

UNIT 8

HOW TO WRITE AND HOW TO WRITE BADLY

C.E.M. Joad (1891-1953)

Students Learning Outcomes:

On completion of the unit, students will be able to:

- answer comprehension questions.
- prepare resume for a job.
- write an application for a job
- identify and demonstrate use of relative pronouns.
- identify, analyze and construct conditional sentences.
- prepare class presentation.

Pre-reading:

- Do you know how to express your feelings or views to others effectively?

The object of writing is to say something we want to say, in other words, to convey meaning. This, which should be an easy task, is considered by most people to be **fraught** with difficulty. Writing is thought to be a complicated and highly technical craft, not to be undertaken except by those who have first been initiated into its mysteries and mastered its technique. So much at least is indispensable for the writing of books, articles and essays. Letters are some-how-different; letters are only a way of talking on paper, and are, therefore, outside the mysterious pale of writing proper.

It is my lot to lecture to a class whose members are obliged to write me an essay once a **fortnight**. The labour of extracting these essays is Herculean. Every sort and kind of excuse is made to escape them: Snooks is working overtime, Jones has forgotten how to spell, Brown does not know how to express himself and Robinson has married a wife and cannot spare the time to write. One day I had an idea. I asked Snooks and the rest to write me not an essay, but a letter. The letter was to tell me how they liked the class, what they thought of the other members, what suggestion they had to make for improving the lectures, and what-*here* I concealed the Gregory powder in the jam. They thought of the subject set for the last essay. The effect was magical; everybody suddenly found his pen and, blossoming into expression, gave me the very thing I had been unable to extract when I asked for an essay.

By this experience I was convinced of a truth I had often suspected, that all the talk about style and form and quality of expression in writing which agitates literary circles is simply highfalutin bunkum, designed to hoodwink people into the belief that writing is much more mysterious than it really is, by those whose living depends on the maintenance of the mystery, and that, if the plain man would only take the trouble to say quite plainly what he thinks, good and even easy writing would be the inevitable result.

Yet this is just what the plain man will not do. When, for example, he wants to write to the papers, and considers it **incumbent** upon him to adopt what he calls a literary style, he thinks that the desired result is to be achieved by using two or three words when one would normally **suffice**: thus he calls an oyster “a succulent bivalve”, a barber “a tonsorial artist”, and says “the delectable Ducky” when he means Cornwall. These unfortunate expressions are based upon a false belief, the belief that the object of writing is somehow different from the object of talking, and that, whereas it is the business of the spoken word simply to convey meaning, the business of the written word is to create what is called a literary effect. This false belief is due to two causes.

The first is the poison of journalese. We may agree that the world is sometimes exciting; it is equally clear that sometimes it is not. But although the world can please itself in the matter, the journalist has no option. Whether we are in the midst of a great war or an August silly season his obligation to be bright, witty and stimulating, and to produce a bright, witty and stimulating paper, remains the same. And if nothing happens to excite or amuse he must make his words do for themselves what events refuse to do for him.

Hence the characteristic of journalism is constant overemphasis. One way of achieving this emphasis is by the use of unexpected and striking words. Thus the cricket reporter will say “the sphere struck the uprights when he wishes to report the fact that the ball hit the stumps”. Another method is by gross over-expression, and by gross over-expression I mean the introduction of flowing and highly charged phrases which are altogether disproportionate to the importance of the event or to the sincerity of the writer's feeling.

Supposing, to take an example quoted by Galsworthy (On Expression), we want to say, “The cat was on the mat”, and, having nothing else to say, and a yawning half-column of space in which to say it, determine to make the statement of this simple fact carry as much weight in the way of eloquence and emotion as we can manage to pile on to it. Then, if we are clever at our job, we shall say: “Stretching herself with feline grace, and emitting those sounds immemorially connected with

satisfaction, Grimalkin lay on a rug whose richly variegated pattern spoke eloquently of the Orient and all the wonders of *The Arabian Nights*.” If we are not clever at our job we shall succeed in being not impressive but merely, like the American journalist who, wishing to report the fact that a mother was dead, sought to arouse emotion by announcing that “the hand that rocked the cradle had kicked the bucket.”

All this is bad, as bad as bad can be. It is vulgar, it is an offence against simplicity, and it is a foe to all good writing. And, since there is no reason at all why we should go out of our way to acquire the habit of journalese, let us, when we sit down to write, take a solemn oath to say exactly what we mean to say nothing more, to use the simplest words that will serve our purpose, and to use as few of them as we can.

