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Letters of application should be sent to William A. Madden, Chairman, Department of English, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 55455. Two examples of the applicant's own writing, either published or in a finished manuscript, should accompany the application. Candidates should also seek letters of recommendation from three referees, both teaching colleagues and students. Deadline for 1972-73 is February 15, 1972.



focus

# Perceiving, Thinking, and Composing: A Structured Approach to Pre-Writing

by **JOSPEH J. COMPRONE**, University of Minnesota, Morris

I

Most teachers of writing, if they are at all sensitive to the enormous complexity of their job, demonstrate easily recognizable evidence of psychosis. We are confused, perplexed and enormously overworked; we are commissioned to teach a skill (or is it an art?) that artists ranging from Sam Johnson to John Hawkes have told us takes a lifetime to learn. And most of us, in our less euphoric moments, would agree. I suggest, however, that it may be just this terrible impossibility that makes composition worth teaching. Our psychotic behavior, usually shared at intervals by our students, might indicate a healthy perspective on contemporary experience.

Certainly the general public and academicians alike have throughout history suspected the sanity of writers and artists. When Norman Mailer tells us that "the shits are killing us" we, the public, respond in a variety of ways. Most responses seem to applaud the statement in one way or another. Those in agreement with Mr. Mailer suggest that the subject of his sentence represents a stunning use of metaphor; others, obviously in disagreement with Mailer, find his verbal extremism terribly satisfying precisely because they believe the sentence demonstrates the insanity of Mailer and his supporters. "The shits are killing us," whatever our reaction, represents a general truth about all language. Words and sentences are always the result of a complex process. That process is far more subtle, far more difficult to analyze, than are words themselves. We have to be at least partially psychotic to understand, both emotionally and intellectually, the basic interrelationship between words and context, especially when we admit that much of the value of words develops through a process that includes perception, the organization of thought and writing.

To clarify I shall refer to a remark by Benjamin Demott. He argues that a "...good writer is a...wide and various man: a character nicely conscious of the elements of personhood excluded by this or that act of writing and ever in a half-rage to allude to them: to hint at characterological riches even where these can't be spent."[1] To be "nicely conscious of elements of personhood excluded by...writing," to be in a "half-rage" to refer to these excluded elements, is to be, at least to a degree, psychotic. Norman Mailer is, as one of my students aptly put it, "crazier than hell." He expects us to know that he is partly playing a

role, partly serious, partly alluding to an entire area of linguistic behavior not usually represented in our everyday talk. He wants us to respond to his statement while acknowledging an enormous context, including the verbal battles of Gore Vidal and William Buckley, street rhetoric, revolutionary diatribes, etc. Certainly the wholly rational man, even the wholly "sane" man, would not be capable of such a wide range of allusion. Only a healthy neurotic, a neurotic able to transfer the results of his neurosis into the voice he projects on a written page can understand and achieve Demott's "half-rage."

Language, Demott suggests, involves dramatic as well as cognitive interaction. In every case, meaning depends upon complex interrelationships among words, context and pre-existing psychological phenomena.

There are two ways of developing writer's "half-rage." Traditionally, we have analyzed the final product of the writing process. We analyze the intricate symbolic patterns of literature, discursive prose and poetry. Then we ask students to imitate that complexity; we ask them to transfer the techniques they find in their reading into their writing. Certainly such analysis and imitation does serve a function. It helps students to realize that written communication is complex, that, in effective communication, explicit symbolic patterns and semantic structures must be controlled.

But such analysis of explicit structure needs to be combined with analysis and practice in those mental activities which occur before a writer puts words on paper. In other words, we must develop activities and exercises that help students to control pre-writing behavior. A writer who understands the complexities in his own perceptual and cognitive processes might be better prepared to allude to those complexities in his writing.

## II

I shall borrow directly from two related fields of psychological research. Both areas relate directly to the definition of symbolic processes found in varying levels of consciousness.

