't have been saying to herself, "Let's see, how can I begin this novel so that the poor reader is not lost or perplexed?" *If* she was thinking consciously about the needs of her audience during this opening paragraph she must have been saying something more like, "How can I start this novel with words so real that readers don't care a hoot about their own needs and are happy to be disoriented."

"Beware of Virginia Woolf," you may say. "Only people who are already experts should ever dream of taking her for a model." Perhaps. But probably not. At any rate some of the best writing by beginners comes when they just plunge in with full attention to what they are seeing and saying so that they ignore considerations of audience and point of view. And some of their worst writing—both jumbled and flat—comes from worrying too much about audience all the time. Blindingly full attention to your meaning is what often gets the audience with you. And yet of course it is also true that the most frequent *weakness* in the writing of beginners—especially in expository or nonfiction writing—is too little attention to the needs of the reader. It's so easy to take too much for granted and assume that readers will understand you as they usually do in face-to-face speaking situations.

The conclusions then are not obvious about how to think about audience and deal with its needs. Perhaps indeed the theme of this section is paradox.

• Writing is usually a communication with others. And yet the essential transaction seems to be with oneself, a speaking to one's best self.

• Sometimes you can't figure out what you want to say and how to say it till you get into the presence of your audience (or think intensely about it). Yet sometimes it's only by getting *away* from your audience that you can figure out your meaning and how to convey it clearly: your real audience can distract or inhibit you.

• You can't get an audience to listen and hear you till you have something to say and can say it well. Yet I think the process by which people actually learn to speak and write well is often the other way around: first they get an audience that listens and hears them (parents first, then supportive teachers, then a circle of friends or fellow writers, and finally a larger audience). Having an audience helps them find more to say and find better ways to say it.

By taking account of the complexity involved in matters of audience instead of trying to oversimplify things, I think we can work our way through to some clear conclusions. In each of the following chapters I explore one aspect of audience and I conclude each with concrete practical advice.

• In Chapter 17, "Other People" I expore how other people are sometimes a "safe" audience which makes it easier for your to communicate well and sometimes a "dangerous" audience which makes it harder.

• In Chapter 18, "Audience as Focusing Force," I explore the tendency of audiences to suck your words into their point of view. This tendency sometimes is helpful and sometimes must be fought.

• In Chapter 19, "Three Tricky Audience Situations," I explore the special difficulties of persuasive writing, compulsory writing, and uninvited writing, and then suggest ways to deal with these difficulties.

• Chapter 20 could have been called "The Trickiest Audience of All," but I called it "Writing for Teachers."

• • •

Just as it often feels as though schools and colleges would work much more smoothly if it weren't for students, so it often feels as though writing would go better without audiences to worry about.

Yet it may well be (especially if you have already worked hard on your writing) that the one thing your writing needs most is readers. And if you want to give the best gift possible to a writer—and you can—give an audience.

17

Other People

The question is this. Do other people help you or hinder you in your writing? The answer, not surprisingly, is mixed: sometimes they help and sometimes they hinder. But it's worth working out the answer in some detail because it turns out you can do something about it when an audience hinders your writing.

Four Images

1. A mother with her toddler chats with a friend in the parking lot outside Safeway. The child wanders back and forth as far as he can without letting go his grasp of his mother's middle finger, sometimes babbling to himself and sometimes even to his mother and her friend. But he knows they aren't listening, he doesn't expect an answer. He also takes a kind of pleasure in half listening to their talk even though he doesn't understand lots of what they say. Sometimes he comes closer and stares up at the friend's face. In short, the child and the friend could be said to be paying half attention to each other. Then the friend squats down and pays full attention to the child: "How are you? Did you get a cookie in the store?" and the child slides around and hides his face behind his mother's leg. This is not a scary or unknown person. The child has often played with him and will do so again. But his first reaction to full attention is to hide.

2. It is a grey late November Northwest day. I am giving a lecture to a large class—a hundred or so students. I have worked in seminar with some of them. Most of them I know only slightly. I

can't seem to create any coherent speech even though I have clear notes and I got quite excited last night preparing them. I mumble, stammer, bumble. It's not that I don't make any sense at all. I do. I'm saying what's in my notes—after a fashion. But it's halting and cramped and not very clear. It's as though my notes and ideas have left-handed threads and the language in my mouth has right-handed threads. I mumble more than usual, especially at the ends of sentences. A couple of hands go up in the back, they can't hear me, will I please speak louder. I do so, but after a moment or two I lose volume again and a couple of hands go up with the same message. When it happens a third time I'm annoyed. I come from behind the podium to the front of the stage and stand on the very edge—as close to them as I can get. Holding my notes in my hands I start talking again. I feel more exposed without the podium but in a way I don't care because I'm sort of mad. It's as though I'm pushing against them with my chest or my whole trunk. "Damn it, if that's the way you're going to be, then I'll bulldoze right through you with my words." And, suddenly, I can talk coherently. It's not just that they can hear me now because I'm closer and keep my voice up. In addition, the threads of my ideas and speech finally seem to mesh with each other. And I can push those words out and make contact with listeners, make a dent. I can tell I'm being heard. Which helps me find more words. I'm a bit *more* nervous now, nakeder, but I'm able to turn that into some kind of forcefulness or even aggression that had been lacking before.

3. I remember a time in my 20's when I was particularly troubled, scared, having difficulty hanging on. I'd never felt that way before. At moments when I was most frightened of coming apart I would call up one of my friends and ask if I could visit. When I arrived I didn't pour out all my troubles or bad feelings. That's not what I wanted. I wanted to feel regular—like the old me: whole and rational and in one piece. And that's precisely what the presence of a friend automatically permitted me to feel. We would do the regular things and talk in the regular way. Things would snap into perspective. Without even noticing it, I felt reserves of strength and solidity. I no longer felt watery-frightened.

4. But during this same period, being with a particularly close friend or family member occasionally had the opposite effect on me. Instead of helping me be my old regular self—hold on better—the presence of that person somehow drew the threaten-

ing feelings closer to the surface. That made me feel scared of coming apart. I didn't want to utter any of those words that were beginning to appear in my head. I would get the urge to go away and often did: "Well, I guess I have to go now. See you."

The Effects of Other People on Our Words

How, then, do other people affect the way we put out words? I mean to suggest by the four preceding images—all images of getting attention from other people—that the answer is complicated. But also that we can arrive at an answer if we work our way through the complexity.

Sometimes what strikes me first is that other people make it *harder* for us to put out words. The larger the audience, the more nervous we are apt to be. Imagine, for example, that you are talking to someone and having no particular difficulty finding words or saying what you mean. But then your listener, for some reason you can't fathom, bends forward and looks at you more closely and listens more intensely. That's liable to make you examine your words more carefully. Then someone else comes into the room and starts listening, too. Then others, some of whom you don't know. In this progression of increased attention, most people get increasingly nervous. The more we have people listening to us—unless we have complete assurance of their support—the more we are liable to wonder how they will see us and whether they might find us wrong, foolish, unlikable. The child hides behind his mother's leg when given a burst of full attention. It is a natural response.

But this very example of the child reminds us that of course it can work the other way. After you give the child some time to feel safer with the increased attention, he will begin to pour forth a stream of words. More attention will call up a limitless fund of things he wants to tell you: "Do you know what? . . . Do you know what? . . . Do you know what? . . ."

And the other story about getting more and more attention as you talk can be retold to show how increased attention helps you put out words. Perhaps, for example, you start to tell about your vacation and the other person listens with merely polite attention. Your account is a bit perfunctory. But, then, as you start to tell about how your child got hurt, the other person, a parent too, leans forward and gets involved in the story and this leads you to

tell more about how you felt, perhaps even to feel again some of the upset feelings from the accident. When listeners really want to hear what we have to say, they seem to suck more words out of us. When listeners are bored or distracted, it is hard to talk clearly and well.

