

Resource Materials
For Teaching Language

Leaving Certificate English Syllabus

Preface

These Resource Materials for the teaching of language are intended to supplement and develop the ideas and approaches outlined in the *Teacher Guidelines*. Their purpose is to suggest generic strategies to teachers who can then select, adapt and apply them to their own situation as they see fit. The materials can be photocopied as required.

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Introduction

These resource materials were produced to help teachers to meet the specific needs of the new Leaving Certificate English Syllabus in relation to the teaching of advanced reading and writing skills.

In Section A the focus is on a variety of strategies which should facilitate a thoughtful and active approach to developing comprehending skills and increased language awareness. Teachers will need to select from the strategies outlined those ones which they can most productively use with their texts and their students. Unless these strategies are embedded in real and relevant contexts of thought and learning they will not be effective.

Section B takes an entirely different approach. Many students are quite unable to reflect on their own use of language; they remain largely unaware of how their texts appear or sound to others. Also, they lack the knowledge and skills required to improve and to develop their compositions. It was thought that if they could see writers of all kinds reflecting on their own texts, this might stimulate a more reflective and conscious approach to the act of composition. However, teachers should find many other uses for the material in this section, as well as finding these thoughtful and original texts of much personal and professional interest.

Section A

Approaches to Texts



“Read not to contradict
and confute; nor to believe
and take for granted; . . .
but to weigh and
consider.”*

*F. Bacon



1. Making Language Live

Part 1: Developing Advanced Reading/Comprehending Skills

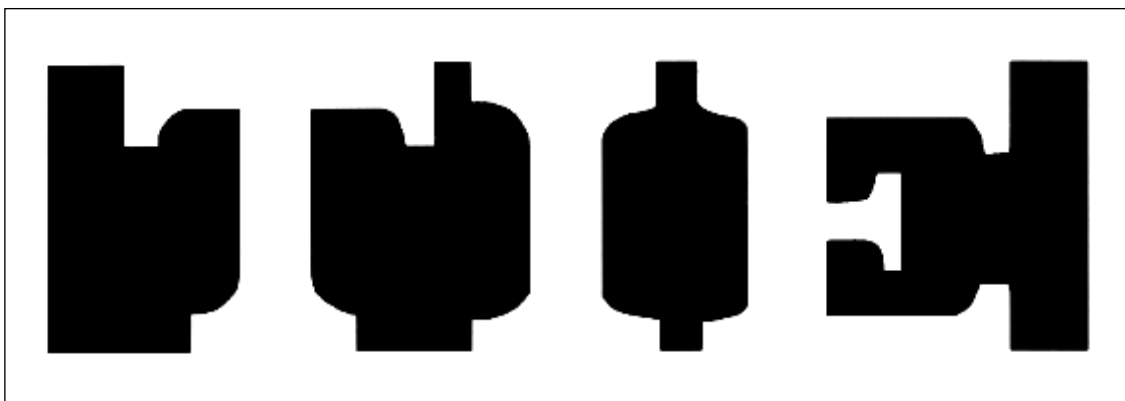
'Reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking makes what we read ours.'
John Locke

Traditional approaches to comprehension assumed that by focusing on the understanding of each individual word and sentence the whole meaning of the text would be revealed. However, what tended to happen was that while students made sense of the small parts they did not realise how these achieved overall meaning within the total text. Students failed to understand or respond in a significant way to the meaning of a text although they could explain and understand each word and sentence. At worst they failed to interpret and integrate the text and simply made serviceable local meaning to survive teacher questions, the lesson assignment or the examination.

Contemporary research on reading and comprehending concluded the following:

- Comprehending is a dialogic act, not an act of receiving a pre-packaged meaning; meanings are constructions and interpretations.
- What the reader brings to a text is the lens through which the text is interpreted; meanings are culturally contingent.
- Meanings do not emerge from a text sequentially, like carriages emerging from a tunnel, but gradually come into focus, like a photograph forming in developing solution.
- All attempts at reading are attempts to make meaning; comprehending is a meaning-making activity and must always be approached in that way.
- Texts should be contextualised and approached initially to obtain their general sense; subsequently the component parts can be examined.

Look at the following diagram. Then reflect on what you see and how you came to see it.



I couldn't see it either!



Topics for reflections:

- How does one come to see the meaning in the image?
- What ways of looking help? What ways of looking hinder?
- Where does the meaning come from? Is it from the page or from the 'looker'?

Comment

To actually see the word TIE one needs, as it were, to step back from specific parts and shapes; seeing the overall pattern that the individual shapes make reveals the meaning previously obscured. Looking too closely at the individual shapes inhibits seeing what is actually present in the form of a meaningful word. It is only when the overall meaning is perceived that it becomes interesting to see how it is constructed and how all the parts fit together.

Methodological Implications

This insight has significant methodological implications not just for the reading of short texts but also for the reading of long literary texts. Traditional linear reading actually can militate against overall comprehension of a text and frustrate the dialogic interplay central to the reading act. In the case of long texts, to initially establish an outline of meaningful perspectives in terms of action, conflicts of value, relationships and thematic concerns and then engage in selective rereading for specific purposes is a more beneficial approach for developing overall comprehension.

These new understandings about how readers relate to texts and how meanings are made clearly signal that traditional approaches to the teaching of advanced reading skills need, at the very least, to be reconsidered. Quite often classroom practice amounted to testing reading rather than teaching the interpretative skills of reading; students were expected to give answers without being shown how to arrive at these answers.

The difference between the two approaches is clear in the following exercises. A comprehension text is followed by a series of questions (a) in the old mode and (b) in the new mode.

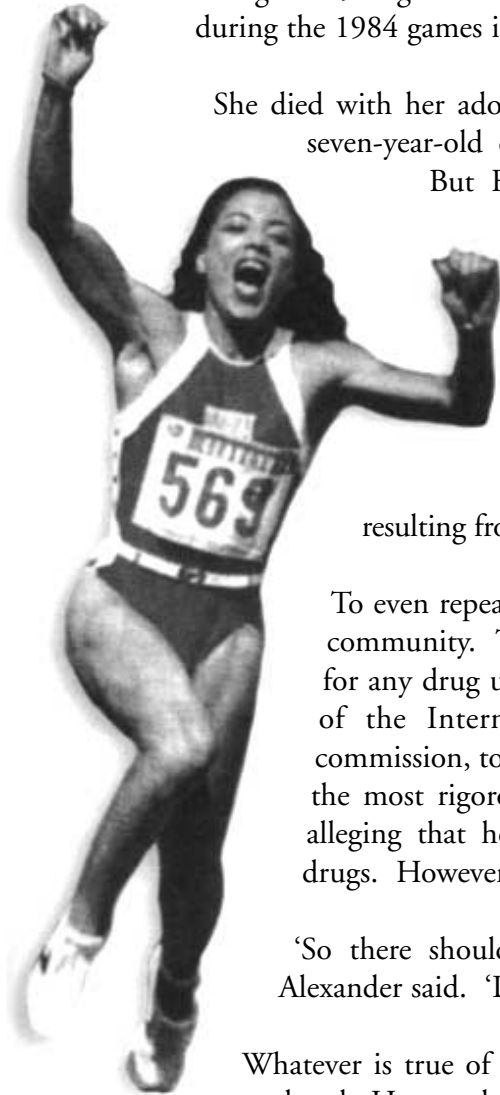
Teachers should find it of interest to experiment with these approaches with their students and consider the quality of understanding and the learning outcomes achieved with these contrasting but perhaps ultimately complementary approaches. While the teacher guidelines have already shown these new approaches in action these exemplars explore the potential of the approach more fully.

SHADOW ON FLO-JO LEGACY

She would have made an exquisite old lady. Imagine her at 80: straight-shouldered, her grey hair swept back, her long-limbed carriage and her elegant diction. Imagine her as she came back for one of her frequent visits to her old neighbourhood, the graffiti-splattered Jordan Downs housing project in perpetually impoverished Watts in Los Angeles, encouraging youngsters there to follow her example and reach for the stars.

It was not to be. Instead, and somewhat ignobly to listen to some commentators, Florence Griffith-Joyner died in her sleep last week at the not so

ripe old age of 38. She died with her decade-old world records in the 200 meters and the 100 meters intact and with her three Olympic gold medals won during the 1988 games in Seoul. She also had two silver, one gained during the 1984 games in Los Angeles.



She died with her adoring husband sleeping beside her and her seven-year-old daughter, Mary Ruth, in the next room.

But Flo-Jo, as she was called, also died with asymmetry, one that is becoming more controversial as critics and allies come forward to debate it.

Did she use performance-enhancing steroids? Or did those accusations stem from jealousy? Moreover, was her premature death caused by heart disease resulting from drugs?

To even repeat those whispers has outraged many in the community. The fact is that Flo-Jo never tested positive for any drug use. Prince Alexander de Merod, chairman of the International Olympic Committee's medical commission, told reporters that Griffith-Joyner underwent the most rigorous testing in Seoul after rumours began, alleging that her extraordinary performance was due to drugs. However, not even a trace of steroids was found.