First, I shall work from a transactional theory of perception. Transactionalism is, at least partially, a response to the earlier, oversimplified theories of perception, theories which argued that the perceiver's mind was composed of "conscious elements" received directly from the outside world. Traditionally, these conscious elements were fused into overall perceptual orientations wholly dependent upon externally-based stimuli.[2] Transactionalism argues that the perceptual process is exceedingly more complex than indicated by such a one-to-one relationship. The human mind, according to transactional theory, is a patterning entity. Perception itself becomes a creative activity, an activity in which the mind is actively reformulating sensory information as that information is received. Mental "reformulation" is influenced by objective sensory information and, perhaps more important to our purposes, by a complex set of pre-established



mental patterns--we might call these patterns perceptual "mind-sets."

Perceptual "mind-sets" are created by an individual over a long period of time. They are often combinations of many past perceptual situations. In other words, the individual creates perceptual overlays which continue to influence perceptual data in the future. Allport, however, argues that the Gestalt or pattern theory, as complex as it is, still oversimplifies the perceptual process. "Configurationism [Gestalt theory]," Allport argues, "had achieved its successes at the cost of practically ignoring the motor side of the organism."[3] Most recent theories combine the approaches of Gestalt and structural psychology into more complex hypotheses. Allport describes the results of several such attempts.

> ...it has been claimed on the basis of experimental evidence that conditions internal to the organism, such as drive, value, or need, can affect the way in which the physical world appears, even in its supposedly stable quantitative properties. Phenomena appeared that seemed to suggest...the presence of a functionalistic preperceiver who selected the sensory data that were to be permitted the right to organize as perceptions.[4]

The central proposition in this theory was that a subconscious property, perhaps only partially rational, acted as a perceptual clearing-house, that the perceived environment was subjected first to a subconscious selective process and subsequently to conscious, rational control. Still another psychologist, Franklin Kilpatrick, argues the following definition of perception.

> ...perception cannot be 'due to' the physiological stimulus pattern; some physiological stimulus probably is necessary, but it is not sufficient. There must be...some basis for the organism's 'choosing' one from among the infinity of external conditions to which the pattern might be related... any notion concerning a unique correspondence between percept and object must be abandoned and a discovery of the factors involved in the 'choosing' activity of the organism becomes the key problem in perceptual theory.[5]

Transactional psychology, then, views perception as process, an intricate process in which the perceived object, the surrounding perceptual field, and perceptual "mind-sets" are constantly interacting.

Now we can turn to a second field of psychological research. A pre-writing approach based upon perception, and the transfer of perceptual stimuli into the symbolic patterns of the mind, must be supplemented by some analysis of how mentalistic patterns themselves are structured.[6]

We can begin by providing a broad theoretical construct for our analysis of mental behavior. Eric Klinger, in a soon-to-be-published work on the structure of fantasy, divides articulated--either subconsciously or consciously "articulated"--ideational streams into two general divisions. Operant segments represent prosaic, rationally-organized, explicit symbolic streams--streams which for matters of definition we might compare to the symbolic structures of written language, especially written language organized according to rational or grammatical principles. Operant language, in its most obvious form, represents consciously formulated patterns of thought. But ideational streams (patterns of thought, if you will) are usually interconnected; operant streams are associated, sometimes in haphazard fashion, with symbolic segments which are progressively more implicit and metaphorical. These segments of articulated consciousness Klinger calls respondent segments. He differentiates between operant and respondent segments of thought as follows.

> Segments of activity may be classified into broad groups which are here called 'operant' and 'respondent.' Whereas operant segments are initiated...volitionally, controlled by consequences, guided by feedback, and therefore proactive, respondent segments are initiated non-volitionally, are not inherently dependent on feedback, are elicited by antecedent events, and are therefore reactive.[7]

III

Most composition texts cover only the later, explicit phases of pre-writing--the phases represented in outlines and preliminary sketches. The outline, however, represents the operant organization of an enormously complex group of sensory and cognitive activities. As writers, we are usually only partially conscious of these early complex phases of pre-writing. The scribal acts recorded in an outline are in themselves the product of perception and thought; if we wish to include analysis of perception and thought organization as process, we must discover strategies through which we can bring that process into the conscious, operant language of the classroom.[8] Let us begin with an exercise in observation.