And even though larger audiences may seem inherently scary, they sometimes serve to give more support and make talking easier. Most of us have had the experience of three or four friends listening intently to us in such a way that we end up finding more words and being more eloquent than usual. People such as speakers, actors, or teachers who address groups know the peculiar power that can come when an audience is really with you. It gives a kind of excitement-plus-support that is exhilarating and leads you to find unexpected words and power. Thus most good, experienced performers are not calm and unruffled before performances. They let themselves feel excitement and even anxiety because they know what to do with these emotions. They don't blot out awareness of the audience; indeed, they probably have more awareness of the audience than a terrified beginner. They come to meet the audience and get the audience to come to meet them, and out of this transaction they build a performance they could not otherwise achieve. By the same token, if you are physically tired or else bored with a topic, an audience can get you *up* so you can concentrate again and invest yourself in it.

In fact, though the attention of other people can make us more anxious, we wouldn't speak at all without that attention. We need other people not just to teach us language but also to listen to us and reply. The wild child brought up only by animals in the woods does not speak at all. Any "back to basics" movement in the teaching of writing needs to start by ensuring each child the most basic thing of all: a real audience for his written words—an audience that really listens and takes the interchange seriously.

We can better understand, then, the effects of other people on our writing if we distinguish between a *dangerous audience* and a *safe audience*. Whether an audience is one or the other is partly an objective matter: are your readers a bunch of hostile critics just itching for you to make a mistake, or are they a crowd of friends or fans who look forward to enjoying what you have to say and won't hold anything against you even if you have difficulties?

But safety and danger are partly subjective matters, too. Some

people are terrified no matter how friendly the audience is, while others are not intimidated even by sharks. Either way, however, you can almost always tell whether an audience is functioning as a safe one or a dangerous one for you at a given moment. You can tell whether the audience is helping or hindering you in your efforts to put out words. (Occasionally it takes you a little while to wake up to the effects of an audience: "Hey, I've been struggling to write this memo for three hours now and hardly gotten anywhere. I thought it would be easy. Oh, yes, that's why I'm stuck. I have to send a copy to———and he's been bothering me for the last six months.")

Most of us have had a teacher or reader who made us want to write—and unfortunately, also, the opposite kind. The safe reader gave us a kind of attention that somehow made us feel respected, taken seriously, and supported, and, as a result, we usually ended up having more and better things to say than we had expected. Because I call him safe I don't mean to say such a reader is always gentle and soft. Some safe readers are tough and demanding but they listen hard, they respect us, they want to hear what we have to say, and in this way they bring out our best skills in writing. The unsafe reader makes us feel that we don't count or that our words are irrelevant and makes it harder than usual for us not only to think of things to write, but also to put down on paper what we already have in mind.

Audiences, then, are the source of the attention we need if we are to be social animals at all, but they are also the source of danger. By paying attention to us, they can help us to find more to say, but that very same attention holds out the possibility that they'll find our words wrong, dumb, boring, or laughable. (The special power of the one-to-one relationship—the *tête-à-tête*—is that it is probably the easiest way to maximize attention and minimize danger. Two listeners have more attention and support to give, but one person's wholehearted attention is easier to get and to hold.)

Sometimes fear of an audience is great enough that we would happily sacrifice attention altogether just to get rid of danger. And that is exactly what it is possible to do in writing if not in the rest of life. Freewriting gives us relief from the danger of readers and attention. When people first do freewriting they usually experience an immediate release from pressure. It doesn't matter what

words come out. In the absence of danger they find new words, thoughts, feelings, and tones of voice they didn't know they had. Most of all, they discover that the process of writing doesn't have to be an ordeal.

• • •

The basic idea, then, is a simple one: when an audience is safe you put out words more easily, when it is dangerous you find it harder. But this simple idea fits the complexities of actual writing experiences better if I add two slight complications.

First, a dangerous audience can inhibit not only the quantity of your words but also their quality. That is, if you are trying to talk to a dangerous audience, instead of finding yourself mixed up or tongue-tied or unable to think of anything to say, you may find yourself chattering away nervously, unable to stop but also unable to say anything important. If, for example, I have to speak to a person or group that I find difficult, I might adopt a voice that hides my real voice and speak with, say, a tinny jolliness or an inauthentic pompousness. If, by contrast, I am with someone I trust, I may say less than usual but talk from my depths—sometimes even revealing more than I wish I had revealed. And so it can occasionally happen that we *feel* an audience is safe that invites us to keep on chattering happily in a gear that is habitual and protective. And we occasionally feel scared or threatened by an audience that invites words from the center. Thus, in the third and fourth images at the start of this chapter, I felt safer in the presence of fairly close friends who snapped me back into my habitual, protected self and helped me to forget about the scary inner feelings, and I felt threatened by the attention of really close friends who seemed to suck difficult words and feelings to the surface.

Second, we must distinguish between real audience and audience in the head. That is, no matter who the *actual* people are for whom we intend these particular words, we are usually influenced by people we carry around inside our heads. We have a habitual way of relating to readers-in-general, and we have some particular memories of past audiences in our heads which can get triggered by present circumstances. (For example, some people always "talk down" no matter whom they are talking to; and some people, whenever they deal with an authority figure, revert to the tone

they used toward the junior high school assistant principal who kept them after school.)

When you are writing it is usually easier to notice the effect of the actual audience than the effect of the audience in your head. For example, you will quickly notice if a particular report is unusually hard to write because the reader is someone who is currently giving you a hard time. Or perhaps a story or poem is a joy to write because you are writing it as a gift for someone you love.

Because the audience in your head is invisible yet always there, you may be unaware of it and of its subtle effects. If you are scared of speaking or writing to most audiences even when they are supportive and caring, you are probably responding to a dangerous audience you carry around in your head all the time (a dangerous audience that probably derives from some real audiences in the past that were dangerous for you). If there's one particular person who flusters you as audience even though you know he is supportive and caring—perhaps a particular administrator or teacher—you can assume that he must somehow trigger your reaction to a dangerous audience in your head.

The audience in our head usually affects us more when we write than when we speak. When we speak, the real audience is right there dominating our attention and drowning out other audiences. When we write, however, all audiences are in the head, even the real audience. In the dark of the brain a real audience is easily trampled by an insistent past audience.

To summarize, we can get a pretty good understanding of how other people affect our writing if we look at these three factors: Is the audience safe or dangerous? Does it affect quantity or quality of words? How much are we being affected by the real audience for these words and how much by some other audience we carry around in our heads?

Dangerous Audience. When you experience an audience as dangerous: (a) it may make you so anxious that you actually cannot write at all; or (b) it may make you merely nervous, preoccupied with mistakes you might make, unable to find words naturally and smoothly, and, hence, unable to concentrate easily on your thoughts; or (c) it may not inhibit words or thoughts at all, but lead you into a protective voice which makes you feel safer, but drains your language of power.

Safe Audience. When, on the other hand, you experience an audience as safe or eliciting, it opens you out: you think of more ideas, feelings and images; words come more easily. But on a few occasions a safe audience can threaten you by making you feel things inside you that you'd rather not feel.

Safe Nonaudience. When you write for no one—for the wastebasket, for yourself, for the process itself—words often come pouring out of you. You find new voices, sounds, and tones.

Dangerous Nonaudience. But when you feel you have no real audience at all—no one who cares what is on your mind either immediately or in the future—you are likely to drift into dull muteness: to feel as though you have nothing to say, nothing on your mind, no thoughts to share.

