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Are You Making Yourself Clear?

NORMAN COUSINS

Norman Cousins has had a long and industrious career as a journalist and writer. He is perhaps best known as the editor of Saturday Review, a position he held for thirty-five years. His long-standing interest in language and his concern for clear thinking are reflected in the following article, in which he argues for both purpose and organization in writing.

Does it do anything right?

In the present scratchy and indiscriminating national mood, education is an easy target. I deplore the tendency but would like to get into the act nonetheless. One of the prime weaknesses of education, it seems to me, is that it doesn't give enough attention to the need for developing the individual's communications skills. It is concerned with his ability to absorb knowledge but it assigns somewhat lesser importance to his need to make himself clear. This is less a matter of vocabulary range than of vocabulary control. It has to do with the entire process by which an individual organizes his thoughts for purposes of transmission.

My problem →

The prime element in this process is sequence. Ideas have to be fitted together. The movement of a concept or an image from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the listener is retarded when words become random chunks rather than sequential parts of an organized and ordered whole. This doesn't rule out unhurried allusions; these can give color to an account and help to make a claim on the imagination and memory. But it does rule out ungoverned circling and droning, reminiscent of buzzards hovering and swooping over a victim until he drops.

It contributes nothing to a conversation to have an individual interrupt himself in order to insert sudden thoughts. The abuse is compounded when these obtrusive thoughts are invaded by yet others so that nothing is complete, neither the sentence, nor the paragraph, nor any of the vagrant incidents or ideas that are strewn around like fragments of an automobile wreck.

People can't make themselves clear
Edu system does not do it right
Write clear - not fast

* Is the edu system right?

- in class discussion good

I think it is all about lack of time?

Is anything helping us write clearly

- Time pressure - push it close

- esp. tests that require essay in short time

If someone can not communicate idea

- does it matter?

Tech today

- shorter: is it clearer

* Differences b/w writing + speaking *

The following quotation is a fair approximation drawn from a recent conversation. 4

"This book I want to talk to you about," a visitor told me, "is one of the finest novels that I—well, let me put it this way, when I first heard about it I said to myself—actually, I told my wife, who asked me if we were publishing anything exciting; you know, my wife is one of the finest assets I have in my job. She doesn't come to the office or anything like that, you know, but—well, first let me tell you that she did disagree with me about two manuscripts I turned down and they were published by another house and of course they became best sellers. First let me tell you I once had a manuscript reader who was working for me and, well, she was two years out of Radcliffe but she had taken Levin's course in writing at Yale. I don't agree that writing can't be taught. I remember my own lit course with Jenney, who told me—well, you know, he had the highest standards and I was really pleased to see him publish last month in *Saturday Review*. What I meant was, someone always publishes the manuscript that everyone considers unpublishable, and this is what one always hears about and it is what always comes up in conversation. One always hears about *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*—it was rejected by a dozen publishers—or *The Naked and the Dead*—it must have been turned down by ten publishers. Of course, Norman Mailer has turned out to be quite different from what everyone expected. His report on the Chicago convention was one of the finest—I don't know whether you saw it in *Harper's*—it was better, you know, than his piece on the Pentagon riots in *Commentary* which—well, let me put it this way, the best writing is being done by—I mean the best reporting—no one has come close, you know, to Truman Capote and this is where we go, you know, when we want to find out what is really—you know, nothing in any of the newspapers can tell us what it is like, especially if you want to know what the real facts were . . ."

Sounds
better
when
spoken

He was at least two hundred words and three minutes beyond his topic sentence, and I had yet to hear the title of the book. The passage quoted is not a parody. If you want its equivalent, I suggest you take a tape recording of a cross section of an average day's office interviews or serious conversations. Chances are you will be appalled by the sprawling and fragmented character of the transcript. Complete sentences will be largely nonexistent; central ideas will emerge as from a deep mist. The surprise will not be that the meaning should be as obscured as it is by the unrelated turnings and self-interruptions, but that there should be any meaning at all. Oral communications in our society come close to being a complete bust. . . . 6

If there is no excuse for blurring and meandering in conversation, 7

there is even less excuse for it in written forms of communication. The daily correspondence basket is a greater source of fatigue than anything that has been invented to harass a man whose work requires him to be in almost constant communication. I have a vivid picture in my mind of Dr. Albert Schweitzer at the age of eighty-four spending most of his time struggling with his correspondence. Every day two sacks of mail would arrive at the hospital at Lambaréné—letters from people who wanted to visit the hospital or work there; letters from Schweitzer Fellowship members all over the world; letters from admirers and readers of his books; letters from doctors and theologians, musicologists, and scientists, all of them writing on matters within his professional competence.