> Ask a class to observe an experience of a public nature--a guest speaker, etc. Discuss, with the class, their expectations concerning the speaker and the situation. The discussion should produce general insight into the mind-sets or perceptual orientations an individual carries with him into any experience.

Each writer, after preliminary discussions, should develop a loosely-organized list of imagery. The list should include both operant and respondent patterns.

Some imagery should be arrived at through free association,



other imagery by conscious referral to previous situations which the writer perceived as similar to the immediate situation. The freely-associated imagery would generally be parallel to respondent thought segments, the consciously-derived list to operant segments.

Let us turn now to another phase in this exercise.

> After formulating rough lists, each student should compose a rough sketch. The sketch would organize the imagery lists into what we previously called perceptual "mind-sets." In psychological terms, each student would be describing himself as a "functional preperceiver." The sketch would transfer operant and respondent imagery into values, attitudes and perspectives.

In this exercise, a writer would develop relationships between different respondent images. Suppose one student had for some unknown reason associated a black automobile and a man with dark glasses with the guest speaker. He would then find ways of rationally relating these respondent images to the immediate situation. This sketch would also encourage the fusing of respondent and operant thought segments. The black automobile and man with dark glasses might be combined with rationally organized attitudes and values. The result is usually an interesting, although somewhat disturbing, blend of affective and cognitive language. For example, our writer might develop a verbal sequence in which the public speaker is metaphorically associated with destruction (black), mystery (dark glasses), etc. If the speaker happens to be radical--say in politics--parallels between the black automobile and man with dark glasses can produce several playful comparisons. Such experiments often are strikingly similar to Fellini and Antonioni scenarios. They make interesting subjects for short films. In this sketch, the writer should develop a good deal of insight into his perceptual orientation--without worrying very much about stylistic, mechanical or organizational problems.

A final pre-writing activity related to perception. After perceiving the hypothetical speech, our pre-writer might compose an analysis of alterations motivated by the immediate perceptual field. He might ask himself how his preperceiving orientation balances with his immediate opinion. What details within the context of the presentation caused a re-interpretation or re-organization of pre-existing attitudes and values? What, in his pre-existing mind-set, caused him to ignore or overemphasize certain aspects of the presentation? Finally, he might describe to the class how writing about these attitudinal changes influenced his original perception of the situation. This exercise would develop in our writer an understanding of what Jerome Bruner calls the third step in the perceptual process: the "checking or confirmation procedure."[9] This step describes the perceiver's attempt to align the content of perception with those hypotheses or mind-sets he carried into the perceptual situation. Bruner points out that the checking and confirmation

procedure itself may alter our perception of a certain experiential field.

There is, of course, an obvious difficulty in such exercises. We are asking our student to become his own psychoanalyst; we are asking him to scrutinize his own perceptual and conceptual behavior. There will be obvious distortions in such self-induced psychoanalyzing. We should be able to improve upon these exercises by class discussion of pre-writing behavior and by discussion of articles generally related to pre-writing psychology. In any case, the purpose of these pre-writing exercises is to produce writers who are conscious of the complex process by which experience is received and organized. The purpose is not intended to be therapeutic, though it may be indirectly contributing to a healthy recognition of what some of us would call "existential realities."

IV

We can now turn from perception to thinking, especially the relationship between thinking and writing. All our efforts in this area should disabuse our students of any ideas they might have concerning a direct relationship between thoughts (or mental patterns in general) and written language. The organizational principles of the mind are decidedly different from the patterns of imagery, the ideational stream, in the mind. Our previous resumé of current associationist theory and cognitive psychology should help here.

We can begin by referring to the pattern of ideation. Thoughts, the psychologists tell us, occur in segments which are connected sequentially. Let us briefly review operant and respondent thought structures. Operant and respondent segments of thought are joined by related imagery at jointures. Operant segments are "initiated volitionally"; they are composed of conscious imagery and sensations directly related to immediate external feedback. They are usually logically organized and logically controlled. Most students attack writing problems with the idea the only their operant thought patterns are transferrable to the written page. They believe, usually incorrectly, that articulated thoughts are similar in structure to written sentences. We must at least begin to convince them that operant mental behavior can be combined with what we previously called "respondent" mental behavior--those segments of thought which are "initiated non-volitionally, are not inherently dependent on feedback, are elicited by antecedent events, and are therefore reactive."

