

PROSE essay like prose narrative or prose drama is an art of prose, and as an art it works in basic patterns. Rather than a sequence of events, it is a sequence of ideas, and it shapes the sequence in certain ways, depending upon its main idea, its attempt or "essay." It makes a leading statement, that is, predicates its subject, and then unfolds, develops, substantiates both subject and predicate in the specific relation it has proposed for them, with the specific connections of that relation: the conjunctive *and*, disjunctive *or*, conditional *if*, concessive *though*.

Students in California have usually read widely and well in books of essays in ideas. The first week of the Fall term of 1961, 30 freshmen, my teaching assistant and I talked about ideas we had met with during the past year. We were able to range from Thoreau to Jung and Freud, from Milton to Edith Hamilton, from Plato to Riesman. There were enough ideas for months of talking and writing.

Then I asked the students each to make a statement of one idea which particularly interested him, and to suggest two or three different ways in which it might be developed into an essay. Blockade. Few associated the concept of an *idea* with the concept of a *statement* or a *sentence*. For many, ideas were at best abstract words or phrases; at worst, as one student suggested, "opinions or untrue facts." Inasmuch as a fact or topic assumes no responsibility for predication, no pattern of organization is obvious for it, and the student is at a loss to know what development may mean for it. Therefore the most typical response to the assignment is

*An examination of the need
—and the means—
to compose our thoughts.*

Essay in Reason

Josephine Miles

something like: "The importance of music: (a) development by examples, (b) general development." Or "The necessity for world government: (a) subjective, (b) objective." Not many aids to reason here!

Idea as Structure

First need then is to talk about ideas as sentences, as saying something about something, as establishing relations, as predicating subjects. The student hopefully proposes, "Music is important" or "World government is necessary," and then goes on: "First I'll write a paragraph saying what I mean by *music* or *world government*. Then I'll develop my point in the predicate about *important* or *necessary*." But can importance or necessity be shown without showing possible alternatives? "Sure," says the student triumphantly, "Here's where I switch from objective to subjective!"

After some time discussing these terms as well as *general* and *particular*, demonstrating the need for both pairs and for the clarity of their relations, we come back to develop the useful structural implications of a good leading sentence. Here is one of the few really organizable ones achieved in the first week. Please ignore the horrors of its wordiness, and

Josephine Miles is Professor of English, University of California, Berkeley.

refrain from *Dic* or *WW* or *P* in the margin. These problems are secondary to sheer understanding of the point, and will mostly clear up when the student's thought clears up. And she is on the right track:

"A prevalent disease, mental retardation has received a minimum of public attention and this neglect has hampered any progress toward alleviating the problems of the disease."

What is the main point here? "Well, that lack of public interest in the disease has hampered progress in understanding it." Cheers. The subject is *lack*; the predicate, *has hampered*; so what will the basic organization be? "Chronological—stages of hampering, development of the verb. But now I see I don't *want* that kind of organization. I want to talk about ways of studying retardation and how they need public support." So? So: "Most ways of studying and improving mental retardation depend on public understanding and support." Then you'll have to demonstrate the predicate *depend*, and talk about *how* and *why*. "That's what I want to talk about—three *hows* and one *why*." Now we are beginning to work out the development of an idea.

Chronology, spatial description, comparison, work mainly conjunctively: *and - and - and; then - then - then; also; moreover*—"Here are the main stages in the study of retardation." Disjunction strives to separate, to insist on mutually exclusive alternatives: *either - or; on the one hand - on the other; not this, but that*—"Either we get public interest, or we give up." Concession assumes but denies: *though - yet; nevertheless; however*—"Though we need public interest, yet we can take the following steps without it." Conditional shows interdependent causal relations, conjunctive but

subordinative: *if - then; because - therefore*—"If public interest improves, our study of retardation will be aided in the following ways." This is the structure which, it turned out, our student intended to establish.

Elements of Support

The first help we can give the student then is to make him see whether the predication he has chosen to make, the verb he has chosen to apply to the subject, is really supportable by what he knows or can discover; and then, second, to see whether he has arranged the elements of support in the order and connection best for his purposes. A syllogism, the classic unit of reasoning, is in itself a small paragraph of substantiation. "I want to say something about Socrates, and what I want to say about him is that despite his great wisdom he is still mortal. Why is he mortal? Because all men are mortal, and Socrates is a man, as I can show in a paragraph of characteristics." Most of our thought concerns *some*, rather than the *all* referred to in this syllogism, but the pattern may be adapted to *some* by taking explicit cognizance of negative as well as positive evidence: "Though two specific authorities deny it, public interest does help, and by public interest I mean not press-publicity, but active individual concern."

Reasoning means giving reasons: that is, it deals with the relations between statements, and these relations are of a few basic kinds: of cause or purpose—*if this, therefore this, or this is so because*; or of choice—*this or this*—both are impossible at once; or of association—*this and this* go along with this. These are the kinds of possible simultaneity or sequence of statements. Once a stu-

dent recognizes that his own thought moves in these basic relations, he will be apt to enjoy both the art and the social force of the simple reasoning process of the paragraph. His planning or outlining will show first what main point or predication he is planning to make about his subject, then the main blocks of material he will use to support it, with *pro* connections *and, or, if* and *con* connections *but, or, though*; and finally a new main point, revised from the first hypothesis in the light of the evidence as it has developed. It is the predicate, not the subject, which is planned to be thus supported and modified. There is no such thing as too large or unwieldy a subject; what the student wants to say about the subject is what needs estimation. A student who tries to outline his material rather than his idea is trying, as one student has put it, to eat sardines without opening the can.

Man does not receive raw materials through the senses and then try to make meanings of them through the mind. Rather, the meanings that he makes, tentative and provisional as they may be at every stage, lead him to look for materials of experience which will test his meanings. So the student does not need to stuff his mind with so-called "facts" before he can be responsible for a tentative statement; and so, on the other hand, for *any* statement he makes he can be held responsible. If we do not teach the student how to make responsible statements, we give in to the myths of "raw fact" or of individual autonomy, and make him the victim either of the outer world or of the inner. Thus we see the dangers on the one hand of the so-called "report" in composition-writing, which leads to an inert sort of copying, and on the other hand the dangers of so-called "creative" writing in which any-

thing goes because there seems to be no valid outer check.

A recent study of suggestions for teaching high school and college composition presented in journals and handbooks over the past few years found that either the so-called "creative" assignment or the so-called formal practical assignment like report and letter-writing bulked large.¹ Hopefully we may soon change some of this emphasis—moving away from "raw material" and "social adjustment" toward the center where they can meet in thoughtful argument—the making of statements based on interest and speculation and the supporting of them by evidence *pro* and *con*.

Why should we allow ourselves to be pulled between two arbitrary poles, when what we share is that very human power which philosophers have always spoken of, the power to agree on basic issues and to subordinate minor issues to major? For the Renaissance humanist, such reasonable power served to mediate between man's sense and his spirit; so today it may mediate between man's psyche and his society. Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community* warns that so-called individual autonomy at one extreme and totalitarianism at the other tend to create a vacuum in between, where men actually live; and that men, to prevent this vacuum, need to strengthen the working categories of their own activities—their church, their club, their voting precinct, their job, to build a solid structure of human community between the forces of the personal and impersonal. So, I think, we need also to compose our thoughts: to learn to get from where we have been, to where we are, to where we want to go.

¹ Study by E. Kaupp and J. Wirth, College of San Mateo, San Mateo, California.

Copyright © 1962 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.