

# REMEDIAL THERAPY FOR THE LOST ART of WRITING

**BARBARA  
ELAINE  
BERNSTEIN**



Once many years ago, I asked my author-father for his comments on a composition I had written for my high school English class. My father read the essay thoughtfully and then said, "Barb, this is redundant. You say the exact same thing here and then here. Why don't you take it out of the first sentence? . . ."

I interrupted him, wailing "But I can't! That's my topic sentence and it *has* to state the entire idea of the paper." He obviously didn't understand the rules of the English teacher's game.

"Don't give me that topic sentence jazz," he sputtered angrily.

*Barbara Bernstein has a B.A. in Psychology and a Ph.D. from the University of Maryland's Institute for Child Study. She is a former secondary school and college English teacher, now devoting herself full time to writing and research.*

That was it. I grabbed the paper and stormed out. Maybe it was redundant, but I'd spent untold hours on it and I couldn't bear to hear that it needed revision starting from the very first sentence. Besides, we had been through this routine before and as usual, he was asking me to disregard cardinal rule number one: There was no compromising on the topic sentence.

The fact was that his advice always ran counter to the English teachers' instructions. There was no way to reconcile the two—obliterating the topic sentence would have meant an instant "F." Nor was my father willing to accommodate and help me bridge the gap. "Baloney!" he had once called the rules, and never wanted to hear about them again. He insisted on being loose and cavalier about these weighty matters. It was exasperating.

Some years later, the tables turned and I was the one asked to help. My younger sister wanted me to look at a term-paper she had written on Tennessee Williams. The theme of her paper was how Williams' plays reflected his own personal

life. She couldn't have picked an easier thesis to support. The parallels were so striking that the paper almost wrote itself.

But even though the paper was clear and convincing, it was nonetheless hard to read. The tempo was uneven for one thing—abrupt in some parts and long-winded in others. The style was also dull and lifeless. The paper just wasn't smooth at all.

As I began to work with my sister on her essay, I noticed something very curious. I was suggesting many of the same revisions that my father had previously suggested to me. Apparently Pam and I made the same mistakes in our early writing. Shortly after that, I became an English teacher in the same district where she and I had gone through school. It was then that I learned how common these mistakes are.

To my surprise, those same errors showed up in paper after paper. Generally, when a pattern is that consistent, it's not accidental—and this was no exception. Ironically, the fact is that these errors can be traced to the way students are taught to write.

The problem is that classroom instruction is too one-sided. Students learn a lot about the importance of an orderly, logical presentation but they learn very little about how to achieve a smooth style. The concern for order and clarity is so overriding that other matters are totally eclipsed. Predictably, the students feel they must write clear, well-organized papers, but they give little thought to whether the language flows or the material is interesting to read.

This unbalanced approach is not an isolated phenomenon. It appears to be uniform from class to class because it comes not so much from the teachers themselves as from the manuals and books they follow. It seems every English teacher in the county receives a syllabus or textbook which outlines in great detail how writing should be taught. Little is left to the instructor's imagination or digression. But most important, the syllabi and texts set forth a uniform set of rules which students must follow in all formal writing. Regrettably, these rules do more to undermine good writing than to produce it. They are designed for the sake of clarity only, and students follow them at the expense of their writing style.

Teachers are essentially innocent pawns in this whole enterprise. It is very hard for them to see the lack of balance in the traditional approach to formal writing because nothing in the syllabus is actually wrong. But the fact is that this relatively benign error leads students astray just as surely as misinformation.

Here, briefly, is an outline of the instruction students receive. They are told to begin every composition with a complete statement of purpose—the “thesis.” The rest of the paper is supposed to directly and explicitly support the thesis. Finally, the concluding sentence must recap or summarize the main idea. In short, students learn to introduce what they are going to say, say it, and then summarize what was said. Since many of their essays are only one paragraph long, it is not hard to see that this eminently logical approach can be extremely redundant.

Furthermore, students can by no means give only the gist of their thesis at the outset. Even though a paper might be more interesting if some “punch” were reserved for later, that is strictly forbidden. The first sentence has to fully state the author's point of view. Another difficulty with the initial (“topic”) sentence is that it effectively becomes a strait jacket for the rest of the essay. It has to be supported with utter singlemindedness. No new slant or extraneous comments are permitted, regardless of how much they might add to the paper.

To make matters worse, students are told to explain every point as though the reader were completely ignorant on the subject. This makes their papers even duller—they write as though they were first grade teachers addressing a class of six years olds.