In one sense, when we ask students to use both operant and respondent mental behavior in their pre-writing activity, we are asking them to use what would traditionally be called "reason and imagination." Psychologists have lately come to subdivide human behavior and language into affective and cognitive: affective behavior and language is motivated and organized by emotional, non-rational stimuli (when a love poem



makes us cry); cognitive behavior by the intellect, by the "knowing" and structuring, the rational patterns of the human mind (when we think by cause and effect). Affective and cognitive provide us with more scientific and accurate methods of discussing and analyzing the traditional concepts of reason and imagination.

Most writers, at least those not as perceptive about writing problems as Mr. Demott, assume that dreams, reverie, fantasy and day-dreaming are activities which do not contribute to the composing process. I have had students tell me that they spent six or seven hours on a paper because their minds, as they put it, "constantly wandered from the subject." As if mind-wandering were an evil. Actually, such mental activity can sometimes offer the writer his most creative solutions to a particular writing problem. The "half-rage" alluded to by Demott, the psychosis I have associated with artists, seems to me to be no more than the psychotic rage to express several meanings simultaneously, a desire to write prose that demonstrates what the critics of metaphysical poetry call intellectual "conceit"--the writer's ability to demonstrate striking associations where no one thought they existed or differences where others expected only similarities. A writer capable of using respondent behavior creatively and effectively will reflect the writer's half rage. When discussing pre-writing activity, this means that our writer will want very much to express in his writing the subtleties, complexities and diverse associations of perception and thought.

V

Let us return, with the affective-cognitive distinction in mind, to the second phase of pre-writing activity--the phase in which the symbolic product of perception is transferred into the symbolic patterns of the mind. Our hypothetical writer recognizes, through his initial pre-writing exercises, that he has to a degree already re-organized and re-interpreted his experience in the act of perceiving. Robert Zoellner, in his much discussed monograph on the relationships between talking and writing, points out an important distinction in our use of the term "metaphor." He argues that "the English teacher's intense literary awareness of the metaphor-as-artifact results in a peculiar professional blind spot: he often appears only minimally aware of the mediative aspect of metaphor, which we may call metaphor-as-instrument. Yet there is obviously a vast difference between the metaphor the English professor teaches--say in Hopkins or Donne--and the metaphor he teaches by."[10] Artifactual metaphors--those metaphorical structures we find in a lyric poem as we read and analyze the poem--do not in any way parallel the instrumental metaphors the poet might have used in transferring the experience of that poem from perceived object to thought and finally to the written page. Our discussion of operant and respondent mental streams should suggest methods of dealing with instrumental

metaphors as they operate in the mind of the writer.

Let us return to our hypothetical writer. He has begun to formulate methods of analyzing his perceptual orientation. He has begun to organize "meaning-complexes"--pre-existing complexes of ideas, attitudes and perceptions which he understands will influence the composing process. Now he can begin his search for instrumental metaphors, metaphors that will expedite the transfer from implicit, respondent thought to more explicit, operant thought. The following is a list of general activities . They can be carried out by an entire class, by a student and teacher in conference, or by the student himself.

1. After composing, discussing and analyzing a perceptual sketch, the writer should begin to search for objects, ideas and emotions which compress the language of the sketch. This exercise should encourage both affective and cognitive responses. Our writer might begin by freely associating those emotions, ideas and objects. He might also try a cognitive experiment by attempting, after using free association., to impose a rational, discursive sequence on those ideas, objects and emotions.

2. Ideally, our writer has organized a large group of images which are directly or indirectly related to his perception of a radical guest speaker. He might select one or two images he believes are particularly striking--perhaps for some reason he associated one of the speaker's gestures with a gesture usually found in a totally different context. These examples of aberrant imagery can become excellent ways of combining operant and respondent behavior.