'So there should not be the slightest suspicion,' Prince Alexander said. 'Let her rest in peace. The issue is closed.'

Whatever is true of Griffith-Joyner, the issue is most certainly not closed. Her coach, Bob Kersee, criticised the media and other athletes on Wednesday, blaming envy and exploitation of tragedy. 'What has happened is that people who are jealous have spread rumours.

'Nowadays, you don't have to have any facts for someone to print bad things about you,' Mr. Kersee told the *Los Angeles Times*. He said it was Griffith-Joyner's brutal training, her willingness to push her body to its limits where it was not fashionable for women athletes to do so in the 1980s, that was responsible for her success.

People in Los Angeles recalled the determination which propelled Flo-Jo to all manner of extremes. Jeannett Bolden, the women's track coach at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a former roommate, recalled Flo-Jo being asked once to leave a shopping mall because she was wearing her pet boa constrictor around her neck.

Others recalled the little girl called Dee Dee growing up poor with 10 siblings in a single-parent household, determined to be an artist or a fashion designer or a poet.

Julie Cart, an experienced Los Angeles sportswriter, recalled one story. Once, when her teacher asked her what she wanted to be, Dee Dee answered: 'Everything. I want to be everything.'

Even then, she created her own nail polish shades. She wore different-coloured socks to school. She was determined to be different and to make the most of those differences. And she was. She dazzled the sports world with her outfits – one-legged, skin-tight, shimmery body suits, or what she called “athletes negligees”. Impossibly long, multi-coloured nails and outlandish jewellery also featured.

But when she broke out of her mid-level athleticism in the 1988 Olympic trials, and emerged from training with a new physique, the rumours of drug use began. Other athletes said such a dramatic improvement in performance times was not possible.

She strongly denied the allegations and offered to take any drug test, anywhere, anytime. When Darrell Robinson, a former athlete, told a German magazine that he has once sold steroids to her, Griffith-Joyner went on a national television show in the US and called Robinson a compulsive, crazy, lying lunatic. However, after the Olympics, she retired, fuelling more rumours that she had got out before she was found out.

People in Los Angeles are angry that Flo-Jo's legacy is being questioned. Hundreds gathered at a candlelight vigil in Leimert Park during the week, singing songs and praising their friend.

She never forgot about Watts. She was always willing to come back home, a high school friend, Sonya Robertson, told the *Los Angeles Times*. She never got high and mighty. She remained down to earth, no matter what she accomplished.

Flo-Jo's sister, Vivian Johnson, and her brother, Weldon Pitts, spoke to the crowd. Mr Pitts said: 'My baby sister showed the world there was no limit to what you can do.'

Whether Flo-Jo pushed herself beyond human limits may never be answered. Autopsy results from Orange County . . . will not be able to show any evidence of steroid use in the 1980s. They may only provide evidence of her exact cause of death.

That is what is behind several people's calls for the truth to be made public by those who knew Flo-Jo best, her coach and her husband, Al Joyner. Dr. Robert Voy, author of a book called *Drugs, Sports and Politics*, and a former medical officer with the US Olympic Committee, is one of those making the calls.

'It would be very helpful for those of us involved in sports medicine to know the true nature of something like this. The premature death of an elite athlete is something that taunts us,' he told reporters.

The real shame is that the truth may never be known. In a time of few heroes, Flo-Jo was the genuine article to many. That her legacy should be diminished by uncertainty seems unfair. As *Sports Illustrated* writer Tim Layden notes: '... now home-run kings legally gobble natural enhancers and college football players sprinkle Creatine on their cereal'.

If anything, perhaps Flo-Jo was simply the one ahead – of other runners and of her time.

Elaine Lafferty, *The Irish Times*, September, 1998

(a) Old Comprehension: focused more on information

1. What age was Flo-Jo when she died?
2. Was she married?
3. Where did she come from?
4. What questions did her death raise?
5. Is this an effective piece of topic journalism? Give reasons for your answer.
6. What does the word 'sibling' mean? Show its use in a sentence.

(b) New Comprehension: focused more on perspectives of meaning

This passage is about the unexpected sudden death of a great Olympic athlete at the age of thirty-eight. Flo-Jo was a beautiful, charming woman who came from a poor background and won over the world through her personal style.

1. Why was this event of interest to many people do you think?
2. Do you believe that she was on drugs?
3. Do you agree with the view of Prince Alexander?
4. Would you be convinced by her coach's assertions?
5. In your view is the writer for or against Flo-Jo or is she just giving an overview of the situation?
6. In Section B ,The Language of Information, Tom Humphries and Brendan McWilliams suggest that a piece of journalism is successful if it makes the reader read right through to the end of the passage. Did this passage keep you reading? Why or why not did it succeed for you? How did the way it used words and sentences affect you? Would you want to change it in any way to make it more effective?
7. What are your thoughts about the use of drugs in sport? With which of the following statements would you agree or disagree?
 - All drugs should be banned from sport.
 - No matter what the risks people will take drugs to improve their performance so drugs should be freely available to all.
 - Drugs destroy the meaning of sporting contests.
 - People using drugs should be banned for life from sport.
 - Sports stars have become commodities exploited by the sports gear companies, so they take risks and use drugs to keep up their level of performance and thus make more money.

Choose one of these statements and write two/three paragraphs on it. Present your point-of-view in the format of an argument.

The contrast between the two approaches should be evident. Old comprehension tended to neglect the significance of the text for short-term linguistic objectives which might or might not be achieved. New comprehension foregrounds context and the meaningful whole. It invites interaction within that context, thus engaging the student in an integrated process of language development which is predicated on purposeful activity leading to increased language awareness.

LITTLE ANGELS, LITTLE DEVILS:
KEEPING CHILDHOOD INNOCENT

In 1828, a young man was found in the market-square of Nuremberg; he could write his name, Caspar Hauser, but he couldn't speak, except for a single sentence, 'I want to be a rider like my father.' He had been kept all his life in a cellar alone in the dark until his unexplained release that day. Though he was in his teens when he suddenly appeared, he seemed a symbolic child, a stranger to society, a tabula rasa in whom ignorance and innocence perfectly coincided. In his wild state, Caspar Hauser offered his new minders and teachers a blueprint of human nature – untouched. And in his case, his character fulfilled the most idealised image of original innocence.

He was sick when given meat to eat, passed out when given beer, and showed so little aggression and cruelty that he picked off his fleas without crushing them to set them free through the bars of his cell. His story attracted myth-making in his own time, and has continued to inspire writers and film-makers. The most recent work, a book-length narrative poem by David Constantine, opens with the aspiration of Caspar Hauser out of nowhere:

He stood there swaying on his sticky feet,

His head was bowed, the light hurt his eyes,
The pigeons ran between his feet like toys
And he was mithered by the scissoring swifts . . .

Even an embryo
Raises its little paws against the din
But Caspar stood there sucking it all in

Dowsing for more of it on the square's navel,
Arms stiff like compasses, at the end of one
He held his letter of introduction

'To whom it may concern' and at the end
Of the other a wide-awake hat,
Both very tightly. There he remained . . .

until the windows
Folded their wooded lids back and in rows . . .
From all the openings of their ordinary lives
The people stared . . .

They inched, already aghast
At all the questions he would make them ask.

Caspar Hauser was an enigma, and after his mysterious return to the world, his life was never free from strange, turbulent incident: he was suspected of fabrication, he was assaulted and wounded by an unknown assailant, and later, was thought to be the usurped heir to the throne of Baden. His innate gentle goodness couldn't save him: he was attacked, seduced, betrayed, and abandoned by his would-be adoptive father, the Englishman Lord Stanhope. And finally he was murdered, in still unsolved circumstances, in 1833.

There'd been other wild children who'd inspired scientific experiments into human development, but Caspar Hauser, more than any other, foreshadows this century's struggle with the question of the child's natural character. And his fate still offers a timely parable about the nostalgic worship of childhood innocence, which is more marked today than it ever has been: the difference of the child from the adult has become a dominant theme in contemporary mythology. In literature, this has produced two remarkable dream figures living in voluntary exile from grownup society – Kipling's unforgettably vivid Mowgli, and J.M. Barrie's cocky hero, the boy who wouldn't grow up, Peter Pan. Both reveal the depth of adult investment in a utopian childhood state. This can lead to disillusion, often punitive and callous, with the young as people. The shock of James Bulger's death was deepened by his murderers' ages, yet their trial revealed a brutal absence of pity for them as children. It was conducted as if they were adults not because they had behaved with adult consciousness, but because they had betrayed an abstract myth about children's proper childlikeness.

Marina Warner, The Reith Lectures, 1994

(a) Old Comprehension

1. Where and when was Caspar found?
2. What happened when he ate meat and drank beer?
3. What was his attitude to other living creatures?
4. Explain these words: enigma, aggression; fabrication.
5. How are Caspar Hauser and James Bulger related to one another in the passage?
6. Itemise how Caspar Hauser was exploited.
7. What aspects of the writer's style did you find noteworthy?

