

The OED And Other Dictionaries As A Source For Student Papers

by

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Looking back over forty plus years of teaching freshman composition in college one of the most successful courses was one called "Writing about Language." The purpose of the course was to teach the students something about the history and structure of language, to make them more conscious of how words work and to help them become more sensitive to the mystery of words. The primary texts were a dictionary and Thoreau's *Walden*. The twelve papers of three to five pages were about language, mostly about individual words.

I will describe four representative assignments and the responses of the students to these assignments.

Early in the class the students were given the following assignment:

Some words you know and feel more intimately than others. You know their internal shape, the curve of their meaning, the limits of their usefulness. Some words are richer than others, or seem so. They serve more adequately than others to convey exact feelings. They have a more succulent taste, or a more fragrant smell, a sharper edge, a more distinct color, a clearer sound, perhaps because you have known them longer, or because they remind you of some instance in your past where they served you well, or because you remember fondly when you first met them and because they have never, even after long years, become trite, have instead acquired a richer, fuller meaning. Some words give you pleasure. They not only denote much but connote more.

Choose a word that you know intimately, preferably one that captures your imagination as well as your mind, that embodies a significant part of your life, a word that interests you. Then explain how and why the word came to have its appeal, to carry its feeling and meaning. Recount your experiences with the word, particularly your first or a memorable contact with it. While you may need a dictionary, as much as possible rely on your own knowledge of and experience with the word. One final note: it is easier to write about a word rich with connotations than about one with few connotations.

Before they wrote the paper I lectured on the larger rhetorical strategies using James Kinneavy's distinction between aims and modes of writing. I pointed out that any of Kinneavy's aims—self expression, persuasion, conveying information, explaining and proving, exploring and making poems or stories—could serve in writing the paper with the least likely being persuasion or making poems and stories. I reminded them that the aims are not mutually exclusive. In discussing mode I suggested that either narration

and description are more appropriate than evaluation or classification, though again all four will play a part, particularly a combination of description and narration.

The results were surprisingly good. Many of the papers were interesting to read. The words about which they wrote were varied: *behavior* (chosen by a foreign student because its wide use in a psychology class puzzled her, and she wanted to discover what it meant); *possibility* (chosen by a girl who argued that "anything is possible if a person sets her mind on goals and works her hardest to succeed," and illustrated her point by showing how she and her partner won a tennis match when the odds were definitely against them; she could not, however, overcome stubborn writing obstacles); *pride* (chosen by a person of color, who explained how pride motivated persons of color to achieve dignity and equality); *Armageddon* (which the student found spooky and ominous sounding, frightening because of its connections with the Apocalypse); *exotic* (the student played on its similarity to erotic as he described his visit to the Hawaiian Islands); *serene* (a description of fishing on a northern Minnesota lake at sunset); and *boy* (a narrative by a person of color about how a white teacher's use of the word to a person of color resulted in violence).

Concerned with revision, I had each student write the paper again, this time paying more attention to the precise situation in which they experienced the word. For example, in the first paper on *enigma*, the writer told in rather general terms how Lucy's line "What's an enigma?" in a high school musical about the Peanuts gang raised the question which no one seemed to be able to answer. The writer was fascinated by the sound of the word. In the revision she emphasized specific characteristics of the rehearsal in which the impact of the question forced her to consult the dictionary to discover, much to her delight, that the situation that gave rise to her search was an enigmatic situation itself. Somewhat gratuitously she brought in the similarity of the sounds of enema and enigma. In the conclusion she conveyed her growing delight in puzzling her friends by using a word not commonly used and thereby becoming, she hoped, somewhat enigmatic herself.

By relating the word to the experience which forced her to discover more fully the meaning of enigma and by seeing in that situation an example of the meaning of the word, this student learned how a word can unlock the significance of what would otherwise have remained an ordinary and unexamined experience.

This paper was followed by another which required greater use of the dictionary. Again the students wrote two papers. This time I assigned the word. Usually I assigned the word *economy*. We discussed the word for an hour. The principal meanings which emerged focused, as one would expect, on economy as a careful use of money and on the condition of the economy of the United States at the time.

By judicious, or perhaps by leading, questions, the students came to

understand that economy could have both a restricted meaning (i.e., a frugal management of money) and a more general meaning (i.e. a careful management of any resource—time, property, personal abilities, labor). This made it possible to illustrate how words generalize in meaning or become specialized, ameliorated and pejorated. The latter led to the sometimes pejorative use of economy to mean parsimony, niggardliness (two words not in most students' vocabulary), or stingy. We were now prepared for the writing assignment:

Look up economy in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *Dictionary of Americanisms*, both the second and third edition of *Webster's Unabridged*, one or more desk dictionaries, a dictionary of synonyms (a source often overlooked and extremely helpful in making fine distinctions in meanings), and, perhaps, an etymological dictionary. In addition check Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, and the *MacMillan Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Famous Phrases* to see how the word has been used. Watch for the use of the word in lectures, over the radio and TV. See if you use the word, if your friends do and how and when. Look for meanings which are not yet recorded in the dictionary. Note past meanings which are no longer current. By now you may be overwhelmed. Do not despair. If you run out of time or space, focus on the dictionary definitions.