A class discussion I once conducted should provide an example of how this second exercise might work. The students had written some poetry and we began discussing the metaphors in their poems. One girl had compared a politician's face, projected on a television screen, to a large, bladder-like organism. First, we approached the metaphor-as-artifact, much in the way we would have analyzed metaphor in a poetry anthology. The student's poem, as a self-contained unit, had attempt to express what she felt was the mindless mediocrity of American politics:

puffing, blowing squid
a pulping bladder on screen.

Now, analyzing the metaphor purely as artifact, we argued that the squid-bladder image, as applied to a description of



the politician's face on television, reinforced the reader's understanding of American politics as mindless and bureaucratic.

Then we changed our perspective and discussed the origin of the metaphor in the thought-patterns of the poet. In other words, we took an instrumental approach to the metaphor. After extended discussion, the class developed the following explanation: the poet had recently seen a political figure on television, a figure who had a thoroughly negative effect on her. In writing, they decided that she had fused the politician's television image with a respondent image--an image of a squid in a glass enclosure which she had carried away from a visit to an aquarium. The comparison of these two seemingly unrelated (respondent) pieces of mental imagery were forced together by her negative reaction to the politician. The metaphor, then, became an instrument supporting the operant meaning of the poem--the depiction of American politics as mindless and bureaucratic. This method of analysis can become a useful aid to composing; it allows other writers to see the fusion of idea and object, of separate areas of respondent imagery, in action. The inexperienced writer is encouraged to fuse disparate ideas, to find meaning and form in what might otherwise remain totally unrelated sensations, emotions, and ideas. They are challenged to make mind-wandering productive.

I am not proposing that, as teachers of poetry, we decide to propose hypothetical trains of thought for every poem--as interesting as that may be. But as teachers of composition such an instrumental approach to metaphor (and all instances of symbolic transfer for that matter) can be a useful approach. It expands the student's consciousness of complexity by revealing subtle relationships between different contexts, by encouraging a playful, creative attitude toward the entire process of organizing perceptions and thoughts.

These exercises merely suggest the kind of affective and cognitive interplay which should, I suggest, become an important part of the composition process, especially the pre-writing process. They are based on the assumption that the traditional composition course concentrated to an exaggerated degree on what Zoellner calls metaphor-as-artifact, or metaphor as it is represented in the symbolic patterns of a written page. We need to devote more time to metaphor-as-instrument, or metaphor as it is used by a writer to transfer symbolic patterns produced by our senses (perception) into the cognitive-affective mental patterns which occur before writing.

Some teachers will argue, I am sure, that students who are self-conscious about their own affective and cognitive pre-writing habits will sacrifice creativity. I believe differently. Students who recognize, even to a slight degree, the complex interrelationships among the processes of perception, thought and writing might better demonstrate the "characterological riches" described by Benjamin Demott. They might even, in truly existential fashion, demonstrate a healthy psychotic rage; a rage to express at least a few of those complex interrelationships in their writing. We might decide not to apply any of the terms of

this discussion to the students we teach, but in teaching them to write we must be familiar with the way perception, thought and writing are related. Only then can we improve the pre-writing habits of our students.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Demott made this remark while participating in the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar on the teaching of English. It has been recorded by John Dixon in Growth Through English (Reading, England, 1967), p. 39.

[2]F.H. Allport, Theories of Perception and the Concept of Structure (New York, 1955), p. 438. Allport's book provides an excellent survey of early perceptual theory. I am, of course, greatly oversimplifying Allport's account of structuralism in early perceptual theory. Morse Peckham (Man's Rage for Chaos, Philadelphia, 1965) seems to support my summary of perceptual theory when he argues that "two main traditions"--"transactionalism" and "directive-state" theory--have controlled perceptual theory for the past thirty years.

[3]Ibid., p. 439.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Explorations in Transactional Psychology (New York, 1961), p. 2. Kilpatrick argues that "the acute contrast between the theoretical possibility and the practical impossibility of leaving values and purposes out of scientific observation...has pointed up the necessity of re-examining the basic formulations from which these problems stem."