(b) New Comprehension

This is an account of a young boy who emerged into society having been imprisoned in strange, deprived circumstances for many years.

1. How would a child without any knowledge of the modern world cope with a similar experience today?
2. Would he/she be treated as badly as Caspar Hauser was?
3. The passage is concerned with innocence in childhood; what are its views on that and how do they relate to your own ideas on that topic?
4. From your own experience would you say that adults tend to underestimate what children know and understand?
5. James Bulger was a little boy of two years who was murdered in the 1990s by two other boys aged around ten years. What does that event say to you about innocence in childhood?
6. What questions does this text raise for you? Can you see any way of finding answers to these questions?
7. This text was originally part of a talk given on the radio. What aspects of the text would suggest that to you? You might consider such ideas as the use of anecdotes, detailed descriptions and illustrations. Find examples of these in the text and consider the frequency of their use in comparison with other kinds of writing such as comment, analysis and explanation.



Teaching idea

- Give a text to the students and ask them to make up questions and queries they have about the text and what it has to say about a topic or issue.
- The students could work in pairs and eventually share their questions, comments and evaluations with the other students.
- In this way the worthwhile objectives of collaborative reading and peer-assisted learning can be relatively easily achieved. Likewise, the variety of interpretations that can occur and the reasons that they do so can be examined and highlighted.

Part 2: Strategies for Reading Texts: Study Skills

The *Teacher Guidelines* (p.10) indicate that the resource materials would suggest a series of approaches that teachers could use in class and from which students could learn to develop a range of strategies for reading texts (text-attack skills). This section outlines these strategies.

There are many strategies available but again they will only be successful if they avoid becoming exercises for their own sake and are experienced by the students as purposeful and useful in given contexts. This means that strategies selected are appropriate for the purpose for which the text is being read and the students see that the specific strategy yields concrete results in terms of understanding and other desirable learning outcomes.

Clearly such strategies are useful across all subjects. In this context the subject, English, while achieving its own ends, functions as the main provider of the essential study skills on which other subjects rely. Fundamentally these strategies are study skills, providing ways of approaching all kinds of texts for learning and understanding. Here the English teacher has an important professional function in relation to colleagues in other subjects in that they should be made aware of the potential of these strategies for learning in their own field. This would be particularly true of subjects where textbooks laden with information and terminology are to the forefront. Research shows that these texts can cause major comprehending problems for many students and militate against learning instead of facilitating it.

All these strategies introduce the students to ways of constructing meaning in a text or to ways of re-constructing texts to highlight other possible meanings. They are based on the research by Lunzer and Gardner in Great Britain in the 1970s under the auspices of The Schools Council and published in *The Effective Use of Reading*. The generic term coined for these strategies is DARTS (Directed Activities Related to Texts).

Teachers will be familiar with these activities in various forms. What is aimed at here is to re-animate their use and outline their potential for the students' development as readers.

① *Completing*

Close process is an activity that shows the importance of putting texts in context.



(a) Close Process

In this process a text is supplied in which some words are omitted. The students are required to supply the omissions and so complete the text. Such an activity demands that the student engages with the whole orientation of the text initially if the omissions are to be filled appropriately. Thus, the activity reinforces the need to treat texts as wholes and as a result the role and purpose of the parts become clear.

There is an array of 'close' procedures available that can be of use to the teacher. In any specific text depending on the focus and purpose of the activity the following types of omissions can be made:

Omissions/Deletions	Possible Purpose
● phrases:	focus on linking phrases in an argument
● longer sections:	identifying modes of development in a paragraph
● titles:	focus on general perspective and emphasis
● sub headings:	recognising steps in a process or presentation
● illustrations:	interpretations of texts in an alternative mode
● captions:	interpretations of visuals
● characters' names:	identifying typical phrases and attitudes of a character
● kinds of words:	focus on a register or a writer's style

Examples of deletion: use of the close process



Activity 1. *Focus on the register of persuasion in a specific context*

The following text is an extract from an insurance company's brochure regarding health care. How do you think the text could be best completed to give the readers a sense that the company is particularly caring of their needs?

Thank you for choosing this company. It would be to think that you'll never us. But in you do, it's to know we're here. (See p. 100)



Activity 2. *Focus on the selectivity of words in a poem*

Complete this poem with the words that you consider to be the most suitable, keeping in mind that in poetry issues of sound, rhythm, and texture, along with meaning, are of paramount significance. When the activity is completed compare your poem to that of the poet. Discuss the differences and seek to understand the choices that she made. (See p. 100)

GOOD FRIDAY, 1991

The low tide reveals him
tangled in the . . . (i) . . . and branches
snagged at the foot of Capel Street bridge.

How he came to be there,
whether he jumped off
the quay wall or slipped
quietly into the green water,
another city . . . (ii) . . .

And what
of the children watching?
The fire brigade, the grappling hooks,

and the boat . . . (iii) . . . up the shallows;
what of the soul manhandling
the body over the stern
who looks up suddenly to our . . . (iv) . . . faces?

Though we glimpsed his face
but briefly, it's there before me now
white as the snow of Komavaro,
his . . .(v) . . . drenched body
that no arms can succour,
his . . .(vi) . . . and pattern ended
under the fast spring clouds,
a strong wind from the east
ruffling the low Liffey waters.

Paula Meehan. From *Pillow Talk*, 1994

Another interesting activity on this poem would be to change the gender words from male to female and see whether the impact of the poem is changed in anyway. If it hasn't any impact what does that suggest about the poet's perception of the drowned individual?

(b) Sequencing



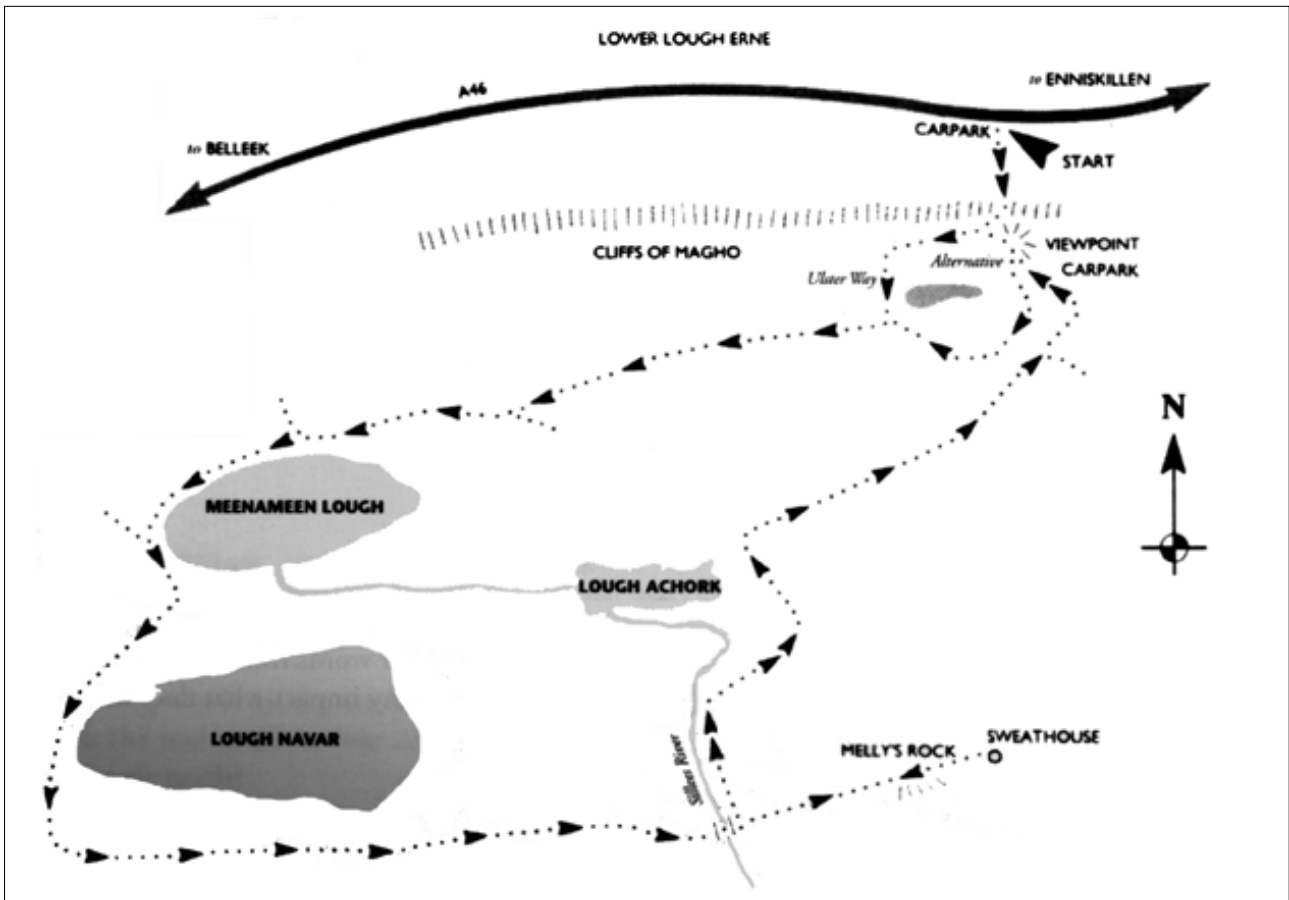
Sequencing encourages students to identify patterns of thought in texts.