But that's not all. Students receive another instruction which causes them to over-explain still further. They are told that every essay is supposed to “prove” its thesis statement. For example, suppose a character sketch begins with the assertion: “Miss Kelly was depressed and forlorn.” Then the rest of the essay would aim at proving this contention by citing evidence from the woman's behavior and appearance.

It has been my experience that students misinterpret this meaning of the word “proof.” They strive for something absolute and irrefutable—as if they were Perry Mason proving that the butler didn't do it. The fact is that a writer cannot *prove* his point beyond a shadow of a doubt or to the exclusion of other possibilities. They can only present supporting evidence. But students don't always appreciate this fact, and so they over-write in a frantic effort to achieve absolute proof. When over-writing is coupled with over-explaining, the combination is deadly. The two have a synergistic effect on the wordiness of a paper.

It should be clear that none of the rules which lead to this poverty of style are exactly wrong.

They're just not kept in the proper perspective. They are overstated hence easily misconstrued. They are also too unbending, which means the author cannot make important decisions based on the unique character of his essay.\*

Finally and most crucially, in an effort to satisfy all these rigid requirements, students lose sight of the overall quality of their work. They focus so much attention on the rules that they fail to step back and look at their paper as a whole. They analyze but do not synthesize, and as a result, their writing is structured to death. The style becomes awkward and unnatural and lacks a smooth flow.

By teaching students to write in this mechanical, rule-oriented way, we are treating the art of writing like a technical skill. It is as though essays could be hammered out by a machine as long as the measurements were right. Obviously writing is much more than that. If an interesting and readable style were held to be as important as clarity and organization, the students' writing would greatly improve. These two goals would temper each other and lead to a more balanced result. The truth is that everything in life requires some blend of different ingredients; that is the only way balance is ever achieved.

Carrying out this didactic prescription, however, is far from easy. After all, how does one teach the art of writing? How, for that matter, is any art taught—other than by concentrating on the technical skills involved? There are no simple formulas for teaching people to write smoothly. But I have found an instructional technique that does help considerably.

I first hit upon this approach when I was working with my sister on her Tennessee Williams paper. The underlying problem with her essay was its lack of smoothness. She had written so many short compositions that she automatically modeled each paragraph in her term paper around the format she had learned for brief essays (topic sentence, concluding sentence, etc.). As a result, the paragraphs dragged; they were dull, redundant, and slow moving. Yet there wasn't enough transition between paragraphs to bridge the gap from one idea to the next. Pam had really never learned how to handle the ma-

\*The reader may perhaps think that these rules could only lead someone astray if he follows them blindly, forsaking all common sense and judgment. But I believe that argument misses the point. Anything which is stated as an absolute imperative (and these rules certainly are) will be interpreted that way. Students are literal creatures, after all. They are taught the virtue of obedience, and that does not mean obedience just when the rules seem right.

ior shifts in thought that occur in lengthy papers, and it showed.

At first, my efforts to help her were almost counter-productive. She couldn't understand what was wrong and seemed to get more confused than ever. Finally, she blurted out: "One minute you say to stretch it out; the next minute you say to tighten it up. Which way is better?" So I explained the matter to her by saying that a good essay should move at a constant pace. The writer must hold as one of his goals a smooth flow of ideas. That way, the paper will neither drag nor be choppy. The essay, in turn, will be easy and enjoyable to read.

High school students readily understand the idea of "pace." It is the amount that is covered per unit time, like the speed at which a car moves. This simple explanation immediately made the matter clear to Pam and she was able to correct the rest of the essay herself.

Since that time, I've seen this scenario repeated again and again. Students who have had an overdose of technical rules do not write smoothly. Their uneven tempo is the ultimate source of all their errors (e.g., dullness, choppy, repetition). But this problem can be straightened out easily if it is just brought to the students' attention. The result is a dramatic improvement in writing quality.

Perhaps this approach is so effective because the visual imagery involved leaves an indelible impression on the students' minds. They are told to aim at "steady movement" which conjures up the picture of an evenly flowing stream. It's the kind of instruction people don't have to concentrate on to hold in their memory.

Another important feature of this technique is its flexibility. As mentioned earlier, inflexible rules are *bound* to lead students astray because the requirements of every essay are different. But the "constantpace" instruction does not lead to error because it is more like a general guideline than a specific directive.

There is no doubt that writing suffers from the singleminded approach which is taken in many classrooms today. The method described here to correct this imbalance seems to me to have outstanding results. It improves writing quality with a speed that suggests the gain is effortless. Thus I highly recommended that technique to complement the other instructions students receive in learning to write. I don't think there is any argument that writing style is as important as clarity and organization. Then there should also be no argument that it deserves equal instructional time. **E**