[6]The following terminology and theory will be at least partly based upon the work of Eric Klinger, a psychologist at the University of Minnesota, Morris. For the past several years, Dr. Klinger has conducted a "fantasy project." The project has attempted to define the organizational principles behind dreams, reverie, and fantasy symbolism. The results of his research will be published sometime in the immediate future. I have taken a great deal of liberty in interpreting Dr. Klinger's theories and in applying those theories to the composition process. Readers of this paper will, I hope, reserve their opinions of Klinger's study until it is published in entirety.

[7]We can list other properties of operant and respondent segments as follows:

Operant Streaming

1. Operant streams are organized discursively, according to rational modes of sequencing. Operant streams represent mental symbols organized according to the pre-existing logic of language and reality.
2. Operant symbolism is influenced to a larger degree than respondent symbolism by external feedback. Environment exerts a direct controlling influence on operant behavior.
3. Unlike the ideational streams of dreams and fantasy, operant streams are seldom disrupted by images and symbols drawn from other contexts.



Respondent Streaming

1. Respondent streams are organized by association of imagery and symbolism drawn from antecedent meaning complexes, rather than from direct feedback.
2. Respondent streams are often disrupted by what we might call aberrant imagery and symbolism, imagery and symbolism drawn from contexts other than the dominating context of a particular segment of mental behavior.
3. Respondent streams are characterized by the phenomena Freud defined as displacement and condensation and the quality defined as pluri-significance by many current psychologists. In respondent streams, the symbolic weight of an antecedent image is often "displaced" on to another image; at other times the symbolic weight of many images is "condensed" into one image; finally, many symbols and symbol-segments in respondent streams are "pluri-significant" in that they represent the symbolic weight of many other ideational contexts.

Again, I should emphasize that these lists represent my condensation of Eric Klinger's analysis of operant and respondent mental behavior.

[8]I should supplement our resumé of current perceptual psychology by referring to the work of Jerome S. Bruner, the social psychologist. Bruner argues that personality plays a large role in perception. He proposes a three-step cycle of perception.

> Analytically, we may say that perceiving begins with an expectancy or hypothesis...We not only see, but we look for, not only hear but listen to...In short, perceiving takes place in a 'tuned organism.' The assumption is that we are never randomly set...but that...we are always to some extent prepared for seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting some particular thing or class of things...Any given hypothesis results from the arousal of central cognitive and motivational processes by preceding environmental states of affairs.
> The second analytic step in the perceiving process is the input of information from the environment...
> The third step is a checking or confirmation procedure. Input information is confirmatory to or congruent with the operative hypothesis. If confirmation does not occur, the hypothesis shifts in a direction partly determined by internal or personological or experimental factors and partly on the basis of feedback from the learning which occurred in the immediately

preceding, partly unsuccessful information--checking cycle ("Personality Dymamics and the Process of Perceiving," found in Perception--An Approach to Personality, ed. by Robert R. Blake and Glenn V. Ramsey [New York, 1951], pp. 123-124 Bruner's theories, offered from the perspective of personality, arrive at a perceptual structure decidedly similar to the structure outlined by the transactionalists.

[9] Ibid.

[10] "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition," College English, XXX (January 1969), pp 267-268. Zoellner applies the distinction between "metaphor-as-instrument" and "metaphor-as-artifact" to the composition process. Thinking is not characterized by the same application of metaphor as is writing. The instrumental metaphors of thinking, speaking and writing applied in the process using language, cannot be understood by either teacher or student through an analysis of artifactual metaphor (p.268). As a result, Zoellner suggests what we shift "our attention from thought process to operative utterance [the spoken word]"; in other words, he suggests we relate the symbolic and metaphorical structures of talking to the operant structures and patterns of writing.(p. 274).

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# "Answer me"

by ED MAKO
Lakeville High School

Answer me this, you men who make man a chemical process . . . . What is gone when the corpse is left? Where is man? The body is present.

And this,you who would have us high grade apes. . . .Why do men suffer loneliness in the midst of the world's billions?

This too I ask, you of the survival of the fittest. . . .Why do men die for one another?

One last answer I ask. . . .Of what use is love?