Advice

• If you are having a harder than usual time writing something, it may well be because the audience is dangerous for you or is triggering a reaction to a dangerous audience inside you. You can usually improve the situation by changing your audience for your early writing. Either ignore audience altogether and do lots of fast freewriting (as in the loop writing process). Or do your early writing to some very different audience that brings out your best. For example you can address a draft of your technical report to your loved one—even permitting yourself some of the fun and games your make-believe audience inspires. You will have more to say—even on the technical subject—you will get more life into the words, and you will produce your draft more quickly than if you had written to the difficult audience. You'll then find it's not hard quickly to revise your peculiar first draft to fit the real audience—getting rid of what's inappropriate, but saving the good ideas and the juice.

Since the pervasive effects of audience in the head are trickier (and more common in writing than speaking) the remaining pieces of advice are aimed at dealing with them.

• Are you almost always frozen or blocked in your writing? Fear of audience-in-general is probably holding you back. Even if your actual audience is sweet and loving, you are probably still reacting in your head to past audiences who were not. Do lots of freewriting for no audience at all and experiment with a safe audience.

• Do you get the writing done but find yourself always self-conscious, always worrying about whether your writing is good enough, always worrying about mistakes? This, too, probably comes from fear of a dangerous audience you carry around in your head. Lots of freewriting without an audience will help here too—and experiments with a safe audience.

• Do you find yourself trapped in a voice that you sense is somehow fake or unreal? Perhaps stiff or too cute or fake-sincere? Freewriting will help—that is, the use of a safe *non*-audience. The safety encourages real voice. But it may not help as much as sharing your writing with an actual audience that is safe. For if you already write fluently, but your voice lacks power, you may freewrite hour after hour—weeks and even months—in a gear that is, in the last analysis, defensive. Your safe, habitual, and fluent writing is the path of least resistance. And, in a sense, your writing works just fine: it's easy for you to get your ideas onto paper. But your lack of voice makes it hard for you to get your ideas into readers.

A safe audience can help you break out of your protective but ineffective voice. Most people lack a safe audience or at least do not make use of one they could use; for example, a friend who simply likes to read and appreciates what you have written. But if you look you can find one or more people who want to provide this support for each other. (See Chapter 3, "Sharing.") Even though the absence of audience removes objective danger, only the presence of live supportive readers gives you positive safety.

• Is your writing almost always too complicated and elaborate? Too many twists and turns in your train of thought, too many qualifications in your argument? This is a frequent problem for writers in the academic world—both students and teachers. It is probably because you are locked into some kind of combat with an audience. As you write you are wrestling with those critical readers—those piercing intelligences who are just waiting to pounce on a careless mistake or a naïve assumption. You are busy shooting down every possible objection before it gets a chance to take flight. As a result you can never permit yourself simply, calmly, and in a friendly way just to say what is on your mind.

Force yourself to write as if you were writing to friends. Explain what's on your mind as though your readers—is it possible?—are just itching for a chance to understand and enjoy what you are say-

ing. Have the courage to stop wrestling with the foe and give gifts to allies. You will surprise yourself at how much easier it is to write—and how your argument often turns out more persuasive even to adversaries. And it needn't be make-believe: write early drafts to friends who really will read you this way.

• Are you wallowing in safety? Just words and words, pages and pages, but none with focus or electricity? You may need *more* real audience for your writing. Perhaps even a dangerous audience. It will help you get more *up* for your writing, help you make the writing process a bit more of a performance in the good sense of the word. Those feelings of excitement, anxiety, perhaps embarrassment: you can't have the attention of readers without them.

And if you must write to a difficult audience (in fact or in your head), don't forget about the possibilities of *confronting* them: forcing yourself to look them in the eye, to make contact with the enemy, instead of taking refuge in safety. You probably have to get mad, but you may thereby find an unexpected source of strong and coherent words. This is what happened to me on that occasion when I was having such a hard time lecturing.

• • •

A child cannot learn to speak unless he has other people around him (and it seems to work best if they are loving people). Yet after he has learned language he can speak and write in total solitude. There is a profound principle of learning here: we can learn to do alone what at first we could do only with others. From this principle I derive my final item of advice and sum up this whole matter of safe and dangerous audiences. We should use an audience—and especially the support of a loving audience—as much as we can and as long as it helps. But the goal should be to move toward the condition where we don't necessarily need it in order to speak or write well. Probably for a long time we will be hurt by people's disapproval, ridicule, or indifference to what we write. It is sensible to avoid dangerous audiences if they hold us back in the work of learning to improve our writing. But we need to learn to write what is true and what needs saying even if the whole world is scandalized. We need to learn eventually to find in *ourselves* the support which—perhaps for a long time—we must seek openly from others.

18

Audience as Focusing Force

I prepared my lecture carefully. I arrive and start in and suddenly realize I have the wrong approach. I thought carefully last night about what I was going to say and worked out a focus, but now that I see my audience I realize it's the wrong focus for them. The presence of the real audience gives a new orientation to the material in my head.

A teacher is asked a hard question in class. He thinks for a few seconds and then turns around and walks to the corner of the room, hunches over a bit, closes his eyes and scrunches up his face and thinks silently for a full minute—perhaps two. Then he comes back and cheerfully tells what he has figured out.

In this chapter I propose a slightly different image of the audience in order to emphasize a different way in which other people affect our writing. Instead of concentrating on other people as safe or dangerous—as creatures who either cheer us on or suck lemons as we try to play our trumpet—I will concentrate on audience as a kind of magnetic field which exerts an organizing or focusing force on our words. As we come closer to an audience, its field of force tends to pull our words into shapes or configurations determined by its needs or point of view. As we move farther away from the audience, our words are freer to rearrange themselves, to bubble and change and develop, to follow their own whims, without any interference from the needs or orientation of the audience. Even if an audience is safe, it still exerts this focusing force.

• • •

Different kinds of writing imply different distances from an audience. At the near extreme is audience-oriented writing. You are

writing to a particular audience and the whole point is to produce a particular effect. Unless the words have that effect you won't get the money or the contract or the job, you won't get into college, no one will come to your meeting. This is get-the-results writing.

At the opposite extreme is get-it-right writing. You don't care whether readers like it or not. The only result that counts is the satisfaction that comes from getting it the way you want it. Perhaps you are writing a poem or story and you have decided you are the only judge that counts. Or you are writing to work out the truth about something important to you and you are trying to serve truth, not readers. Maybe the writing will in fact go to readers; maybe they'll like it; that's nice. But if they don't, that's their problem, not yours. (Of course you may *use* readers for get-it-right writing. Their reactions can help you enormously—but for getting it the way you want it, not the way they want it.)

Audience-oriented or get-the-results writing is pragmatic and it's usually only a part of some larger transaction with people. Memos, letters, reports, applications are typical examples. The writing is a means to an end. After you have gotten the results you can often happily throw the writing away. Get-it-right writing, on the other hand, is usually writing as an end in itself. No matter what nice things result from having written it, you won't want to throw it away. Because pragmatic writing is part of a larger action-in-the-world, it often involves deadlines and so you are often writing in a hurry. Get-it-right writing, on the other hand, since audience doesn't count so much, is often more leisurely.

If you know at the start that this is a very audience-oriented piece of writing, such as a memo or letter of application, try concentrating on your audience and your purpose right at the very beginning. As you start to write, or even before, picture your audience in your mind's eye and figure out just how you really want to affect them—and then write very much *to* them. If this strategy works, it will save you much time and effort. The presence of the audience in your head will give your words more focus, will help you thread your way among the many things you could say to what you should say. You won't have to waste your time with inappropriate approaches you will later discard. You won't have to try to write everything you know. The problem of how to reach this particular audience may even help you figure out something important you've never understood before.

