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1975

## Back to Basics: Grammar, Rhetoric and Disciplined Thought

Charles R. Cyr

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We joke a lot about values. One of my favorite stories is about a cattelman down in West Texas. He had made a sack of money in oil and cattle. He lived in a big house and enjoyed all the comforts of life. But of all his possessions, he prized a solid gold cadillac the most. It was a beauty — red upholstery, television, running water, and all the rest. In fact, he let it be known that when he died he wanted to be buried in that cadillac.

The poor fellow met an untimely death, and the arrangements were made. A big earth-moving machine was brought out from town, and the hole was dug. The hour for the service arrived, and the mortician drove the cadillac to the place of burial. The corpse was seated beside him dressed in his best. The car was shiny to perfection. All the gadgets were operating. As the crane lowered the car into the grave, a man who had been hired to help dig the grave turned to a friend and said, "Boy, that's really living, isn't it?"

But it isn't funny. In fact, it's dead serious. George Santayana, the renowned American philosopher once observed that "Those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

Plato, philosophizing on the transition of the Greek state from glory to decline, observed: "They have filled the cities with harbors and dockyards and walls and tributes, instead of truth and righteousness and temperance.

Lewis Mumford puts it like this in his work *The City in History*: "From the standpoint of both politics and urbanism, Rome remains a significant lesson of what to avoid; its history presents a series of classic danger signals to warn one when life is moving in the wrong direction. Wherever crowds gather in suffocating numbers, wherever rents rise steeply and housing conditions deteriorate . . . ; where the precedents of Roman building almost automatically revive, as they have come back today — the arena, the tall tenement, the mass contests and exhibitions, the football matches, the international beauty contests, the striptease made ubiquitous by advertisement, the constant titillation of the senses by sex, liquor and violence — all is in true Roman style. So, too, the multiplication of bathrooms and the over-expenditure on broadly paved motor roads, and above all, the massive collective concentration on glib ephemeralities of all kinds, performed with supreme technical audacity. These are symptoms of the end: magnifications of demoralized power, minifications of life. When these signs multiply . . . the barbarian has already captured the city from within."

Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his Nobel lecture comes right to the point when he says:

"The spirit of Munich has by no means retreated into the past; it was not a brief episode. I even venture to say that the spirit of Munich is dominant in the twentieth century. The in-

timidated civilized world has found nothing to oppose the onslaught of a suddenly resurgent fang-baring barbarism, except concessions and smiles. The spirit of Munich is a disease of the will of prosperous people; it is the daily state of those who have given themselves over to a craving for prosperity in every way, to material well-being as the chief goal of life on earth. Such people — and there are many of them in the world today — choose passivity and retreat, anything if only the life to which they are accustomed might go on, anything so as not to have to cross over to rough terrain today, because tomorrow, see, everything will be all right. (But it never will! The reckoning for cowardice will only be more cruel. Courage and the power to overcome will be ours only when we dare to make sacrifices.)

Surely the bell tolls. It tolls for all of us who are responsible by influence and investment for the education of young and old alike, and we dare not fail to hear and heed.

Albert Einstein speaking of values — love, honor, integrity, dignity, unselfish service, decency, purity, honesty and all the other noble virtues of our Judeo-Christian heritage — declared:

"It is essential that the student acquire an understanding of and a lively feeling for values. He must acquire a vivid sense of the beautiful and the morally good. Otherwise he — with his specialized knowledge — more closely resembles a well-trained dog than a harmoniously developed person."

He is not one lone voice crying in the wilderness. Victor Frankl, Europe's leading psychiatrist and psychotherapist and a man who endured the horrors of Nazi concentration camps, has this to say:

"I am absolutely convinced that the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Miadanek were ultimately prepared not in some ministry or other in Berlin, but rather at the desks and in the lecture halls of nihilistic scientists and philosophers."

"Quo vadis educatus?" in my opinion the only way education dare go is the way of quality education which results in quality life — life in which men and women are not only certified for employment but, more important, credentialized for responsible citizenship, the kind of citizenship which bears the approving stamp of God.

