

Writing with Style, by John R. Trimble (Prentice-Hall, Inc. 143 pages).

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In the plethora of books that floods a college English teacher's mailbox each spring, an occasional text demands a second glance. It may be the color, or an intriguing design, or the author's name, but with Writing with Style it is the subtitle: Conversations on the Art of Writing.

Art? Conversations? An informal text with advice on how to write better? Yes indeed -- a text, as the author puts it, for "those writers who've already been through the textbook mill and who now find themselves hungering for helpful tips, inspiration, and a clear, lively synthesis of the essentials."

In the 138 pages Trimble stocks a wealth of information on how skilled writers think and write, building a reservoir not only for the advanced writer, but also for the "less advanced writer in need of a quick overview of the terrain he's painfully traversing."

The text is divided into two sections: "Fundamentals" (with such chapter titles as Getting Launched, Thinking Well, How to Write a Critical Analysis, Openers, Middles, Closers, Diction), and "Odds and Ends" (Punctuation, Conventions Regarding Quotations, Tips on Usage, and Epilog). Although the titles may suggest a resemblance to conventional texts, here the resemblance ends, as it is the immediate practicality of the book, the concrete explanations of how experienced writers think, the professional tips on writing and the brevity, that makes Writing with Style what it is:

"different -- short, fun, genuinely useful."

Quotations from famous writers begin each chapter. What student would not react to John Updike's "Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what it is one is saying," or John Mason Brown's, "It is in the hard, hard rock-pile labor of seeking to win, hold, or deserve a reader's interest that the pleasant agony of writing again comes in," or Ernest Hemingway's, "The indispensable characteristic of a good writer is a style marked by lucidity." Students will immediately identify with "labor" and "agony," and will probably groan about "rewriting," but the point comes through: writing is far less inspiration than they may have suspected.

Trimble's main objective is to develop a "writer's sense," and he achieves it admirably. Step by step he guides the reader through the thinking process of skilled writers: Where they begin, how they develop their ideas without all the trial and error so common with novices, and where they end. Throughout the process are tips framed in questions and answers. Take his discussion on thinking well (Trimble believes the failure to do so causes most writing problems). Writing is more than communication, it is the "art of desired effects," and the essay writer never forgets that persuading (or selling) the readers is the desired effect. To effectively illustrate the procedure Trimble asks, "How do you sell your reader?" answering it crisply with

- 1 Have something to say that's really worth his attention.
- 2 Be sold on its validity and importance yourself so that you can sell it with conviction.

3 Furnish strong arguments that are well supported with concrete proof: facts, examples, and quotations from authorities.

4 Use language that sells -- vigorous verbs, strong nouns, and confidently assertive phrasing.

The author does not stop there, however; he continues his succinct enumeration, and with the help of judiciously chosen examples, shows the reader what writing is all about. And what examples: colorful passages by Pauline Kael, John Mason Brown, E. B. White, Robert Frost, Mark Twain and others, plus student writing which he criticizes and follows through with revised copy.

Some readers, Trimble's "literary prudes," may protest the inclusion of Chapter 9, "Superstitions," in which he treats the Seven Nevers of the TOTELarian Creed and Rules like an exorcist releasing holy demons. For each of the inexorable Seven,

1 Never begin a sentence with and or but

2 Never use contractions

3 Never refer to the reader as you

4 Never use the first-person pronoun, I

5 Never end a sentence with a preposition

6 Never split an infinitive

7 Never write a paragraph containing a single sentence,

Trimble appeals through logical reasoning and stylistic usage and preference for its abandonment, citing exemplary passages for support. But he does caution against promiscuity, which should pacify the prudes to some degree.

The premise behind Chapter 11, "Proofreading," is sound: "Proofreading is like the quality-control stage at the end of the assembly line. Think of it in these terms and you'll see why you shouldn't consider a paper finished until you have proofed with finicky thoroughness." But in only one instance does Trimble place a clamp on too much correction: if the insertion is more than one or two sentences, retype the page. It is conceivable that insertions, carets and other conventional proofreaders' marks could so disfigure a paper that the original, with all its sloppy proofreading, would be less irritating to read. His suggestion for students to place, in the margin, circled numbers relating to uncertain uses of punctuation, idioms, and the like, and to ask pertinent questions about such usage at the end of the paper, is excellent. Students need to doubt, ponder, and inquire.

But all the tips in the world could not produce such a text were it not for the author's style and attitude: clear, lean, fresh, graceful, optimistic, and witty. Even the dearest of subjects comes out lively:

Actually, the dash is so versatile and so eager to work that it occasionally moonlights as a colon, as a trailing-off thought ("If I could only--"), as a censor (Oh, d----!), and other such things. Unfortunately, novice writers instinctively recognize this trait and work it silly, asking it to double as a comma, a semicolon, a parenthesis, a period, *ad scandalam*. This is why it is tagged as a mark of Easy Virtue by many staid writers, who don't let it near their prose. Such an overreaction is a pity, really, because when the dash errs, it is a victim, not a culprit, and nothing can quite replace it.

Writing with Style is certainly not for students and teachers who demand the conventional: exercises, discussions of grammar, logic, or the research paper. It is for those who need a shift from the usual bill-of-fare, who

need, in Trimble's words, "an informal 3-hour refresher course with the emphasis on refreshment." It has the fundamentals of writing; it has ready-to-use and time-proven tips on writing; it has all the earmarks of good writing. It is a welcome departure from the conventional.

POEMS

Dale S. Olson
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At the Funeral of a Family Friend

I sign the book,
shake hands with sombre faces
and nervous smiles,
then fold my hands to contemplate.

One step in the long journey
that is my family,
my life should be like Duchamp's nude
descending the staircase --
alarmed and alive with movement.
But here is death,
silence without motion;
still, like the man with the blue guitar
we strain to hear the music.

Unfolding, I rise
to breathe the crisp air
of an April morning.