When you establish in your head a good relationship with your audience, suddenly your writing runs strong and clear. You can find words and they are right. You are looking readers in the eye and directing your words right to the center of their brains, not staring at their shoes or mumbling distractedly as you stare at the ceiling. When this works, everything clicks.

If, for example, you are writing to the school board to protest a certain policy, you will avoid some of the commonest writing problems if you keep those readers vividly in mind. You will be less likely to get off onto a tangent about how smart and delightful your child is, or how terrible you feel because of the way you've been treated, or what bastards they are, or what the seven most important educational principles are that you learned in a certain book. Seeing school-board members in your mind's eye will help you keep to the main point, figure out your best argument, and help you realize when you are likely to bore them or anger them or make them condescend to you. Sometimes you can't even figure out what you need to tell people till you see them. That's what happened to me when I worked out my lecture alone and then tried to give it to the real audience and realized I had the wrong approach. I hadn't done enough to make contact with my audience in my mind the night before.

But of course sometimes this strategy doesn't work. Keeping the audience in mind may hinder your efforts to write. Instead of your language running strong and clear, it gums up or goes dead. Perhaps you know those members of the board and three of them intimidate you. Keeping them in mind makes you nervous, stilted, unable to think straight—just as you would be if you were standing there in front of them in the official meeting room with polished tables. Or perhaps you don't know them at all and that blocks you: sitting down and writing to these official names-without-faces suddenly brings back all the anxiety you have ever felt about mysterious authority figures.

But it's not just danger that can make an audience hinder you. What concerns me in this chapter is the focusing or organizing force they exert. Perhaps, for example, you are writing a background research paper for a friend who is running for political office. You are not at all intimidated by her but she sees everything polarized in terms of republican-or-democrat. Every time you try to write *to* her, you get sucked into that polarization—either giving

in to it or spending all your energy just fighting it. Keeping your audience in mind prevents you from working out the truth and saying clearly what *you* need to say. You finally realize that you need to ignore her, get yourself out of her magnetic field, do lots of fast first-draft writing to help your thinking cook on its own. When you finally work out clearly what you have to say, then it is safer—indeed necessary—to move back into the field of force of your audience so it will help you shape your material to her concern with party division.

Or perhaps you are writing a story for a particular magazine, say a children's magazine. Again, you are not threatened, you have written others before. But every time you start to write to your child audience your writing slips into certain overworked or corny patterns. You feel the pull of certain audience expectations—or of certain habits or expectations you have with this audience—sucking you down paths you sense you should avoid. You finally realize you have to move out of the field of force exerted by that audience, write the story as *it* wants to be written—let it grow in the directions it is trying to grow in—no matter how inappropriate the result may be for this audience. When it is finished you can make some changes in it—perhaps even very radical changes. You can change inappropriate language, leave out whole episodes, entire characters, change the plot. That may sound like radical mutilation, but it can lead to a deeper "rightness"—verbal and textural integrity—than you can usually achieve by constantly fiddling and adjusting and adapting your story to your audience *as* you are trying to write it for the first time.

And what you usually discover is how little you need to change to fit it to the audience, even though you were ignoring its needs as you wrote. (See Auden's poem "The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning" for a wry treatment of this point.)

• • •

Again a paradox. When you attend to audience from the start and let your words grow out of your relationship with it, sometimes you come up with just what you need, and in addition your words have a wonderful integrity or fit with that audience. Everything is on target. But sometimes the effect is opposite. The audience hinders your writing by exerting too much pull on you (or intimi-

dating you). And occasionally when you think too much about audience, your words are too heavy with audience-awareness. Your words feel too much like those of a salesman who is trying too hard to make "audience contact."

But it's not really so much a paradox as an occasion for exercising choice and staying in charge of your own writing process. That is, you can choose *when,* during the writing process, to enter into the magnetic field exerted by the audience. If your piece is audience-oriented and if you are in a hurry, you should try entering into it at the beginning and staying in it. You may be lucky and not have to do much revising. But if that keeps you from being as inventive or creative as you need to be, then stay out of reach of your audience and approach it later, during revising.

Your choice about when to enter the audience's field of force will also be affected by your own temperament. Some people are better at writing from within the circle of audience, others are better at writing from outside it. Some people, that is, are good at audience contact, at talking while they look their listener in the eye. They find it natural to speak and write in ways that fit particular audiences. They are good at feeling the listener's point of view and speaking appropriately. They are good at letting the audience sit inside their head and have a say in how the words come out.

I lack this skill. I'm bad at thinking while I look my audience in the eye. Sometimes I can't even figure out what I'm feeling till I look away or close my eyes. (I am not, however, the teacher I pictured at the start of the chapter who goes into the corner to think. I'd probably teach better if I dared do that.) It makes me mad that some people should be so good at something I find so difficult.

It has taken me a long time to realize that even though such audience-oriented writers have an enormous advantage over the rest of us, they are simply displaying *one kind* of verbal intelligence, and the rest of us have another kind. It sounds odd to say but we are good at *excluding* the audience from a place in our heads as we write. We non-audience-oriented temperaments are better at speculating, musing, flying high, or diving deep—letting words and thoughts lead us where they are going despite the pull of audience. When I can stop being jealous of the audience-oriented writers long enough, I can also be smug: those folks got good grades in writing all the time and can get their memos and

reports written more quickly and fluently than I can, but they aren't so good at freeing themselves from audience needs and expectations and coming up with what is original and authentic.

Thus audience-oriented verbal intelligence is in a way more practical and realistic than the other kind, but it is important to realize that neither is superior. They simply represent two different linguistic muscles, two strategies for putting out words, two distances at which to sit from an audience as you think. If you have the first sort of temperament, you are probably better at getting things written quickly, clearly, and in a way that fits the audience. You have an enormous advantage for the kinds of writing required in school or business and the practical world. If you have the other kind of verbal intelligence you are probably better at getting-it-right writing: letting your own piece develop according to its own internal potentialities (and in your own interests) and not caring so much about the needs of audience.

Because the audience-oriented temperament is so much better for the quick execution of pragmatic writing tasks, many people with the other temperament simply conclude that they are congenitally bad at writing. And they are often branded as dumb or illiterate in school. They give up and don't learn to *use* their brand of verbal intelligence (which mostly means learning to revise enough to *harness* what they have figured out for an audience). They end up never writing. But still, some of the great works of speculative thought and imaginative literature are deficient in audience contact: the writers didn't give a damn about audience. They produced works that are difficult and obscure—organized in the worst possible way for someone who doesn't already understand the ideas or partly share the vision. Conversely, some writing that is especially clear to readers is, as it were, *too* clear. It succeeds too well in merely following the beaten paths that already exist in readers' heads. It lacks originality or authenticity in thought or language.

Once you realize that we are dealing here not with a matter of good and bad writers but rather with two complementary habits of relating to an audience, you can learn to exploit your strong side instead of just feeling bad about your weak side. The important thing is that you get to decide how far away from your audience to sit while you do most of your writing. If you are more like me you will find it better to ignore audience as you write and then during

revising make a special effort to orient what you have to say to the audience. If you have the opposite temperament and skill, you may find you get things written best if you keep mental contact with your audience as you write. Indeed you may even want to use some of your revising efforts for trying to *break out* of audience orientation, instead of trying further to adapt your material to their needs.