When Cyrus, King of Persia, captured Babylon in 585 B.C. he spoke at length of the importance of continuing alertness. He reminded his people that "To have been once brave men is not sufficient; it is harder to hold what you have gained than to gain it."

How desperately we need to hear and heed those words in 1975. Freedom is not free; the price is still eternal vigilance, and 'tis to such vigilance we are summoned today.

## Back To Basics

### GRAMMAR, RHETORIC AND DISCIPLINED THOUGHT

By CHARLES R. CYR, *Assistant Professor of English, Director of Freshman English, Sacred Heart University, Bridgeport, Connecticut*

*Delivered before the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Conference on College Composition and Communication*

*(4 C's), St. Louis, Missouri, March 14, 1975*

LADIES and gentlemen: When I received from our chairperson last summer the announcement of and the motif of this year's 4C's convention, I had a definite reaction to its motif. I shared that reaction with her in a letter; and I would now like to share it with you to begin my talk today.

Here is the particular paragraph of that announcement which put my mind in tift:

In an age where computers and television seem to control our thinking or to make us passive in our concerns about the human condition, I believe that we teachers of college com-

position and communication should look guardedly at how we "process" the minds of students. Untapped young minds, found too often in our traditional academic settings, are our challenges as we search for new ways to release this creative power. A silver anniversary, therefore, is a very appropriate time for reviewing the past, evaluating the present, and charting the future because we are the decision-makers.

All of the following phrases leapt at me from that paragraph:  
 "... computers and television seem to control our thinking ..."  
 "... look guardedly at how we 'process' the minds of students."  
 "... our traditional academic settings ..."  
 "... search for new ways ..."  
 "... time for reviewing the past, evaluating the present and charting the future ..."

Those first two phrases/repeat/ leapt at me because I associated them with the theme of my talk at last year's meeting in Anaheim: "An Anti-media Message for the Classroom." In that talk, I cautioned against depersonalizing the English/Humanities classroom by too much resort to media therein. Indeed I expressed the very concern that in regard to media, we "look guardedly at how we 'process' the minds of students."

I am a traditionalist — perhaps even an old-fashioned one. Last year I basically rejected the use of Media in the English classroom; and this year I'd like to recommend an embrace of the good old English grammar and rhetoric basics. Thus, you see, I can't join very eagerly in a "search for new ways" for I'm very concerned now about "new ways" having damaged "our traditional academic settings."

Perhaps you recall that Vance Packard's article "Are We Becoming a Nation of Illiterates?" was referred to in one of the keynote speeches at Anaheim last year. It had just been published, and indeed I had read it with keen interest; since then I have reread it often. Furthermore, just before this school year began, I corrected approximately 300 Purdue Placement exams in basic English which averaged a 37 percentile — significantly below the mean established some time ago. Certainly the open-door policy has had its effect on that figure. And I am convinced that it is the responsibility of the college Freshman English classroom today to stress the good old basics in order to revive the better basic writing skill of yesteryear.

Therefore it is indeed "a very appropriate time for reviewing the past, evaluating the present and charting the future." BUT:

I submit that evaluating the present suggests that we have done better in the past and that a resort to the better basics taught in the past will help us to chart a more successful course for the future.

The Vance Packard article advances seven principle explanations for the decline of literacy in America — three of which I will consider in particular and elaborate upon myself here:

1. Writing as an educational subject has lost status.
2. The overloading of English teachers and instructors (presumably at the high-school level?)
3. The side effects of the telecommunication revolution.
4. A revolt against rules and established ways.

Let us examine the ramifications of these points.

Writing as an educational subject has lost status.

Well one reason that that status has been lost is to be found in the second point mentioned above: the overloading of English teachers and instructors. Indeed I have observed in the pre-college school systems I have watched as a parent and interested educator during the past ten years that any extra monies (and there was some around awhile ago) was generally given to new experimental schemes. It has not gone to expand teaching staffs so that average class sizes might

be reduced — so that the difficult business of teaching basic writing skills might be more readily attended to.

Writing as an educational subject has also lost status because good, solid comprehension of grammar principles is generally not taught in teacher preparation programs today. Primary and Secondary teachers turned out in the past ten or fifteen years — generally — have been expected to pick up language comprehension somehow — but they haven't. Thus it is understandable, but not forgivable, that they tend to shy away from it, or leave it underdone, in their classrooms.