This activity focuses on the manner in which a text is structured to achieve coherence and cohesiveness. By doing these activities students can be made aware of how important a direct line of thought is for achieving an impact in their own attempts to write in any genre. Such basic concepts as narrative structure (beginning, middle, end), logical structure (thesis and evidence; steps in process), paragraph structure (main sentence and development), and sentence structure (noun-verb) can all be clarified through this strategy and approach.



Activity 1 Steps in a process

The sketch-map overleaf outlines a walk in Lough Navar Forest in Northern Ireland. However, the instructions accompanying the map have become confused. Rewrite the instructions in the sequence that you think best suits the sketch map. (See original text on p. 101)



Follow the path around the loughs. Return to bridge and turn right up scenic drive route to complete circuit. Continue to the sweathouse. From Car park on A46 it's an abrupt climb up a wooded scarp from the road to the wonderful views of Atlantic, Donegal and the Sperrins. A sharp descent brings you to natural hardwoods, birch and rowan, at Sillees bridge.

Many variations of this process are possible in relation to an array of different kinds of texts, e.g. menus, recipes, instructions, programmes, development of themes or characters in a literary text. In all these possibilities the students need to feel that they are engaged in a meaningful thinking process with a clear purpose and a tangible, worthwhile outcome.



Activity 2 *Establishing a plot line*

The following lists some of the main events in the plot of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Rearrange the events on a Plot-line in the order they occur in the text. Number them from 1 to 10 on the line. Check your answer on page 101.

Plot line for *Macbeth*:

- Macbeth is encouraged by Lady Macbeth.
- Macbeth becomes King.
- Macbeth is tempted by the witches for the first time.
- Macbeth has Banquo murdered.

- Macbeth kills Duncan.
- Lady Macbeth goes insane.
- Macbeth is reassured of his invincibility by witches.
- Macbeth has Lady Macduff and her family killed.
- Banquo's ghost appears to Macbeth.
- Macduff kills Macbeth.

Having done this exercise it would be of interest to reflect on Shakespeare's reasons for organising his plot in this particular way. Would it be possible to organise it in a different way and what dramatic affect would such a reorganisation have?



Activity 3 *Reconstructing a paragraph*

In the following confused paragraph select the key sentence and arrange the development sentences in the best order. Then see the original structure on page 101.

The paragraph is taken from a lecture that Oscar Wilde gave in the U.S.A. around 1882. The title of the lecture was *House Decoration*.

It should be made into something more permanent. There is nothing to my mind more coarse in conception and more vulgar in execution than modern jewellery. When I was at Leadville and reflected that all the shining silver that I saw coming from the mines would be made into ugly dollars, it made me sad. The golden gates at Florence are as beautiful today as when Michelangelo saw them. This is something that can be easily corrected. Something better should be made out of the beautiful gold which is stored up in your mountain hollows and strewn along your river beds.

Subsequently, the paragraph could be analysed to establish how it achieves its cohesiveness, e.g.

- Main topics repeated throughout in synonyms:
Jewellery – beautiful gold – shining silver – golden gates.
Coarse – vulgar – ugly.
- Effective link words:
This – Something – When – It
- Strong, focused key sentence:
There is nothing to my mind . . .
- Concluding emphatic image:
The golden gates at Florence . . .
(cf. Section on paragraphing on p. 80)

What students learn about paragraphing from such an activity needs to be immediately applied to some paragraph of their own.



Activity 4 *Focus on the structure of a text*

This is not very different from the previous activity and some work has already been done in the *Teacher Guidelines* on this where the structures of inductive and deductive arguments were outlined . . . (See p.33 et seq in *TG*.) Again, to reinforce these concepts, sequencing can be used most effectively to enable the

students to make distinctions between thesis statements and supporting evidence, irrelevant details and false inferences, valid and invalid conclusions.

These activities involve giving students a part of a text and then requesting them to speculate on how they might complete it and to justify the selections they make.

Exemplar a Headings

Suggest ways of developing each of these headings and organise them into an effective argumentative genre.

- Technology pervades our contemporary world for good or for ill.
- The quality of many people’s lives has improved greatly. There is so much less drudgery.
- The power of technology enables scientists to push out the boundaries of research.
- But what is the downside of all this or is there any?
- Millions are unemployed in the world, their skills have become useless.
- Scientists are experimenting in areas that need careful thought.
- Too much information crowds out real understanding.
- Technology is here to stay and grow but . . .

This particular approach could be useful for building up characterisations, comparing aspects of texts and describing the style or vision of an author.

Exemplar b Show a section

Speculate on what might be expected to precede or follow this passage in terms of preparation, extension, commentary, evaluation, analysis, etc.

In short, a Formula One driver has to be almost preternaturally alert under conditions of maximum physical pressure. Obviously, the adrenaline is pumping but in addition to the physical fitness of top athletes, he needs that chess player’s mind as he assimilates telemetry data, calculates overtaking points, and executes a racing strategy. All of which is why speed is so dangerous for most of us: we simply have neither the physical nor mental stamina to handle it. (See p. 101)

Exemplar c Complete a narrative

The conclusion of this short narrative has been omitted: request the students to compose a suitable closure.

Along the cliff paths the pet-bees were busy on clover, thrift, knap-weed and vetch. Pet-bees had no sting. The lore said that was because they were a cross breed of “yellow bellies” and “red asses”. You carefully examined one, just to be sure. Did it have all the marks, red ass, yellow and black striped body and yellow nose? You grabbed it quickly and closed your hand over. The bee squirmed against your skin and buzzed angrily. Then you waited, leaning casually against the grassy ditch.

Soon the long-legged girls in their shorts and bikini tops appeared, ignoring your existence as usual. Just as they passed you shook your fist near their ears. The

trapped bee buzzed loudly and sent the girls running and shrieking along the path. Slowly you opened your hand, the bee stuck for a moment on the sweaty palm, dropped off and droned away. (Conclude with just one more sentence.)

Gabriel Thomas *Memories of Autumn*, 1998 (See p. 102)

② Predicting

Predicting fosters a more active interpretive reading stance.



This activity is an integral aspect of the act of reading and comprehending. As we read we guess and anticipate, reaching forwards towards either revelation, or discovery, or conclusion. Some of our guesses will be accurate. Many will be inaccurate but these can still remain vibrant as possibilities and desires. While prediction is a key aspect in all reading it is particularly so in the reading of narratives, be they oral, written or visual. Since narrative is central to English, teachers should find the approaches of interest in many areas.

There are numerous ways of using prediction. Students could be invited to speculate about a text and comment in the following situations:

- Consider the impact of the title and the cover-illustration.
- Give some chapter headings: speculate about content.
- Comment on extracts from the text: focus could be on a variety of areas, action, setting, character change, genre, etc.
- Speculate about conclusions. In what other way could the narrative have ended?
- Comment on the text's use, adaptation and relationship with a particular genre(s).
- Comment on comparative associations and perspectives.



Activity 1 Using the cover of a text to elicit speculation and expectation

e.g. *Reading in the Dark* by Seamus Deane.

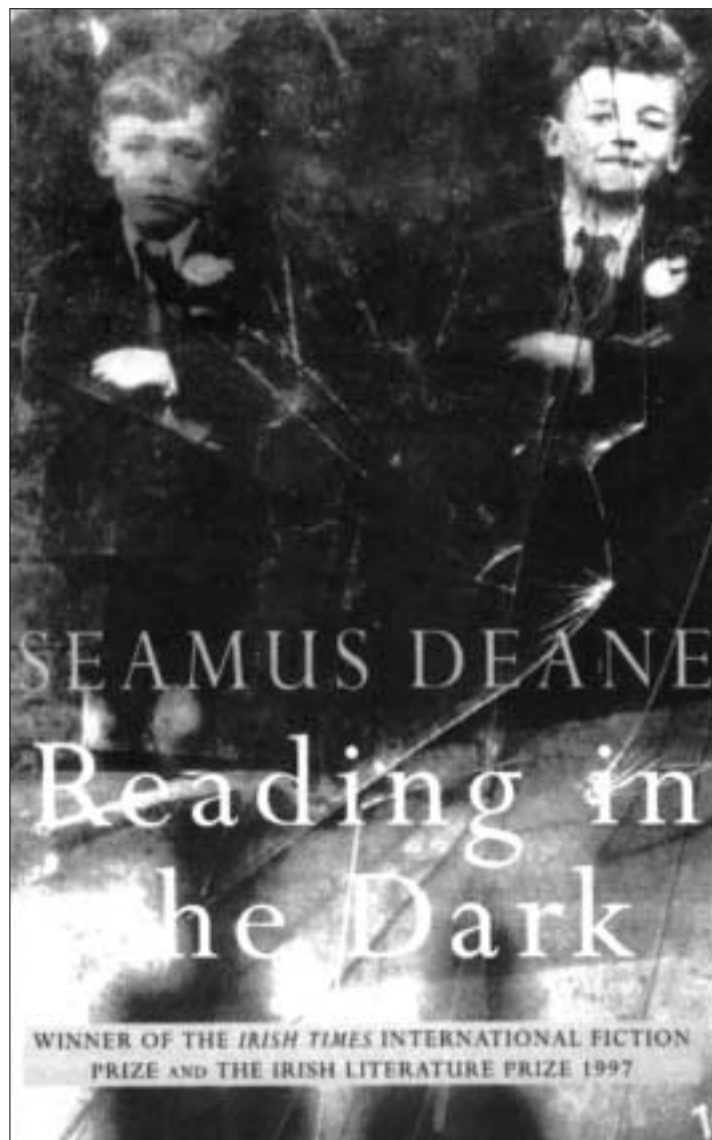
Show cover and start brain-storming session around its initial impact and associations. The following is a list of ideas that might arise from such a process:

- Childhood, respectable, Roman Catholic, Confirmation/Communion, posed photograph, defensive and correct (hands folded), smiling/sad, brothers, friendship, school friends
- Shattered cracked glass, death, disillusionment, through a glass darkly, violence, explosions, personal family possessions, anger, brokenness, edges, sharpness

- What does the title suggest? Something secret, forbidden behaviour, can't be done, unable to see what the darkness hides
- Colours in original cover (sepia) suggest a sense of the past . . .
- What questions does the cover ask?
- How does it relate to the actual title?
- What kind of story might be expected here? About family, war, friendship, religion, loss.

Through this process and subsequent discussion an informing context can be established for a reading of the novel.

Having read the novel, students could be asked to comment on the selection of the cover and the particular slant and perspective it gives on the text. Subsequently, in the light of their own reading, what kind of book cover would they design for this text? A further development of this would be to ask the students to design a summary poster for this book and compose appropriate summary captions to capture its essential impact as they see it.





Activity 2 *Exploring the concept of hero/heroine*

This generic approach should be quite useful for working in the comparative mode.

- Explore and define the concept of hero/heroine in the literary sense. This should relate to previous work the students have done for the Junior Cert. They can bring their cultural assumptions (perhaps mainly from the mass media) to bear here and these can be challenged and problematised by the texts they are about to read or re-read. They might come up with such qualities/characteristics as: brave, strong, clever, powerful, action person; certain moral qualities such as: integrity, a decision maker, resists opposition, tends to be driven by belief or commitment to take risks; source of the action through relationships, changes and develops significantly; usually opposed by a strong figure (villain).
- Applying this model to texts, consider what happens to the generic concept in each of them and what is the impact of that adaptation in terms of the meanings of the text.

1 Tragic hero/heroine

Antigone

Hamlet

The Third Man

2 The young hero of a bildungsroman

How Many Miles to Babylon?

Fly Away, Peter

Reading in the Dark

Cinema Paradiso

3 Hero/heroine in a romance

Far from the Madding Crowd

Room with a View

Great Expectations.



Activity 3 *Exploring narrative genre*

This approach can be applied equally well to the narrative shape of whole texts and to the qualities and characteristics of the genre(s) to which they relate. How is a romance narrative organised to convey its possible meanings?

Consider the characteristic attributes of a typical romance story:

- Beautiful young heroine is not permitted to mix with other students in school. Why?
- New boy arrives in school . . . not integrated easily. Why not?
- Heroine is involved in accident. Who is significant in helping her?
- Heroine invites rescuer to visit her at home. What kind of home? What happens when he comes?
- Heroine arranges to meet with hero. What happens?
- Parents of heroine become active. Why and how?
- Heroine responds to this development. What choices/decisions does she make? In what way?
- Crisis of conflict. Outline the conflict.
- Resolution. How is it resolved?
- Conclusion. Happy or sad or . . .

This of course is simply the framework for a romance. It would be of interest having used the prediction exercise in this way to view some romances from this perspective. What is being looked for is not imitation and formulaic correctness but rather characteristic and surprising approaches that enrich the specific text in a distinctive manner. Each author will play creatively with the genre; it is through being able to appreciate the characteristic approach of an author in contrast with other authors that we can come to understand and achieve insight into individual artistry. When the generic form is used in a formulaic manner uninformed by any sense of imaginative energy or a sense of reaching for meaning then the whole area of critical and evaluative commentary comes into focus in a meaningful way.



Activity 4 *Stereotypes and the teaching of poetry*

Ask the students for their expectations (predictions) re poetry about love of place. Brainstorm their views. The following list might be the characteristic outcome of such an exercise:

natural setting, streams, mountains, flowers, childhood memories, a sense of loss, summertime, colours and sounds.

Now read the following poem *The Hospital* by Patrick Kavanagh

A year ago I fell in love with the functional ward
Of a chest hospital: square cubicles in a row
Plain concrete, wash basins – an art lover’s woe,
Not counting how the fellow in the next bed snored.
But nothing whatever is by love debarred,
The common and the banal her heat can know.
The corridor led to a stairway and below
Was the inexhaustible adventure of a gravelled yard.

This is what love does to things: the Rialto Bridge,
The main gate that was bent by a heavy lorry,
The seat at the back of a shed that was a suntrap.
Naming these things is the love-act and its pledge;
For we must record love’s mystery without claptrap,
Snatch out of time the passionate transitory.

The contrast between the students’ predictions and the approach of Kavanagh should enrich their sense of the resourcefulness of poets and the potential of the imagination to distil poetry out of almost anything.



Activity 5 *Prediction and Argument*

Here the approach can focus on the logical structure of a text. Elements of a text can be supplied and students requested to predict conclusions, hypotheses, kinds of evidence needed, even link words needed to ensure that the text is cohesive.

- Fill in a possible thesis sentence on the topic of the school-uniform in this argument.
(More than one sentence may be possible)(See p. 102)

.....
because they are generally badly designed,

negate individuality by implicitly preaching conformity in dress, and impose unnecessary expense on families.

- Omit the conclusion from a persuasive text:

Based on the evidence, what conclusion would the students predict in the following text:
(See p. 102)

Art has been frequently dismissed as being irrelevant to the business of serious living. People firstly need to eat, have a home and a means of making money. When all these three items have been taken care of then there can be the leisure for art and literature. A person cannot feed his family on either the pages of a book or the canvas for a painting.

At the heart of this view is the mistaken notion that humans are materialistic and physical creatures, animals really, who just need a nest and food and they will be content. There is ample evidence to show that this not the way to contentment; of course food and shelter are necessary but equally necessary is sustenance for the inner spiritual person . . . it is from art and literature that such comes.

Therefore

.....
.....

This exercise is particularly useful for students to revise their own writing of argument. The following questions could effectively focus that revision:

- What evidence has been presented?
- What point-of-view was taken on it?
- What conclusion was reached?
- Are there effective links?
- Do I demonstrate the thesis proposed?

③ *Comparing Texts*

Comparing helps to define each text's special qualities.



This activity is now a major dimension of the aesthetic and narrative domains of the new English syllabus. It is an activity with much potential in the realm of general language acquisition. The contrast of the two texts allows each to become more sharply defined and in focus. It is of particular use in the context of point-of-view and genre structure.



Activity 1 Compare accounts of the same event or person

Consider the following accounts of Jack Charlton:

- 1 He is a gaunt and forbidding figure. He prowls through the soccer game in all its variety and attempts to reduce its fun and skill to a minimum by making the win at all costs the chief objective. This mean view of sport is reflected in his tight mouth and hard eyes. Jack is in this game not for the love of the game but for the money and fame it brings him. The sooner this predator leaves the managerial ranks the better for Irish football.
- 2 It is the slow smile that always seems to flicker about the corner of his lips which first attracts you. Then you are taken by the honest appraisal of his alert eyes which seem to see right through you. There is such strength about the man, a certainty of a man who knows his job and knows what life is for, that makes you want to stay talking to him. You come quickly to see why he is a great manager of people; people trust him and therefore will be motivated and inspired by his trust in them.



Having considered these accounts and the way they are composed give a written assignment of a similar nature: write on the same event or person from two different viewpoints. The following cartoons might be used as a stimulus.