But there is another cause for the belief that writing is something more, and something more important, than just talking on paper. Many authors, anxious to exalt the mysteries of their trade, have maintained that writings is an art—in the sense in which the painting of picture or the composing of music is an art. As an art it possesses a definite technique; there is an appropriate **diction** to be learned, judgment exercised in the selection of words, tricks of harmony and rhythm to be mastered. In a word, there is the acquirement of a style, and unless the author has first mastered a style his writing will be of no value.

The belief in style as a thing which is valuable in itself, independently of the meaning it conveys, was very prevalent at the end of the last century. The so-called decadents, led by Oscar Wilde, cared much more about the way in which a thing was said than about what was said.

Samuel Butler has a delightful passage in his famous *Notebooks* on this attitude to writing, which he regards as pretentious **cant**:

“I never knew a writer yet who took the smallest pains with his style and was at the same time readable... Men like Newman and R.L. Stevenson seem to have taken pains to acquire what they called a style as a preliminary measure — as something that they had to form before their writings could be of any value. I should like to put it on record that I never took the smallest pains with my style, have never thought about it, and do not know or want to know whether it is a style or whether it is not, as I believe and hope, just common simple straightforwardness. I cannot conceive how any man can take thought for his style without loss to himself and his readers.”

He goes on characteristically to add: “I have, however, taken all the pains that I had the patience to endure in the improvement of my handwriting...”

In other words, a man's style should be like his dress. It should be as **unobtrusive** and should attract as little attention as possible. Butler is here voicing a conviction which I feel very strongly. Provided that a man feels genuinely on a particular subject, provided also that he has got clearly conceived in his head what he wants to say on that subject, provided, too, that he is careful to say only what he has clearly conceived and nothing more, then, if he has a sufficient knowledge of grammar and the laws of syntax, his thoughts, when he comes to put them in down, will automatically express themselves in the mould which we call good writing, while the enthusiast, whose feeling is not merely genuinely but fanatically intense, may unwittingly break out into great writing.

“A true original style”, says Shaw, “is never achieved for its own sake.... Effectiveness of assertion is the beginning and end of style. He who has nothing to assert has no style, and can have none; he who has something to assert will go as far in power of style as its momentousness and his conviction will carry him. Disprove his assertion after it is made-yet his style remains.”

No man living writes better English prose than Shaw; no man has a more true, original and effective style.

Yet surely, I shall be told, you will admit that there is music and beauty in words. Two men may feel equally strongly, and think equally clearly, upon a given subject, yet one will express himself with a passionate and moving sincerity that will carry conviction, the other in the cold, colourless terms of a Government Blue Book. Should we not aim at achieving that quality, whatever it may be, that clothes with beauty the words of the one, and eschew the official bleakness of the other? To this question I shall endeavour to suggest an answer in a further article.

About the Author

C.E.M. Joad, English philosopher who has helped to “popularize” philosophy, he has written many types of essays, which are the explorations of a quick and many sided man into many realms of experience. This essay is out of his book, “The Bookmark” and was originally contributed to a socialist weekly paper.



Reading and Thinking Skills:

1. Answer the following questions.

- i) How did the author make his class write an essay?
- ii) How do journalists make their reports over emphatic?
- iii) What does the writer say about using the simple words in writing?
- iv) Why is writing thought to be a complicated and technical craft?
- v) Why is letter writing different from other styles of writings?
- vi) "The labour of extracting these essays is Herculean." What does it mean?
- vii) How does the talk of style and form of writing create mystery in the minds of plain/common people?
- viii) How did American journalist report? Give examples.
- ix) What is the importance of simplicity in writing?
- x) What does the author say about the style of G. B. Shaw?

2. Choose the correct answer.

- i) The object of writing is to
 - (a) publish something we want to say.
 - (b) convey something we want to say.
 - (c) spend our leisure time.
 - (d) improve our handwriting.
- ii) What was the response of the class when the author told them to write an essay?
 - (a) they were very pleased.
 - (b) they made every sort of excuse.
 - (c) they disliked him.
 - (d) no response.
- iii) The author told his class members to write a letter, because they
 - (a) could convey their meaning easily.
 - (b) wanted to go on leisure trip.
 - (c) didn't want to do anything.
 - (d) needed practice in letter writing.
- iv) A journalist uses striking and unexpected words, because
 - (a) he is a very learned and literary man.
 - (b) he wants to achieve over emphasis.
 - (c) he needs money.
 - (d) he needs fame.