But in addition to using your strength for tasks at hand you can gradually work on your weak side. I need to practice writing while I look my audience in the eye. It will help me be quicker in writing pragmatic audience-oriented pieces. Audience-oriented writers need to practice detaching themselves from the pull of audience and encouraging a drift of focus, an evolution of organization, bubbling.

The only thing to watch out for—especially if you have a non-audience-oriented temperament—is the feeling that says, "I'm a *writer* not a mere communicator. I don't care about pragmatic success with readers, I care about *quality*." The truth is that even if you are writing something that won't ever go to an audience, you often can't get it the way *you* want it till you spend some of your writing or revising time thinking of this piece in terms of a particular audience and situation. For I overstated earlier the advantages of staying away from an audience if you want creativity and cooking. Audience is not the only influence on your words that may prevent them from evolving into new and different orientations. This same kind of inhibition can come from yourself. Often you cannot get an essay out of its rut or find that central image your poem needs till you go up and sit almost in the lap of a powerful imaginary audience and do some more writing. Sometimes you need to overpower your *own* field of force in order to shake things up and produce new growth, and you can best do this by visualizing your audience so they are vividly present to you as you write, and directing your words to them. (It can help to work with a sharing group.)

Summary and Advice

- Beware the common advice that has blocked so many people over the years: that you must *always* keep your audience in mind from the beginning of any piece of writing. This is wrong just like

that other common advice: that you must *always* figure out your meaning before you start. The point is that figuring out your meaning and keeping your audience in mind are both *focusing procedures*. If you already have plenty of good material in your mind, or too little time, you may want to focus your mind before you start writing. But if you want your best insights you are probably better off avoiding focus for a while. Here's a correct statement of the rule: *sometime* before you finish writing you must figure out your meaning and think about your audience; and then revise strenuously in terms of this focus.

- Get a feeling for what it's like to write from inside and from outside the magnetic field of your audience and for the temperament that usually goes with each. Figure out which is your strength and which your weakness so you can exploit the one and gradually strengthen the other.
- Learn, therefore, to take conscious control over when you bring to bear the focusing effect of audience on any writing project. For example:

  If your piece is unfocused and wandering, continually bubbling, and you want to *end* the fission or chain reaction, bring your bubbling pot closer to the audience: that is, bring your audience more strongly to mind and write more *to* it.

  If it won't bubble enough, if you can't find enough to say, if you feel stuck saying dull or obvious things, try ignoring your audience and following the words where they want to go or else writing to very different audiences (as in the loop writing process).

  Don't forget, however, the possibility that your writing may be stuck because it's too much in *your own* magnetic field. Try concentrating *more* on audience and perhaps address yourself to other audiences. That could start the bubbling that you need.

19

Three Tricky Relationships to an Audience

Perhaps you've noticed there are two distinct *kinds* of difficulty in writing. One kind feels as though you are straining to lift a heavy load of bricks onto your shoulder or struggling to carry something unwieldy across a stream with only slippery stepping-stones to walk on or trying to thread a needle whose eye is almost invisibly small. Taxing or scary or frustrating but also clean, hard work.

But there's that other kind. You are trying to fight your way out from under a huge deflated silk balloon—layers and layers of light gauzy material which you can bat away, but they always just flop back again and no movement or exertion gets you any closer to the open air. Or you are lost in a dense fog with no sense of direction—or rather just enough sense of direction to realize you are going in circles. Or you are sinking slowly into swamp mud and every effort to crawl or swim gets you in deeper. Or you are trying to saw through a thick plank and the harder you try the tighter your saw gets stuck in the cut. It's this kind of difficulty that makes you feel helpless and angry and finally stops you.

I have learned that when my writing feels difficult in the first way, it is a sign that I am indeed wrestling with the difficulties of writing itself: figuring out my thoughts, working out the logic, finding language for what is just barely emergent in my mind, or finding the right approach for a difficult audience. But when I experience that second kind of difficulty, it means I haven't yet managed to get my teeth into the writing task itself. There is some mix-up. Often it is because I am going about my work in a self-defeating way—perhaps trying to edit my words carefully while

I'm only just writing out my earliest tentative thinking. But often it's a mix-up about audience. This feeling of working at cross-purposes to my goal—this continual racing of the motor while the gears refuse to engage—often comes from being afraid of the audience or confused about who it is or mistaken about what I am trying to do to it.

I talked in the last chapters about the difficulties caused by dangerous audiences—inside and outside your head—and how to work on these difficulties. And about how to use or avoid the focusing or organizing force exerted by audience. But in addition there are certain relationships to an audience that are inherently tricky because at the same time that they make it hard to write well, they also keep you from realizing what is causing the difficulty. Here are the three that I have noticed as I watch myself and others struggle: writing when you are trying to persuade readers, when readers are compelling you to write, and when your writing is entirely uninvited.

A. Persuasion

"Can't you see how wrong you are?"

There is nothing tricky about those occasions when you can use what could be called *straightforward persuasion*. You can jump right in and give good information, argue with reason, and season the whole thing with good manners. For example:

- Your committee (company, neighborhood, school) has to choose between three plans. You have been appointed to study and recommend one. Your report will go to people in an audience who have not made up their minds yet. Indeed they are really asking you to help them make up their minds. They don't want tricky tactics or emotional appeals, they just want the best information and arguments. Your task is similar if you want to persuade them but are not yourself on the committee.
- You are writing a letter to the newspaper to persuade readers to vote for a certain candidate or measure, but you are trying primarily to sway the undecided readers, not the enemy. (Some studies show that more people read letters to the editor than any other section of most newspapers.)
- You are writing a job application or applying for a scholarship.

You know the reader has to give someone the job and is trying to find the best candidate and so will read your qualifications with interest. It's important in such pieces of writing not to be bashful, roundabout, defensive, or coy in telling your strengths. In a kind of neutral, disinterested, and succint way, you must frankly brag. (If the reader has a huge stack of applications to read; he will probably make a lot of 60-second eliminations in order to cut the number of applications down to manageable proportions before reading them carefully. Therefore, you must summarize your best material in your opening paragraph or cover sheet—don't include there anything questionable that could be used to eliminate you.)

What makes these occasions for straightforward persuasion is that your readers are open to your words either because they have not made up their minds or because you have some kind of authority on the topic or because they need to make a decision and are therefore open to new information or arguments. Your job is clear: to present the best information and arguments in the most reasonable and human way.

Before going on to tricky persuasion I suggest this one simple but deep strategy for straight-forward persuasion. Try hard to find good arguments for your position, but then try even harder to find arguments to refute yours. Then figure out how to answer those refutations. That is, the doubting game or the dialectical process turns out to be a powerful way to generate good persuasion. The strength of your argument depends more than anything else on your willingness to be a smart lawyer for the opposition. The only problem with this strategy is that you sometimes discover your original position is wrong. But that's useful information, too.

• • •

What concerns me in this chapter, however, are tricky audience situations and, in this case, I am thinking about the many times when you are trying to persuade someone in a straightforward way but actually you are wasting your time.

• You are writing a letter to the newspaper to persuade readers about a certain bill or candidate or situation, but this time your position is a minority one. Perhaps you want to argue for an end to all armaments—or income taxes or welfare. Or perhaps you are writing about a polarized issue like some of the recent bottle-deposit bills and you are not satisfied just to write to the relatively

few middle of the roaders with open minds. If your bill is to win, you've got to *change* some of your opponents' minds.

- You are trying to dissuade someone from dropping out of college or hitchhiking around the country or divorcing you. Or trying to persuade your reader to accept your decision to do one of those things.
- You are writing an article or pamphlet or leaflet to persuade workers at a nuclear plant that nuclear power is a bad thing; or to persuade intellectual undergraduate women that abortions should be illegal.