So teaching basic writing skills in grammar and high schools, a difficult process to begin with, is being reluctantly approached by overburdened teachers rather unequipped to do it in the first place. Thus writing as an educational subject has lost status — a sorry state of academic affairs indeed.

The side effects of the telecommunication revolution

It is not difficult to recognize that television in the home and tape cassettes increasingly proliferating in schools constitute essentially passive mental experiences — quite different in intellectual degree from reading a book wherein the written language is visually impinged upon the mind. Thus has the fundamental language experience of yesteryear deteriorated. The visual observation/experience of the written language is relatively missing; and reading practice is relatively missing. Two of the good old 3 R's are slipping away.

A revolt against rules and established ways

This pervasive anti-standard attitude of the last decade has certainly complicated an academic situation deteriorating in other respects. I doubt there is one of us here who, perhaps diligently trying to teach correct standards of grammar and rhetoric, hasn't encountered each semester the pitiful cries of students who want to do it their way — their incorrect, unconventional, undisciplined, unskilled way.

The deterioration of the basic writing abilities of today's typical college Freshman has been personally evinced for me during the past several summers when I have corrected all the Purdue Placement Tests of entering Freshmen, in use at my small private university. The average percentile for this past Fall's entering class was 37. That figure 37 indicates that, since 1962, when this particular test was established, the average percentile has slipped 13 percentage points.

In that same period, of course, the open-door college policy has developed (at our small university and widely elsewhere). And community colleges have developed and proliferated. The altruistic intent of open-door colleges and community colleges has been/is to provide higher education practically on demand to a large number of barely qualified high-school graduates, or "equivalents."

But whatever the philosophical validity of that academic attitude may be, we college composition teachers are faced with this immediate fact:

Today there arrive in our classrooms (generally), continuously and numerous, Freshman students typically unequipped with writing skills traditionally expected at the level of higher education.

This fact is not new to us now in 1975. But what are we going to do about it? Lament the situation, decry the high-schools (who have already desecrated the grammar schools who seem to teach who knows what except grammar these days), and assign D's and F's based on college level expectations and move the poor student on into an academic system he hasn't got the basic skills — writing or reading — to handle? Lament appears to be the reaction indicated in a hi-lite quote in a Boston Globe article of November 17, 1974 (reprinting Philip Hager of the Los Angeles Times). Hi-lited smack

in the middle of the first page of an article entitled "Why Graduates Can't Write," is this statement:

What startles and saddens college English instructors is a noticeable decline in the writing ability of today's brightest and best students.

Well, I for one am no longer startled by this realization — nor have I sat about saddened, lachrymose, moaning "Alas, alack and wailaway." Nor do I recommend so piteous (and pitiful) a position for today's teachers of freshman college composition and communication.

Today's typical Freshman minds are certainly trainable to the correct conventions of grammar and rhetoric. The Freshman arriving thru today's open door to college needs basic help, basic training, and must be given it by colleges as a first order of intellectual business — instead of a lamentation that high schools and grammar schools haven't done their jobs.

This basic writing skills problem is immediate, acute and increasing — so much so, in my estimation, that I cannot entertain today the idealistic motif of this conference: "Untapped Resources: Let the Minds of our Students Be the Supreme Resource." Much as I can admire that ideal, I recognize a debilitating reality insistently interrupting its realization.

The fact is: they can't write right. And if they can't write right, they can't express effectively and validly, even to themselves, what they potentially think. Thus whatever "creative power" of any value is waiting to be tapped is going to have to wait a little longer — until the basic tool is provided those minds for the correct, effective expression of that potentially "creative power."

I say we must go back to basics — now.

By going back to basics, I mean going back as far as those 8 basic parts of speech.