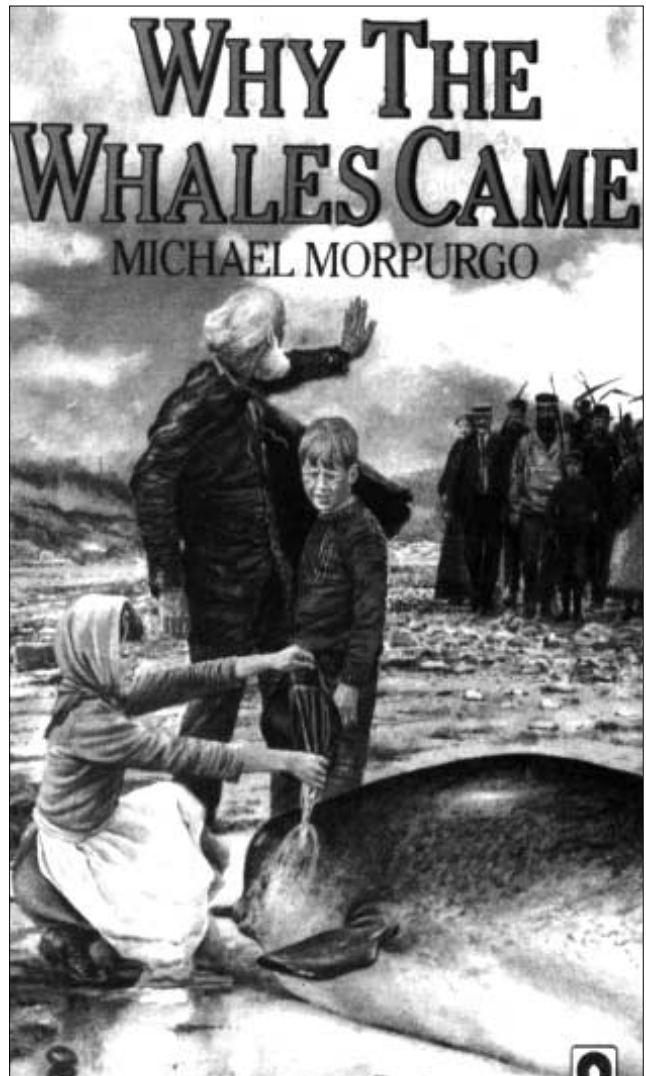
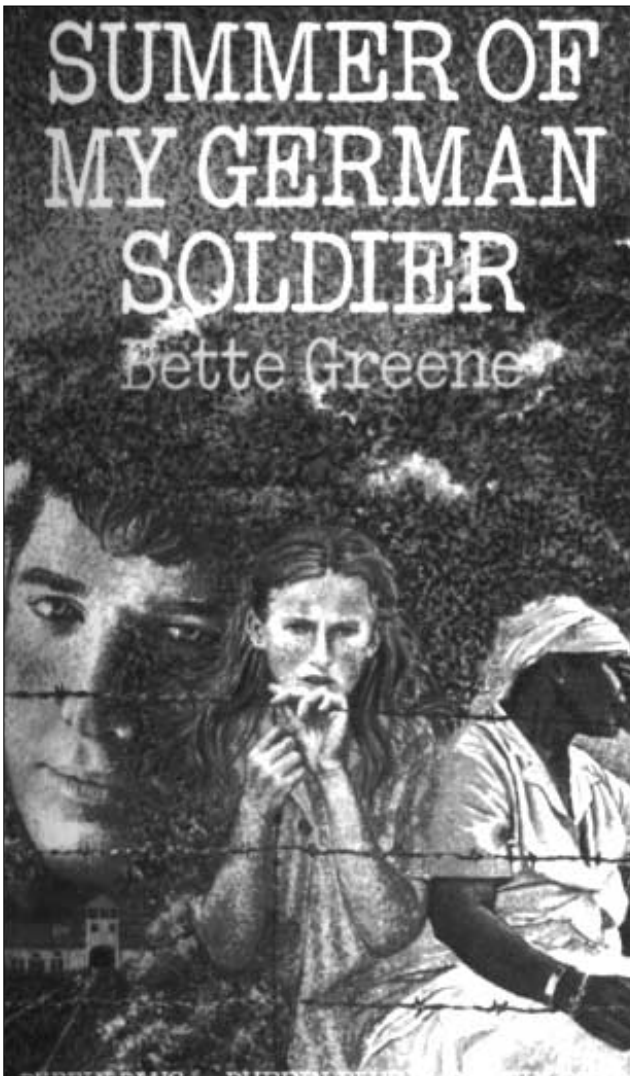
Activity 2 Comparing two drafts of a text

Consider Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's changes in the extract from her work in progress on pages 161-162. What are the effects of the changes on the impact of the narrative and the characters?



Activity 3 Comparing two visual texts from a semiotic perspective

The *Teacher Guidelines* (p.69) suggest that semiotic approaches to visual texts are a worthwhile methodological approach for enabling students to read the cultural signs and symbols operative in making meanings.



Consider these book covers under such headings as:

- selection of place, objects and people
- use of shapes (consider use of colours if original is available)
- arrangement of covers
- social and cultural setting created or suggested
- impact desired and impact achieved



Activity 4 Comparing two short stories

Compare the following two short stories. They both have young girls as their main characters and both give a sense of helplessness in their worlds. How do they differ in their impact? How does the social and cultural setting contribute to the meanings inherent in the stories? How does the way the words and syntax are used in each story help to create a particular world in each of them? (It might be a good idea to select a short extract from each story and compare their actual use of punctuation and syntax.)

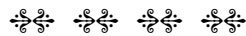
MY GRANDMOTHER'S ATTIC

The attic is something that is on top of houses in the country because in Lisbon on top of houses there are other houses and on top of these there are others and so on up to the roof but in the country they have the attic where they tidy away things that are of no use or that nobody wants to throw out because even though they are of no use they cost money and without cash nobody can survive well I went to the countryside with my Mother and my Father in the car the countryside is very far away we went in the Opel belonging to my cousin who was a builder and who is now a high flier with limited after his name because he built some houses and went into partnership with a gentleman who works in a bank and now he's going to build a whole estate with a view over the yards of the other houses and he's going to buy a Mercedes which is now the Opel for high fliers who have cash we took a long time to get to the countryside because my grandmother from time to time to get notice from people said that she was feeling sick and we had to stop the car and get around her and tell her to breathe deeply and to open the top button of her dress but this was only the first few times because after going around for hours on end all we wanted was for her to shut up and the most my father would do was to order her to open the window and to tell her that if she went on like that the next time she would stay at home the journey used to be a delight now its a drag because before we used to stop in Caldas to have a pee and eat some fruit but they built a new road and whoever wants to pee should pee at home before leaving I was nearly the whole time twisting myself wanting to go but they only let me go for a pee when we arrived in the countryside the worst thing about being my age is that we only have a pee when the grown-ups want to and not when we want to when we arrived in the countryside it was already night so that we went straight to the house to eat without me having to listen to my aunts from the country saying that I had grown a lot and that I was like my father from the nose up which isn't true and like my mother from the nose down which isn't true yet but is going to be some year or other because of a few things that I noticed the other day but I can't talk about that or else this composition will stay in the drawer and I will stay with the back of my head burning anyway I don't care that my aunts from the country say that I have grown and that I'm the same as my father and my mother because they are so proud that it even seems as if they ordered me to be like deliberately when we all know that people are born at random because I don't believe that someone would have ordered my father the way he is deliberately the only explanation is that he came to be the way he is by chance but what drives me mad inside and out is when they begin to pretend that they are very interested in my life and to ask 'so Guidinha how is the studying going'

and 'so what marks did you get Guidinha' because this is nothing to do with them and because these questions only make people remember about town things and they ruin the trip to the country yes because we go there for the air and the cabbages not for marks and other town things this time as we arrived late we went straight to eat the vegetable soup with my aunts from the countryside all slobbering around the soup pot and saying 'you don't have vegetable soup like this in the city because here it's all natural all pure all just as God made it in the fields' as though they thought that the cabbages in Lisbon are made by machine or that the potatoes are plastic if the dummies studied more and worried less about other people's studies they wouldn't talk such nonsense after the vegetable soup came the roast beef and they started up about it 'you don't get meat like this over in Lisbon because this hasn't been frozen' and I was laughing to myself inside oh no no it wasn't if it hadn't been it was rotten it rotted on the boat in which it came from Argentina in my house we don't eat roast beef with potatoes but it's not because of a lack of good meat at the butchers but because of a lack of cash in the pocket as cash unfortunately doesn't come from Argentina then came the cream puffs and them with their eyes wide open 'eat as much as you like you see the cream isn't from UCAL' dummies it's as though they think that their cow is better than the UCAL cow dummies and liars they were all the time saying 'eat as much as you like' and when I wanted to fill my plate again there wasn't any more and one of them said to my father with a knowing smile 'you can see the child is healthy she doesn't lack an appetite' it was me though who was worried about her health then we went to bed and the next day we had breakfast and to hide from the aunts I took myself off to the attic to see what was in the trunks which are very big boxes that they have there to stuff things in the first had uniforms eye-glasses old boots shoes from the time of Maria Cachucha who was a lady who lived many years ago old books and other nasty items the second was full of things as well from the time of the other lady who must have been my father's first wife although I couldn't say for certain but the fact is that whenever someone talks about something old or about which nobody knows for sure there in the house they say that it must be from the time of the other lady this is why I think that my father married twice the first wife must have committed suicide when she discovered what he was like the third trunk had old things but less old than the others and there was the one which resulted in me having to put a cushion at the back of my head to bear the trip back it happened like this I opened the trunk rummaged around until I found some trivial things like a photograph of my father much younger than he is now with his arm in the air to see if it was raining there I don't know why you could see very well that it was a sunny day and I thought the photograph was nice and put it into my pocket to ask if my father when he was younger had worked with those men on television who go looking for rain and then make lines on the blackboard and say that there are storms in the Azores but I had never before had such an unlucky idea because when I showed the photograph at lunch my father went as red as a big pepper grabbed me by the arm brought me out to the corridor and I was slapped on the back of the head such a slap on the back of the head that I wouldn't like to say is there anyone who understands big people those adults who think they are so

intelligent and all they have is a heavy hand and nothing else in the end life is just like that and if you are small you have to put up with it until you grow up and can lord it over smaller people the worst thing is that I still have a long way to go before I'm big but I'm getting there.