- v) What is the suggestion of the author in writing?
- (a) one should use bombastic words.
 - (b) we should not be sincere when we write an essay.
 - (c) one should use simple words and one word would normally suffice instead of using two or three words.
 - (d) one should use complex words.
- vi) The characteristic of journalism is
- (a) constant overemphasis.
 - (b) happiness.
 - (c) sadness.
 - (d) constant emphasis.
- vii) When we sit down to write, take a solemn oath to say exactly what we
- (a) think to eat.
 - (b) love to say.
 - (c) mean to say, nothing more.
 - (d) don't mean to say.
- viii) A man's style should be like
- (a) his cap.
 - (b) his dress.
 - (c) his coat.
 - (d) his car.
- ix) Effectiveness of assertion is the beginning
- (a) and end of style.
 - (b) and middle of style.
 - (c) and heading of style.
 - (d) and way of style.
- x) No man living writes better English prose
- (a) than Shakespeare.
 - (b) than Shaw.
 - (c) than William Wordsworth.
 - (d) John Keats.

Critical Thinking:

- What problems do you face while writing? Share your feelings with your friends.

Writing Skills:

Application for a job

Remember the following points in letters applying for a job:

1. In the introductory paragraph, state the post you are applying for and give specific information about the advertisement to which you are replying (the name of the newspaper and the date should be included).
2. The body should contain essential information.
3. In the concluding paragraph, express your willingness to provide additional details and to attend an interview.

Activity:

Write an application for the job of an assistant in a well-known organization.

Preparing Curriculum Vitae (CV) or resume`

Curriculum Vitae

1. **Personal details:**

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| (i) Name | (ii) Father's Name |
| (iii) Address | (iv) Telephone |
| (v) Age | (vi) Gender |
| (vii) Marital Status | (viii) NIC |

2. **Education**

3. **Qualifications**

4. **Experience**

5. **Sports and other activities**

6. **Testimonials**

7. **References**

Research Project

Write a research report on planning to promote the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in our education system.

Grammar:

Relative Pronouns

Relative pronouns refer to persons or things already named, and are used to introduce clauses.

Examples

1. I read the book. The book was on the table.
I read the book which (that) was on the table.
2. We met the man who was in the bus.
3. I did not see the man whose cousin is here.
4. Here is the man whom I have not met before.

NOTE: *Very often sentences are joined together without the use of a Relative Pronoun.*

Example

I met the man you had told me about.

Interrogative pronouns ask questions like:

Examples

1. Who ate the apples?
2. Which book do you like?
3. Whose car is black?
4. What are you writing?
5. Who did you walk to college with?

Conditional Sentences

There are three types of conditional sentences.

Conditional: Type I

This type tells us that something will happen if a certain condition is fulfilled.

Examples:

- i) If I go to the market, I will buy some story books for you.
- ii) If you win the football match, the principal will award you with a prize.

Conditional: Type II

Conditional of this type is contrary to fact in future / present.

Example:

If the weather were nice today, I would go to the zoo.
(I want to go to the zoo, but the weather is not nice)

Conditional: Type III

Conditional of this type says that something didn't happen because a certain condition was not fulfilled.

Example

Had he worked hard, he would have passed the exams.

Activities:

1. Write down the conditional sentences by filling the verb in bracket in correct form.

- | | |
|--|-------------------|
| i) If he (come) here, I (convey) you message. | (Type I, II, III) |
| ii) If I (have) enough money, I (buy) this house. | (Type I, II, III) |
| iii) If I (meet) him, I (give) your message. | (Type I, II, III) |
| iv) If I (find) your mobile phone, I (give) it you. | (Type I, II, III) |
| v) If I (am) the minister of education, I (reform) the examination system. | (Type I, II, III) |

2. Fill in the blanks to complete conditional sentences.

- | | |
|---|------------|
| i) If you play tricks on people, they ____ not trust you again. | (Type I) |
| ii) If you _____ asked me to lend you some money, I _____ been happy to help you. | (Type III) |
| iii) If I won a million rupees in a lottery, _____ | (Type II) |

Oral Communication Skills:

Class presentation

Activity:

Prepare a three minute presentation on what you like or dislike. You could begin: "I would like/dislike...."

A good talk:

- is organized _____ it doesn't ramble.
- has some variety of tone.
- is clear and easy to listen to.