What makes these attempts at persuasion tricky is that you are addressing your words to people who have a *stake* in what you are trying to refute. You are caught in a bind. The more you try to persuade them, the more their stake in their view causes them to dig in their heels. For you to win they must define themselves as losers. You can't argue without making your readers into your enemy, and enemies can't be persuaded—only beaten. But you can't beat people with words—or at least not if they don't consent to be beaten—because of that brute fact about reading: words only work if they are inflated with human breath and it's the reader who has to do the blowing.* Why should the enemy pedal if you are steering where he doesn't want to go? "Let me come up to your tower and show you that you are stupid for opposing deposits on bottles," but your reader has to haul you up in the hand-crank elevator. Why should he? "Let me show you movies to prove you are a murderer for condoning abortion," only the reader has to crank the generator to make electricity for your movies.

So what can you do? Trick them? Say "I have a wonderful trip I want to show you, you'll love it," and get them to pedal while you steer and then suddenly take a turn down the path they hate? Keep your destination secret? "Have you ever thought about the fact that all men are mortal? Odd, isn't it? And perhaps you haven't ever looked at it this way before, but, you know, Socrates is a man. HA HA! GOTCHA! Socrates is mortal!"

If your readers have a stake in what you are arguing against, you cannot take straightforward persuasion as your goal. You must resist your impulse to change their beliefs. You have to set your

*See the beginning of Chapter 27, "Breathing Experience into Words," for a fuller account of this aspect of the reading process.

sights much lower. The best you can hope for—and it is hoping for a great deal—is to get your readers just to *understand* your point of view even while not changing theirs in the slightest. If you can get readers actually to entertain or experience your position for just a moment, you have done a wonder, and your best chance of getting them to do so is not by asking them to believe or adopt your point of view at all.

In short, stop trying to persuade the enemy and settle for planting a seed. If you think about the way people actually do change their beliefs—which is rarely—it is usually a gradual process and depends on a seed lying dormant for awhile. Something has to get them to a position where they might say, "Imagine that. He actually believes that stuff and he's not crazy. I never could imagine a sane person thinking the country could get along without an army. I always thought it was some kind of emotional hang-up—something odd said by people who have a thing about uniforms or guns or something. I didn't realize that there really were coherent arguments. Of course they are all wrong, deeply misguided arguments, but now I can see why they appeal. It's interesting to know what it's like for a person to actually see things that way."

If you can get a reader to take your point of view for just that one conditional moment—to inflate your words with his breath—then future events will ocassionally remind him of the experience. Contrary views are inherently intriguing. And if your position has any merit, your reader will begin—very gradually of course—to notice things that actually support it. For the first time, for example, he will begin to notice specific incidents when armies or armaments increase danger to his country rather than decrease it. A seed is the best you can hope for.

So how do you plant a seed? You do it by getting the person actually to see through your eyes. There are many ways of doing this, but I think they all depend on one essential inner act by you: seeing through his eyes. And it's not enough just to do it as an act of shrewd strategic analysis: "Let's see what actually passes for thinking in the minds of those rednecks." For them to experience your point of view even for a moment, they must let down their guard. You can't get them to do so unless you let down yours, too: actually experience *their* point of view from the inside, not just analyze it. Though persuading can employ the doubting game, planting a seed calls for the believing game.

What does this mean in practice? If you relinquish your effort to make readers change their beliefs and settle instead for trying to get them merely to entertain yours for a moment, and if you start with an honest attempt to see things through their eyes, you will find a whole range of specific ways to write your letter, article, or report—depending on your skills and temperament. You can trust your instincts once you understand your goal: somehow to persuade readers to work *with* you rather than against you in the job of breathing life into your words. For example, if I were writing a short article or leaflet to readers with a stake in what I'm trying to refute, I wouldn't say, "Here's why *you* should believe nuclear power is bad." How can I get them to invest themselves in words which translate "Here's why you've been bad or stupid"? I would take an approach which said, "Here are the reasons and experiences that have made *me* believe nuclear power is bad. Please try to understand them for a moment."

There are various ways to try to get readers to work with you. Your best choice depends upon your temperament and the circumstances. But if you are trying to change deeply held beliefs, autobiography, biography, and fiction turn out to be among the most effective types of writing. After all, changing a belief requires having an experience, not just getting some information or logic, and it's not surprising if imaginative and experiential writing sometimes prove more effective than argument.*

It's no accident that people so often use arguments on the enemy that only work on allies. Most of the things that *feel* like good arguments only work on people who agree with you or are at least open-minded. It's all too easy, as you are writing along in your room, to start hammering home arguments which prove resoundingly that the enemy is *wrong!* These feel like good arguments because of a mix-up about audience. We have let ourselves forget the real audience and started to write a speech about the evils of nuclear power that is just perfect for people who already believe nuclear power is evil. It would bring down the house at an anti-nuclear rally. But unfortunately it will make no headway at all on someone who doesn't already agree.

*There is an interesting literary problem opening up: how can you write what could be called propaganda, but is honest and doesn't make the reader feel manipulated—in short, good literature? It no longer seems as self-evident to me as it once did that good literature and propaganda must be contradictory categories.

So what works on opponents? There is no simple answer. You need feedback to find out. Very few people get accurate honest feedback from an opponent as to how their arguments are working—feedback that says, "Here's what it felt like being your opponent and reading your words. Here are the places where you actually made a dent on me, made me listen, made me actually consider your words seriously, and here are the places where you just made me dig in my heels all the harder against you." The only occasion when we are likely to get sincere, thoughtful feedback from an opponent is when we write something for a teacher who happens to disagree. But teachers usually don't give you "here's-what-it-felt-like-to-be-your-enemy" feedback. Usually they try to extricate themselves from combat and give you more theoretical feedback about the quality of your reasoning and use of evidence—feedback on exactly those techniques of persuasion that won't work here because they only work on disinterested readers with no stake in the issue.

What you need then more than anything else is feedback from opponents. It's not easy to get, but it's possible. Find a friend who is an opponent on your issue and coax him to give you honest feedback. To get a helpful opponent you may have to ask a favor of a friend's friend. And if you can't make a friendly contact with someone who disagrees strongly with you on the issue you are writing about (shouldn't that be cause for concern?) you can practice on other topics where you and your friends actually disagree.

Summary and Advice

- For any persuasive writing, take time to think carefully about your relationship to your audience and what you are asking of it. Can you really hope to make those people *agree with you* or should you settle more realistically for just trying to get them to *listen to you*? Have they made up their minds yet? If so, how much stake do they have in the view you want them to abandon? Do they have any special reasons to listen to you? Is there some authority you have which they will accept? Is there some new decision or action they must perform that might make them willing to consider new information and arguments? In short, are you trying to persuade or to plant a seed?
- How much do *you* have at stake in the issue? If you are argu-

ing for one of your important beliefs, you will probably have an almost irrepressible urge to make readers agree with you—an urge that may destroy any chance of success.

- Get accurate feedback—especially from the enemy. Find readers who will tell you honestly what their position was before they read your piece, what happened to them as they read, and what changes, if any, were finally produced in their views. It's often discouraging feedback because words seldom produce change of position, but if you are trying to persuade, perhaps the most useful thing you can learn is how seldom it is possible.
- There's one more strategy that does wonders whether you are trying to get someone to agree or just to listen: be right. If you're right you can sometimes succeed even though your writing has serious weaknesses. Reality helps you make your case. (It's not foolproof, of course, since sometimes being right makes you so insufferable that people are willing to stay wrong just for a chance to disagree with you.) It sometimes helps you to define your task of persuasion as part of a larger task of finding out the truth.
- Whether you are trying to persuade an open-minded reader to agree with what you are saying or trying to get an enemy reader simply to experience what you are saying, there is one essential thing you must learn: how to enter wholeheartedly into the skin of your readers and see or argue as they would.