You will immediately perceive a difficulty. Everyone has the same, or almost the same, data. Invention seems to be dictated. Arrangement and the method of classification seems self-evident. There is little more to do than to begin where the OED does and show how the meanings have developed historically or to classify meaning by showing distinctions. About all that is left is style. Think again. There are other principles of division besides chronology; for example the movement from the specific (management of a household) to the general (management of any community).

It may be, indeed it is, possible to vary the mode. Instead of a classification a narrative may be possible. Perhaps the predominant meanings of economy can be recounted in a story. But whatever mode you use, one point is paramount: Be sure when you finish that you have discovered and that you have informed the reader in an interesting way what exactly the meanings of economy are. When you write the next paper you will discover how important it is to understand the discriminations among the meanings of economy.

Students responded to the challenge of this paper. On the surface it would seem to be a dull assignment. Only the most eccentric (or is it the most enigmatic?) people read dictionaries. Even fewer write papers about the words they look up. The dictionary is not usually a source for writers; it is a tool.

But, I repeat, some, indeed most, papers were interesting. For example, there was the student who "chugging along on the train from Wellsville to

Pittsburgh" was surprised to discover a town named Economy. Here she found an Economy Gas Station, the School of Economics and Home Economics, Economically Safe and Sound Banking, the Economizing Home Store, the Economical Heating Company and economy-sized items ranging from economy-sized peanut butter (which was smaller and less economical than the giant size) to economy-sized cars (which were larger and less economical than the compacts or subcompacts). The town, she wrote was founded by a Greek immigrant. She was right in her etymology but unaware that Economy, Pennsylvania was founded by the Utopian George Rapp who after moving from Harmony, Pennsylvania in 1815 to New Harmony, Indiana returned to Pennsylvania and founded Economy in 1825.

Economy, when my student visited the town in her imagination, was electing a mayor. Each of the candidates ran on a platform, the major plank of which was a major definition of economy. One was interested in improving "the art or science of managing a household, including especially its expenses, buying only what was necessary. Another promised to improve "the administration of the concerns and resources of the whole community, especially the expenditure of money," and pledged, as almost all candidates do, to reduce spending and make more prudent use of taxpayers' money. The third, a political economist, assured the voters that he would use his knowledge, as economists originally did, to increase the material resources of the town by the careful management of resources, including time, human resources and labor. The fourth candidate was concerned to help the citizens understand, as he did, "the method of divine government of the world, or of a specific department," in this case God's will for Economy. His favorite phrase was Economy needs the "economy of Truth."

In spite of the ingenious use of story to explain the meanings of *economy*, the paper was sometimes incoherent and lost sight of the goal of informing the reader what the word meant. But overall it was apparent that she not only understood the meanings of the word but that she knew something about point of view, that she was imaginative. Other papers used other techniques, but none quite as striking as this one.

Immediately after writing the paper on the meaning of economy, we read Thoreau's *Walden*, and you remember that the title of the first chapter is "Economy." The next assignment, then, was simple: "Keeping in mind the definitions of economy, write a paper showing how Thoreau explores the functions of economy in his life. Keep in mind that Thoreau implies rather than states the meanings of economy."

This was perhaps the most difficult of the four papers, for Thoreau uses the word economy only one or two times in the chapter. The students were on their own in exploring Thoreau's reason for the title and developing a rational to account for his title.

All of the students immediately saw the connection between economy and Thoreau's attempt to live a simple and frugal life, but again some students

were more imaginative. One examined three different definitions implied by Thoreau. The first point, and perhaps the most insightful, considered not Thoreau's direct application of economy in his life but with his use of economy in organizing the chapter. Citing the OED definition of economy as "the structure, arrangement of proportion of parts, or any product of human design," the student attempted to show Thoreau's "order or arrangement in general" in the first chapter of *Walden*.

His next point was to show how Thoreau exemplified "the efficient and sparing use of material and human resources" in his years at Walden pond. Here the student emphasized Thoreau's prudent use of resources which made possible an effective use of time and labor in order to "transact some private business with the fewest obstacles: to live wisely and simply."

Finally the student demonstrated how Thoreau's initial chapter exemplified his concern to manage his household and his finances as frugally as possible. The paper concluded with an attempt to show how all three of these definitions were related to each other and how all three could be subsumed under the rubric of economy as a choice of values, Thoreau preferring to get by on only the most essential and elemental material necessity—to maintain body heat—that he might be more free to live a humane and civilized life.

The assignments making use of dictionaries brought into play considerable numbers of techniques usually handled in a composition class: invention, arrangement, and style. The writing assignments allowed the class to consider the purposes of writing as well as the possible modes of writing. It is helpful but not necessary to understand Kinneavy's aims and modes, readily available in Kinneavy, McCleary and Nakadate, *Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990); indeed other classifications work just as well.

Writing about words taught the students a very practical use of the dictionary, particularly the OED—which too many students never use and often never know exists. Writing about words taught the students something about how meanings change and how words are related. Students seemed to get a better feel for the sense of words, for connotation as well as denotation. The assignments helped students to see how words can be precise yet imprecise, can reveal but also obscure ideas.

By writing about words the students saw that a careful examination of words helped their understanding of what they read. They came to realize that both writing and reading are explorations, are means of discovery, discovery of ideas and of others as well as of themselves. In short, students came to realize that writing and reading depend upon a love for and understanding of words, and that that love and understanding deepens and enriches our experience.