Late at night, long after the hospital was put to bed, Schweitzer would be bent over his desk, working on his correspondence. One night, during my visit in 1958, I was unable to sleep. I left my bunk and walked toward the river. I saw a light in Dr. Schweitzer's quarters and peeked in. There was Le Grand Docteur, struggling with his correspondence at 2 A.M.

We discussed the matter the next day.

"My correspondence is killing me," he said, "I try to answer all my letters, but I keep falling further and further behind. I get great joy out of reading my letters. It keeps me in touch with the outside world. I like to hear from people. But most of the time, I don't really know what my letters are trying to tell me. They wander so!" — letters

Is it unreasonable to expect education to attach primary importance to the techniques of clarity, either oral or written? Is it unreasonable to suggest that respect for the next man's time is one of the most essential and useful lessons a person can learn? Time is capital. Time is finite. Clarity is a coefficient of Time.

I should like to think that the school provided an environment conducive to the development of habits of clarity. But I am troubled by what I know. A recent high school test in English composition that came to my attention called upon the student to write descriptive material of 1,000 words or more in ninety minutes. If the school allowed (or even required) the student to spend half a day thinking about such a writing assignment, and a full day for the actual writing, the time would not be excessive. A writer like Thomas Mann felt he had put in a productive day if he had been able to write 500 words. Good writing, most of all, is clear writing. This is painstaking and often painful work. It requires time. It requires sustained and sequential thought.

But the school itself is not yet a model of organization, either in its internal structure or in its relationship to the student. I see very little evidence of total time-management in the demands made by the

Got a secretary

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usually good and reading goes fast

I agree - they want fast

school on the student. Each course of study has its own claim. Unable to get it all in, the student is often under pressure to cut corners. He finds himself forced into a strategy of intellectual merchandising and packaging; he becomes more concerned with the voluminous trappings and the appurtenances of surface scholarship than with genuine achievement. He learns the tricks of glibness. . . .

Yup

All this has to do with the student's ability to organize his time, to give his total attention to a difficult problem or objective, and to make himself clear. The school is not the only conditioning agent in the thought patterns and habits of the student, but it is possibly the dominant one.

Meanwhile, there is the ongoing problem of all those who are beyond the reach of the school. It is churlish and absurd to take the position that a poor communicator is locked into his low-level condition. The key to his liberation is the realization that effective communications, oral and written, depend absolutely on a clear understanding of his purpose. That purpose should be clearly defined and identified. It should be developed point by point, with the rigorous attention to sequence of a professional bead-stringer at work.

I have no clue of my purpose

In verbal communication, the prime requisite is to anticipate the circumstances of a meeting or encounter. If it seems likely that the time available for meeting will be limited, then it is obviously suicidal to use up most of the time in clearing one's throat. Nor does it seem especially perspicacious to have overly long agenda, saving the most important items for last, when there is every likelihood that time will run out long before the main event.

In written communication, no better advice can be offered than to cite the favorite six-word question of Harold Ross, late editor of the *New Yorker*: "What the hell do you mean?" Ross was a great editor because he was death on ambiguities. Though he edited one of the most sophisticated magazines in the nation, he cherished the simplicities. He insisted on identifications for all names and places. And he hated extraneous words or observations. Under his rule, the *New Yorker* became a model of clear, effective writing.

My purpose here is not to drum up business for the *New Yorker*, but to point out that institutions can be built on clarity. Also that clarity is one of the truly distinguishing characteristics of the educated man.

QUESTIONS ON CONTENT

1. What does Cousins feel is the prime weakness of education today?
2. What does he feel is wrong with contemporary oral and written communication? What does he offer as a solution to this problem?

So how does he suggest we fix it?