B. Compulsory Writing

"I think I'll just hold this gun to your head till you finish."

Much of the writing we do is compulsory. It starts in school and continues on the job. Writing an important thank-you letter as an adult can feel just as compulsory as when your mother sat you down and forced you to write a letter to Grandma for a birthday present you didn't like. If you write at all as an adult, it's probably because you have learned to be stoical and resigned about compulsory writing. "I wish I didn't have to write this thing this weekend. I'd like to be outdoors. Still, that's the way it goes, this is always happening to me." But as you work on the writing, you have a particularly hard time. You take all weekend and don't finish till late Sunday night. And all the while you tend to say to yourself, "I'm so *bad* at writing. I wish I had *skill* in writing."

It is hard for you to see that you ruined your whole weekend needlessly. You could have gotten the job done in half the time, in fact you could have gotten it done at work before the weekend even started. You think your weekend was ruined by your difficulty in writing but what ruined it was your difficulty in dealing with compulsory tasks. You were so busy complaining about how bad a writer you are, you didn't remember the times when writing went much better. You may not have had *many* good writing experiences—but then you may not often write without a gun at your head.

Or perhaps you aren't so stoical. You get so furious that you fume and stamp your feet and bang your fist all weekend. And yet you may not realize how much that impedes your writing. That blankness in your mind when you try to think of ideas, that difficulty you have in just letting yourself write down sentences at all, that pressure in your head when you try to organize what little you have to say: you tend to experience these as lack of intelligence or lack of skill in writing when really they come from your inability to deal with compulsory tasks.

I don't mean to imply that this analysis makes things easy. Solving the problem of your reactions to compulsory tasks is probably harder than learning how to write well. But at least there is hope of progress if you can tell which one is holding you back—if you can feel the difference between trying to saw through a thick plank with an imperfect saw and trying to saw through that plank when your own efforts are binding the saw. If you persist in thinking your only problem is a writing problem, you block progress on both fronts.

If you have to do a piece of compulsory writing it helps to face the central issue squarely: are you going to consent or refuse? To consent is not necessarily to cave in. You don't have to like the task or the taskmaster, you don't have to grovel, but if you want the writing to go well, you have to invest yourself in the job wholeheartedly. If this is hard for you, it is probably because it *feels* like groveling or caving in. You may not be able to put your full strength into the job—to consent—unless you feel you *could* refuse. And this is a matter of power. It feels as though "they" have all the power. It is true that they have authority and therefore they probably have sanctions. They can fire you or flunk you. Or hate you. But the final power is yours. You are in charge of whether

you consent or refuse. What feels compulsory is not compulsory. Even people "compelled" with actual guns have sometimes insisted on their power to refuse. I am thinking of the successful nonviolent resistance by Norwegian school teachers during World War II.*

Does it help, you may well ask, to portray your harrassed supervisor or your bumbling teacher as a sadistic TV Nazi pointing a gun at your head, when what you are trying to learn is to consent (when appropriate) to compulsory tasks? But if you can feel, underneath your alleged difficulty in writing, your older feelings left over from the many times "they" twisted your ear or somehow compelled you to give in, you will have much better luck in stepping beyond those past feelings and getting this present job done quickly. (Those TV movies with Nazis wouldn't have such appeal if they weren't really about the universal childhood experience of being helpless before superior power.)

But you may not believe in your power to refuse unless you really use it—openly and with full responsibility (instead of fooling yourself into being sick or having an emergency or "trying as hard as you can" and somehow not succeeding). Perhaps refusing is not the ideal solution, but it's better than that familiar worst-of-both-worlds compromise: you don't get the fun of saying No or the satisfaction of doing the job quickly with investment. All you get is a ruined weekend and a sense of powerlessness.

Summary and Advice

- Figure out whether the writing is compulsory. Is someone else *really* demanding it? If not, it's not compulsory. If so, it's not still compulsory: you can refuse.
- Are you sure the price of refusal is too high? Will you really be fired? Are you sure you want that job? Will they hate you for life? Are you sure you care? It is easy to assume the world will come to an end if you say no.
- If you finally decide to consent—if you decide it's not worth whatever the price is just to get out of doing this piece of writing—then *consent!* Do the job wholeheartedly without fighting it. You

*See "Nonviolent Resistance and the Nazis: The Case of Norway" in *The Quiet Battle*, Mulford Sibley, editor (Boston, 1963). Also the second section of Part III of *Conflict Regulation* by Paul Wehr (Boulder, Colorado, 1979).

don't have to love the job just to invest your best efforts in getting it done quickly and getting some pleasure from it.

- If angry resentful feelings hold back your writing, stop, recognize those feelings for what they are, scream them out or write them down for ten minutes, and then get back to your job. Insist on your power to write efficiently.
- But don't forget the advantages of compulsory writing. Sometimes you learn things because people "make" you. Children seem to be aided in learning self-control by internalizing the control exercised over them by others. When you sign up for a writing course, what you may well be doing is simply paying someone to make you write every week. You realize you cannot yet get yourself to write every week, but you are willing to pretend the teacher can make you do it. There's nothing wrong with putting that make-believe gun into his hand if it will help you learn faster. But, remember, it's make-believe.

C. Uninvited Writing

"Pssst! Hey Mack. You wanna buy my novel?"

What a relief, then, to write, not because someone is demanding it, but because you want to. Even if it is a tricky letter, even if it is a piece of persuasion that will be hard for you because you lack the professional training you need, or even if it is a novel you know will keep you in the woods for years; still it gives enormous satisfaction to feel that *you* have made the decision to expend your time and effort this way. You know you will have frustrations, but you want to write this thing and so you find it easy, comparatively speaking, to put up with them. The main psychological fact about uninvited writing is that you naturally invest yourself in the writing task.

Or do you? For if uninvited writing always goes so well, how come everyone doesn't do it? Part of the problem may be that most people are introduced to writing in school where it is compulsory. "Who would ever write if they didn't have to?" But, in addition, uninvited writing has a built in difficulty of its own. It takes arrogance, *chutzpah*, *hubris*. "Uninvited writing" is just another way of saying "no audience." You have to walk up to strangers on the street and tap them on the shoulder and say, "Excuse me,

would you please stop what you are doing and listen to me for a few hours? I have something I'd awfully much like to tell you." You know the reply you will get.

Why engage in uninvited writing if you have to put up with that? And so most of us don't. Which would be fine except for one small fact: we *do* have things we want to tell people even if they haven't invited us to do so. But there is another fact. We are all capable of stopping people on the street and fixing them with our eye and getting them to listen and making them glad they did. We are, that is, capable of writing things which make readers want to read and glad they did. We just have to *do* it, and probably put up with a lot of rude refusals for a while. But we can insist on being heard.