1. Noun
2. Verb
3. Adjective
4. Adverb
5. Pronoun
6. Conjunction
7. Preposition
8. Interjection

In recent decades, colleges have not seen fit to teach parts of speech. They have assumed — once reasonably — that those very basics have been provided by grammar schools and/or high schools for those who aspired to college. Today, however, college composition teachers cannot assume any such basic preparation. The fact today is that the typical entering college Freshman doesn't know those 8 basic parts of speech. He or she may perhaps have heard of them (and may hold them somewhat fuzzily in mind) but doesn't grasp or comprehend them. In such a situation, the freshman college classroom is now responsible to provide the first building block toward the college expository essay. It must begin fundamentally with the basic definitions traditionally definitive of word functions: the 8 parts of speech.

This treatment of basics should then move purposefully through phrases and clauses to the independent clause called a sentence. This movement involves a study of the following building blocks:

1. Parts of speech
2. Phrases: prepositional and verbal
3. Clauses: dependent and independent
4. Sentences
5. Punctuation

In this way, there will be provided — as there once was provided

in English-teaching classrooms — a solid grounding or footing in the language. And the mind which grasps the basics in language feels more certain of subsequent procedures.

What are those subsequent procedures?

Well, in freshman English classrooms which didn't go "relevant" — a word I use derisively — and/or abandon writing altogether, those procedures used to involve, and occasionally still do, a disciplined approach to the five basic aspects of the college expository essay.

1. Structure
2. Paragraphs
3. Sentences
4. Words
5. Punctuation

This approach has been appropriately concerned with the *effective* application of these five basic essay aspects — effectiveness being a dimension somewhat beyond basically correct writing (once, but no longer, assumable of entering college Freshmen).

Within this arrangement, there could be studied a structure that clearly, expositoryly tells what will be told, tells it, and in conclusion tells what was told. There could be studied paragraph unity, coherence and development — with stress perhaps on effective coherence. There could be studied words specific in quality rather than vague and/or verbs active and more forceful than the verb "to be." (How many entering Freshmen today can rattle off "be, is, am, are, was, were, being, and been" to begin with?) And, of course, effective punctuation could be studied — and students could be made more dashing.

I trust my colleagues can forgive me speaking so basically here. But when I hear — as I did hear last year in Anaheim — a keynote speaker seriously ask "Who really understands sentence structure?", then I think it's time for all of us to go back to basics, at least for this moment.

Who really understands sentence structure?!

A simple sentence is readily recognizable. When the mind is rhetorically quickened, it can certainly comprehend a complex sentence incorporating a subordinate clause. It cannot seriously be claimed that the parallel sentence cannot be recognized, cannot be practised, or cannot be taught and learned. And are we to abandon the due regard for, the appropriate practice of, the admiring recognition of that designable sentence occasionally used for impact — that sentence structurable to rise rhetorically to its final delivery point — the impactive periodic sentence?

This study of the effective college expository essay should certainly be done today. But first we've got to take one giant step back to basic fundamental definitions and thereby provide correctness before we proceed to teach effective college expository writing.

Once correctness occurs, effectiveness can be considered. But I reiterate: It has now become the responsibility of the Freshman college classroom to stress basically correct grammar before proceeding to the effective implementation thereof — and the appropriate college level thereof.

It was once a basic assumption of college level education that the mind could be disciplined to think carefully and to analyze rather objectively. Now we hear intellectual rubbish about students' right to their own language, the pain of staring at a blank page pen in hand, and writing subjective reactions to overcome that painful mental block. Colloquial expression of subjective reactions is OK'd and even encouraged. "Man, what does *Hamlet* mean to you?" thus overcomes the more disciplined attitude of seeing the thing in itself as it really is and expressing such analysis in the third person, objective, point of view. In this "school of thought," lyrical self-indulgence overrides disciplined objectivity, while pain-easing sym-

pathy obscures the discipline of mind basically assumed of higher education.

There are levels of language discretely identifiable; call them a ladder of language, if you will. They ascend as follows:

Formal English

General English

Colloquial English

Slang (I call it "slanguage.")

Students supposedly entitled to their own language, being human, will hardly make the effort to rise above the colloquial, casual, level — to rise to that higher level of General English appropriately expected of higher education. Indeed the term "higher education" has traditionally implied an operation of mind above the ordinary — and an expression of mind above the casual. It has been a basic assumption; let us get back to it.