Luis de Stau Monteiro (Portugal, 1971)



POSTCARDS

And my mother does not sleep at all. And I do not know where my dad is.

We get postcards but they are from different places and sometimes, different lands. It is all lands. There are no people or farms or houses. It is scrubland and coloured hills. There is a man somewhere, or a woman, and that is a job, to paint light and cheer up the country. And some of them are funny. There are blue trees and green skies and some of the clouds have faces. So I think it is the boredom. They must get carried away. And my mother has a boxload. To her they are like love letters. I do not understand this. There is no love there that I can see. I have three of my own. They all say 'Hope you're keeping well.' They arrive on my birthday. Not a day early or a day late. On the right day. I suppose that might be love but I think it is good timing.

And I am the last one now. My sisters have gone and my brother. They have gone Over There, across the water. My mother says that they could not wait to Get Out, to Get Away. She says not to mind, but I do. The house is very quiet. And in the post some cheques and money orders. My mother will not cash them. And she tears them up into very tiny pieces. She shakes when she does this and hides the pieces in a drawer. 'I would not give them the pleasure,' she says, 'I would not.' I would. I do not see where the pleasure lies but I cannot say that. I cannot say very much to her.

And they went away on boats and planes so I am the only one left now. And one day I will go, though my mother does not know this yet. There are things you must do first. You need money to leave and exams if you are to get on. That is what Mrs Kinny used to say. 'Exam grades are passports,' she said, 'that or a rich daddy.' But I do not know where my dad is. Mrs Kinny said I have a good brain and I could go far. Mrs Kinny said I must study hard. She liked me a lot. She liked all the unpopular girls because we did not play a lot. And not with each other. I do not have much time to study now. My mother gives me work to do as I'm the only one left. She could not do without me, she says, I am her Love and she kisses me and pulls me to her. But she will not let me read or get on. She does not like my head in a book. 'What, with all this work to do.' And there is a lot of work. There is no denying the work to do.

And so, I do not go to school. Sometimes the Inspector comes but nobody can approach us quietly, take us by surprise. The dog barks. It howls and throws

back its head. He has a rusty van and the road is not smooth. There are ruts in it and soft mud. And we hear it cough and sputter and outside the house is gravel. Any my mother puts me in the cupboard and folds a coat over my head. There is plenty of time. It is my dad's coat. It smells of my dad and I do not like that. And she pulls a table against the cupboard and sits there. And she is a good liar. She calls him Mister and first he will not sit down or drink her tea. But then he does. She pretends I am Over There with my sisters and my brother. And soon they are talking about the bad road and the storms and the people in the town. He says she must be awful lonely on her own but my mother does not fall for that. My mother does not fall for anything. And when the van is coughing up the road she moves the table back and opens the cupboard door. She slides the coat off my face. BOO! she says. That is our joke. And we both laugh.

Any my mother does not sleep at all. She does not like to be still. She says she does not know how to be. Every night my sheets are clean. Every days she scrubs them and they are on the line and freeze into walls. And she stands over me at night. I think it is to make sure that I have not gone away. She likes to touch my face and put her fingers in my hair. She does this very gently, not to wake me. And it does not wake me now. And I sleep.

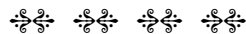
And this is what our house is like. It is stone and square and has deep windows. And there is a wooden barn leaning and falling on it. I do not like to go in there. It is my dad's place. It has his things and they are all metal. They are tools and engines and old inventions and they are everywhere in the straw. They are all rusty. It smells of rust and the straw is bad and wet and that smells too. Also, there are rats. When they die they leak a gas and so it smells of that too. I think you can die of that gas so I do not go in there. The light does not go in there either.

And so our house is very windy. This is because the land is flat for miles. And the wind is always wet. It is a soft wet though. You do not know you are wet until you touch your hair. And this is because the land is swamp and this means that my dad should not have built this house because nobody should build a house on a swamp.

And this is what out house sounds like. The wind flaps the sheets so there are sheet noises and a shutter bangs because we do not go into the barn to get the tools to mend it. And the dog barks and splashes in the puddles. And it is my mother who makes all the inside noise. I think this is why she does not stop because otherwise it is very quiet. And it becomes still. The sheets and the shutter and the dog are not noises to us because we do not make them. And we have only two rugs and the floors are cement. When you walk on the floors the dust rises and you cannot see your ankles for clouds. And the sound is hollow. This means that I can hear her feet and she can hear mine. And she is always asking me to get things and to Hurry. I do not see where the Hurry is but she does.

And the things I must bring quickly are old. This is what we do at night. And she calls them her Young Things. And I know them all by heart. There are dresses and she holds them up to the lamp and tiny moths fly out and so there are tiny holes. And I sew up all the holes. And there are photographs which are yellow and grey and curl up at the edges. Of my sisters and my brother. I look at their faces but I do not recognise them. They could not wait to Get Out to Get Away she says. And there is no picture of me and only one of my dad. And the one of my dad is after their wedding. There are other faces in the back but they are blurred. My mother and my dad are young and they are smiling. And my mother has white flowers in her hair and pinned on her blouse. They are so white they are like shining lights so that is what you notice first. And that is because they are painted. And my mother saves this picture up till last. And this is when she cries and goes through the box. To her they are like love letters but I do see any love there. And so I go to bed. And soon the house grows quiet. And it becomes still.

Brigid O'Connor, *Here Comes John*, 1993



Activity 5 *Comparing history and fiction*

Contrast this historical account of the famine with the fictional account. Highlight the differences in point of view, tone, feeling and language use.

Meanwhile, Indian corn continued to pour across the ocean, and prices slumped. By the end of march, 1847, the price of corn, which had been £19 a ton in February on the Liverpool Exchange, had fallen to £13, and at the end of August was £7 10s. On March 26 Mr Nicholas Cummins reported from Cork, ‘. . . the continuance each day of food cargoes here . . . I cannot estimate the fleet this day in our harbours at less than 250 sail, or the contents at much less than 50,000 tons.’

Indian corn was now cheap and plentiful, but the labourers who were being turned off the public works by tens of thousands weekly no longer had the few pence required to buy, and though the price of food fell, and fell again, the Irish people continued to starve.

Lower food prices meant, however, that less money was needed to establish a soup kitchen, and with added pressure from the Government’s ‘forcing-on’ measures, soup kitchens became fairly generally established throughout the country. Indeed, the fall in prices saved so much money that the temporary relief scheme, the Soup Kitchen Act, ultimately cost about a million pounds less than had been estimated.

But the food distributed through the kitchens was severely restricted, both in quality and quantity. The Government decided that relief given under the Soup

Kitchen Act was to be restricted to cooked food only: 'Undressed (raw) meal,' Trevelyan wrote, 'might be converted into cash . . . and even the most destitute often disposed of it for tea, tobacco and spirits.' Each ration was to consist of one pound of biscuits, meal or flour, or one quart of soup, thickened with meal, and four ounces of bread or biscuits. When the ration was of bread only, 1^{1/2} lb was given. These quantities, stated Trevelyan, had been 'declared by the best medical authorities to be sufficient to maintain health and strength'. Further, 'it was found by experience that the best form in which cooked food could be given was "stirabout", made of Indian meal and rice steamed, which was sufficiently solid to be carried away by the recipients. The pound ration thus prepared swelled with the addition of water to three or four pounds'. Each ration had to be collected by the recipient in person, with the exception of the sick and the infirm and children under nine years of age, who received half a ration; children over nine received the full ration on one pound.

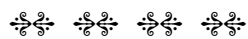
The term 'soup' became elastic. On April 8 Mr Stanley, secretary to Sir John Burgoyne's Relief Commission, circularized the inspecting officer of each Poor Law Union with a definition of what was officially understood by soup. 'As the term 'soup' in the instructions seems to have created an impression with many parties that only the liquid ordinarily so called is meant, and that meat must necessarily form an ingredient . . . the Relief Commissioners beg that the general term 'soup' in the instructions may be understood to include any food cooked in a boiler and distributed in a liquid state, thick or thin, and whether composed of fish, vegetables, grain, or meal.' Doubt was expressed that 'soup' contained enough nourishment, and Mr Erichsen, the Government agent in the grain market, wrote to Trevelyan, that he was uneasy about the effect on the people's health of such a diet. True, in English workhouses the inmates did not always get meat, but were given cheese and pease instead, and though before the famine the Irish labourer had lived all but exclusively on potatoes, he usually drank a certain quantity of butter-milk.