Insisting on being heard. I remember the particular moment when I saw clearly how essential that feeling is for all writing, but especially for uninvited writing. I hadn't yet, I think, published anything—and no one had asked me to write this piece I was struggling with, but I was trying to say some things in it that were very important to me about teaching and learning. I had already managed to get down on paper in one form or another a lot of what I wanted to say. (In other words, my fear of tapping strangers on the shoulder wasn't so overwhelming that I pretended I had *nothing* to tell the world.) But the writing was going terribly. The whole thing was a mess, and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't seem to get things clear. And then finally things went better. I stopped to reflect on what had happened, and I wrote a note to myself (shortened and cleaned up here):

> 6/11/71. I'm correcting a near-to-final draft. Finally I'm making it much clearer and better. I'm rearranging sentences and points so they finally work. I had it all screwed up—my interpretation all mixed in with my information in an ineffective way—and my information unclear. Then a series of rearrangings make things fall into place with a click.
>
> So what made this possible? It can't be any new knowledge about logic or sentence-arrangement or rhetoric. I was already trying as hard as I could to use all of that knowledge I had. I was struggling over and over again—writing and rewriting, arranging and rearranging—and it was still mud. It didn't work. All my best knowledge didn't help.
>
> But finally I can see what did help. It was the feeling "Damn it,

I've got to be done with this thing and I know goddamn well most people won't really hear it and thus they won't accept what I'm saying—it will all roll off their backs—even if they read it, which they probably won't do because it is such a mess—but if they do they will think it's just a fuzzy harebrained scheme of Elbow's. I'm tired of that. I'm not willing for that to go on any longer." In short, what made the difference was a *decision* I made about my stance toward the reader. That inner act of readjusting my transaction with readers *caused* the words and ideas finally to come out in a different and better order.

It was like my readjustment to my lecture audience where I got mad at students saying they couldn't hear me and I moved from behind the podium to the front of the stage. A combination of frustration and anger made me finally insist on being heard and this made me suddenly able to do something with language I hadn't been able to do till then.

The essential question for writing, then, is this: how long are you willing to be unheard?

• • •

It would be impossible to avoid all compulsory writing and sad to run away from all uninvited writing. But having a gun at your head and having to go out and tap strangers on the shoulder are not your only ways of relating to the audience. Readers can *invite* you: call you up and say "Will you come out to dinner with me? I'll pay if you will tell me about your trip." Or "It's on me if you'll tell me your thinking about the project you did last year. I have one now just like it." What better way to make you enjoy communicating and to bring out the best thinking. An audience that invites your words but doesn't demand them acts like suction.

Ten years ago I had only a vague sense that I might write a book. It was sort of a fantasy that I didn't take seriously. But when a publisher's representative knocked on my office door to show me books for the courses I was teaching and asked at the end whether I had any writing projects in mind, and when he said that his editor might like to talk to me about my idea, and when after some negotiation the editor was willing to offer me a contract, suddenly I started to take the idea seriously. Because someone was willing to publish me, I started to have more ideas and, more important, I started to write them down like mad.

If you want to see the vivid effect of an inviting audience, think back to occasions when people wanted your thinking or advice about something you'd never thought about. At first you had nothing to say but the fact of their asking probably put things in your head.

Writing's greatest reward, for most of us anyway, is the sense of reaching an audience. Ideally the audience should love what we write, but in the last analysis, it's enough if we can feel them reading. The fisherman falls in love with fishing because of that unpredictable wiggle, that moving pressure on his hand, even if the fish gets away. At least you felt them tasting your bait, at least you made contact with someone on the other end of the line. This experience makes you want to pick up the pencil and try again. *This* time you'll hook them. But it is you who are hooked.

The usual way to get yourself invited to write something is by doing well under the two previous conditions: writing something uninvited or compulsory that's good enough to make them call you up and ask for something else. (A good reason to learn to deal with uninvited and compulsory writing.) It seems unfair. The rich get richer. The best racers get the best starting place. You don't get the delightful encouragement of an invitation till you have already had a success.

But you don't have to wait for the invitation. Without having to muster all the courage it takes to stop strangers on the street, you can nevertheless find friends or make acquaintances who will *want* to read your words. In effect, publish: find an inviting audience, even if you have to copy out your writing in two copies or ditto it or pay for xeroxing; even if you have to start with friends who read it partly because they like you and care about what's in your head. Invite them over to read or listen, even if part of the incentive is a nice dinner or good refreshments. And you can find others who will want to read your writing because they want someone to read theirs. However you get it, a willing audience does wonders. It causes you suddenly to write more easily, to think of more, and get more satisfaction from writing.

Many people sabotage their hunger for an audience by sending off their stuff to highly competitive magazines or publishers who will almost certainly reject it. Too many rejection slips can make you so discouraged that you give up. Don't attempt large unknown audiences till you have made full use of a small known group of

willing readers: connected with it, gotten pleasure from it, gotten feedback and learned to improve your writing on the basis of it. Only then are you in a good position to decide what to send off into the unknown and how much rejection you are willing to put up with.

People also sometimes sabotage their instinct for finding a real audience by feeling they need to get permission from an expert before giving their writing to the real audience. If experts are the real audience for your writing, by all means give it first to them. But if, for example, you are writing up some important insights you've learned about how to be a better parent, you are likely to have the impulse to give your writing first to a psychologist or therapist or university professor in the field. You feel you need an expert to check out your words before they go to the real audience of parents. It's a natural impulse. I've certainly acted on it numerous times. We seek someone with authority to tell us if we are right or to give us suggestions. Most of all, we seek a midwife to usher our child into the world.

But watch out. Checking your writing with an expert often turns out to kill the whole project. First you have to find the right expert. That can be a problem. Then the expert may not respond. Experts are busy. Even if they respond positively, their response may actually stymie you: "This is very interesting. I think you should read Smith and Jones, oh yes, and Abernathy"—just three people to him but a year's reading or more for you—and if you do start reading, you are liable to conclude, "Oh dear, I have nothing really new to say," or "Oh dear, there's so much I don't know about this field, I can't write till I master it." And your project withers and dies even though you have already written a piece with lots of good insights—a piece that might in fact be more useful to real parents than Jones or Smith or Abernathy if only you get a little feedback from parents and do a little revising.

And, of course, the expert may discourage you in a much more straightforward manner. Once I sent off an essay about learning that I was excited about to an expert I thought would see the genius in it and give me some good suggestions. I got a reply which said nothing more than "I wish people wouldn't use the word 'concept' unless they really understood what it meant." But how could it be otherwise? The authority is tired of reading about child rearing. He's read too much already. He is not a willing audience for

your words. At best he reads out of duty or as a favor. He will simply notice the differences between what you have written and what he believes to be the best writing in the world about the topic.

I paint a bleak picture. Of course it *can* work out well. The expert might give you just the encouragement you need—along with a few suggestions which are just right for helping you revise and give your writing to the audience. But I'm deeply suspicious of the impulse that makes so many people feel they must get clearance from readers for whom the words are *not* intended before giving them to readers for whom they *are* intended. Experts are experts because they know a lot, but the one thing they cannot tell you is what it is like to read your words as a non-expert—for example as a curious or baffled parent who has read very little about child-rearing.

"But what if my thinking is false," you may say, "and my advice about child care is wrong?" But if you were riding on a bus or talking to friends you would tell them what you have to say about child-rearing if they were curious to know. So why do you need permission now from an expert to do the same thing? To engage in the essential audience transaction in writing—directing words to people who are interested in what you are saying? Speaking would be a curious business if we felt we had to get permission from listeners who are not likely to want to hear our words before directing them to people who are likely to want to hear them.

You are in a good position to go to experts *after* you have road-tested your words—after you have seen what works in practice and what doesn't and then done some revising. At this point you will have a crucially different relationship to experts than if you sent it to them first. You won't be saying, "Please sir, may I have permission to let this thing out into the world?" (as though your writing were a new drug that might turn out to be thalidomide). You will feel more like a colleague saying, "Look, I've got something interesting here, something that works. I wonder if you would be willing to tell me where you agree and where you don't."

Summary and Advice

- Don't wait for an invitation. You probably have writing you want to give the world, even if the world hasn't gotten around to