The ultimate basic of higher education which we must get back to, then, is this disciplined intellectual activity presentable in the college expository essay:

To see the thing in itself as it really is — without a self-indulgent reaction thereto, objectively (not subjectively) expressed.

To get to that ultimate basic of higher education, however, in today's college freshman classroom, we must begin a bit more basically than we have been wont to do. We must reach back and inculcate the eight (8) basic parts of speech — then move forward very purposefully, quite basically, through phrases and clauses to sentences. With these basic elements firmly established, we then develop the well designed college expository essay which exposes to view at every possible point a careful analysis — a careful analysis correctly written, operating at the General English level of language, refined by the objective point of view.

These are the basics of grammar and rhetoric and disciplined thought expected of higher education. We must teach them all in college classrooms now — either anew or again — as we get Back to Basics.

Thank you.

# The World Food And Population Crisis

## A ROLE FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR

By C. W. COOK, *Chairman of the Executive Committee, General Foods Corporation*

*Delivered before a Panel on The World Food Conference, Dallas, Texas, April 3, 1975*

I AM glad that my first platform appearance in my home state since being repatriated after 44 years is in Dallas, which will always be Big "D" to those of us reared in Longview, 125 miles to the east of here.

It seems evident that there is widespread confusion about the so-called "food problem." No wonder!

Let me remind you of some of the seemingly contradictory statements, analyses, projections, conclusions, etc., which the public must try to sort through.

Respected experts predict that widespread famine in several parts of the world is inevitable — has, in fact, already *started*. There are others who insist that planet Earth has the potential — the resources and the talent — to provide adequate nutrition for at least twice the world's present population, and probably many more.

On the home front, there is confusion also. It is explained that higher and higher retail food prices are the result, primarily, of ever-increasing export demand to food-short nations. Now, we are seeing the prices of most U.S. farm commodities slide downward, and growers are worried that their 1975 income will be significantly below that of 1974. Some predict the pipelines will not only be refilled, but that there will be surpluses that someone must store and finance.

Actually, I don't think there is as much contradiction in all this as would appear to be the case. Permit me to submit to you *this* individual's assessment.

First, I am convinced the world does indeed face a staggering problem in trying to feed the sheer numbers projected to be on this globe in the decades ahead.

Lester Brown, now a Senior Fellow of the Overseas Development Council but in the Department of Agriculture in 1965, predicted in that year — 1965 — that regional famines would start in the 1970's and would be severe by the early 1980's. Mr. Brown's recent publication *By Bread Alone* updates in — to me — convincing detail his forecast of spreading hunger.

Lord C. P. Snow, eminent British scientist and writer — speaking

in Fulton, Missouri in the late 1960's — warned of a collision (to use his words) between "soaring population" and "limited food supply" beginning between 1975 and 1980.

Let's consider more *recent* opinions:

The October 1974 report from the Committee on Agriculture of the House of Representatives includes this statement in its summary: "All 4 of the major resources necessary to produce food — arable land, water, energy, and fertilizer — are now in short supply."

Dr. Phillip Handler, eminent scientist and current President of the National Academy of Sciences, is quoted in the February 1975 issue of the U.S. State Department's publication *War on Hunger* as follows: "The prospects of an imminent world food shortage seem to me to be virtually self-evident."

I, unhappily, share those gloomy and ominous opinions.

At the same time, I can understand the reasoning of those who contend enough food *could* be produced to nourish the world's population for the next 30 or 40 years. These optimists can and do point out that world food production has more than kept pace with world population growth over the last 20 years.

In contrast to the pessimistic views I quoted from two government sources — the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture and the U.S. State Department — another government source, the Department of Agriculture, states in its December 1974 publication entitled *The World Food Situation and Prospects to 1985*: "The factors which have given rise to the present world food situation are largely transitory and can be corrected by intelligent policies."

The optimistic projections, however, invariably hinge on such "ifs" as:

— *if* all nations, including the Communist countries and the OPEC bloc, would make all-out efforts on a continuing basis and would collaborate in a coordinated attack on the problem

— *if* massive investments are made to bring more land under cultivation; to make water available where needed (such as parts of west Texas); to construct numerous fertilizer plants, especially to make use of the natural gas now being "flared" in the Mid-East and