The complaint from all sides was that the ration of one pound of meal, biscuit or flour was not enough, even if three or four times that weight in water might be absorbed. Sir Lucius O'Brien, of Dromoland, declared that the people were 'only just kept alive' on a pound of meal a day; from Skibbereen a doctor wrote that all the soup kitchens did was to prevent people actually dying of starvation; and in Kinsale the Superior of the Carmelite Convent complained that the starving were being given 'soup' made with only ten ounces of meal and rice to a quart of water, and that the four-ounce slice of bread which went with it was very small because the bread was made with one-third Indian meal, which weighed heavy; the Protestant rector of Killmaule wrote that on soup-kitchen rations his people were starving. All complaints received the same official reply, signed by Mr. T.N. Redington, the Under-Secretary: the ration issued had been approved by the Board of Health.

The method of distribution was detested by the people. Each person was required to bring a bowl or pot and stand in a line until his turn came to have

soup or stirabout ladled into it; this outraged Irish pride. The poor inhabitants of Newmarket-on-Fergus, County Clare, sent a petition declaring that distribution of food by such a method 'debases and demoralizes', and that they could not endure being the bearers of pots and pans. In Ennistymon, when the people were instructed to attend bringing cans, they said they had none. The Inspecting Officer, Captain Gordon, then gave tin cans, free, to four of the poorest men, but only two would use them; the two others refused, though they were in a state of starvation – 'such', observed Captain Gordon, 'was their pride'. In Sligo the people were reported to be 'too proud to fetch soup', though they would go any distance for meal; in Tipperary, at Templeouhy, a crowd gathered outside the kitchen, shouted they would not have soup, and 'ill treated a female who had been engaged to attend to the soup kitchen'; and at Miltown Malbay a crowd rushed the kitchen and demolished the boiler.

From *The Great Hunger*, Cecil Woodham-Smith, pps.293-5



Eily could not believe the crowds when they reached the village. Hundreds of ragged starving people thronged the small main street. They queued, desperate for food. Some were so weak they could not stand, so they sat on the ground, dejected but determined to keep their place. The children fell into line at the very back. Eily's eyes roved over the crowd, searching to see if she could pick out any familiar face.

The faces – the faces – she would never forget them. They all had the same look. The cheeks were sunken, the eyes wide and staring with deep circles underneath, the lips narrow and tight, and in some the skin had a yellow tinge. Hunger and sickness had changed these people. Now they were like ghosts. Old women clawed and tried to push their way to get further up the line. Mothers stood staring ahead as scrawny toddlers pulled and whined against their filthy skirts. This must be hell, through Eily, for once really terrified.

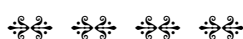
Suddenly in the distance three women with aprons and caps emerged from the door of a ramshackle shed, lifting a large heavy cauldron. Immediately the crowd surged forward. Eily just managed to grab hold of Peggy, whose feet were actually lifted off the ground in the panic. Peggy fastened her arms around Eily's waist and rested her head against her chest. She was exhausted and scared.

The women had begun to ladle out the soup. There were tin mugs for those who did not have anything of their own. Twice the pot was refilled before the children actually moved forward.

Now Eily had a clearer view. She could make out figures inside the shed busily chopping carrots and turnips and onions and throwing them into large wooden vats, along with scoops of barley and buckets of water. A man then came along with a bucket of roughly chopped pieces of meat and offal and threw them in too.

The afternoon passed and they still had not reached the top. All the children were worried about was that the soup would run out before they had their turn. Finally they got there. An exhausted woman begged one of the servers for two extra mugs for her two children, who were about half a mile back along the road. They were too weak to walk any further. She was refused, but when she took a long gulp of the hot soup from her own mug, the server quickly replaced it with a bit of top-up. The woman carefully made her way back through the crowds carrying the precious liquid. Eily and Michael and Peggy and Joseph all took a big swallow of the soup too when their turn came, but no top-up was offered. Then they found a free bit of space to sit and enjoy the meal. The soup was greasy and globs of fat floated on its surface, but it would keep them going.

From *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, Marita Conlon-McKenna



④ *Underlining*



A flexible and
useful strategy for
focused analysis

Underlining has always been very much a part of teaching reading and study skills. Sometimes indeed a text was underlined so much that in the process it lost its analytical and discriminatory effect.

By giving more specific objectives (and if necessary using different colours for different underlining purposes), the specific patterns of a text can be made to stand out.

Texts can be approached in this way to highlight and focus on:

- Colours and sounds (sense details of any kind can be selected)
- Details of appearance and dress
- Aspects of landscape or setting
- Qualities of character
- Repetition of words and phrases
- Key ideas and sentences
- Supporting evidence: facts, references, opinions, anecdotes
- Words of feeling and/or attitudes
- Linking words
- Surprising words
- Words which are characteristic of a register or genre.

Again as in all language work, using this approach in relation to a text being studied, or some other meaningful and relevant contexts, would be the best way to proceed.



Activity 1 *Select the colloquial phrases and terms in this text which create a sense of a different language world.*

By-and-By, when we got up, we turned over the truck the gang had stole off of the wreck, and found boots, and blankets, and clothes, and all sorts of other things, and a lot of books, and a spy-glass, and three boxes of seegars. We hadn't ever been this rich before, in neither of our lives. The seegars was prime. We laid off all the afternoon in the woods talking, and me reading the books, and having a general good time. I told Jim all about what happened inside the wreck, and at the ferry-boat; and I said these kinds of things was adventures; but he said he didn't want no more adventures. He said that when I went in the texas, and he crawled back to get on the raft and found her gone, he nearly died; because he judged it was all up with him, anyway it could be fixed; for if he didn't get saved he would get drowned; and if he did get saved, whoever saved him would send him back so as to get the reward, and then Miss Watson would sell him South, sure. Well, he was right; he was most always right; he had an uncommon level head, for a nigger.

I read considerable to Jim about kings, and dukes, and earls, and such, and how gaudy they dressed, and how much style they put on, and called each other your majesty, and your grace, and your lordship, and so on, 'stead of mister; and Jim's eyes bugged out, and he was interested. He says:

'I didn't know dey was so many un um. I hain't hearn 'bout non un um, skasely, but old King Sollermun, onless you counts dem kings dat's in a pack er k'yards. How much do a king git?'

'Get?' I says; 'why, they get a thousand dollars a month if they want it; they can have just as much as they want; everything belongs to them.'

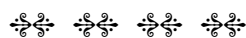
'Ain't dat gay? En what dey got to do, Huck?'

'They don't do nothing! Why, now you talk. They just set around.'

'No – is dat so?'

'Of course it is. They just set around. Except maybe when there's a war; then they go to the war. But other times they just lazy around; or go hawking – just hawking and sp - - Sh! - d'you hear a noice?'

From *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain



Activity 2 *Select the words and/or phrases in this passage that suggest the single-mindedness and intensity of the convict.*

I had often watched a large dog of ours eating his food; and I now noticed a decided similarity between the dog's way of eating, and the man's. The man took strong sharp sudden bites, just like the dog. He swallowed, or rather snapped up, every mouthful, too soon and too fast; and he looked sideways here and there while he ate, as if he thought there was danger in every direction of somebody's coming to take the pie away. He was altogether too unsettled in his mind over it, to appreciate it comfortably, I thought, or to have anybody to dine with him, without making a chop with his jaw at the visitor. In all of which particulars he was very like the dog.

'I am afraid you won't leave any of it for him,' said I, timidly; after a silence during which I had hesitated as to the politeness of making the remark. 'There's no more to be got where that came from.' It was the certainty of this fact that impelled me to offer the hint.

'Leave any for him? Who's him?' said my friend, stopping in his crunching of pie-crust.

'The young man. That you spoke of. That was hid with you.'

'Oh ah!' he returned, with something like a gruff laugh. 'Him? Yes, yes! He don't want no wittles.'

'He looked as if he did,' said I.

The man stopped eating, and regarded me with the keenest scrutiny and the greatest surprise.

'Looked? When?'

'Just now.'

'Where?'

'Yonder,' said I, pointing; 'over there, where I found him nodding asleep, and thought it was you.'

He held me by the collar and stared at me so, that I began to think his first idea about cutting me throat had revived.

'Dressed like you, you know, only with a hat,' I explained, trembling; 'and – and' – I was very anxious to put this delicately – 'and with – the same reason for wanting to borrow a file. Didn't you hear the cannon last night?'

'Then, there was firing!' he said to himself.

'I wonder you shouldn't have been sure of that,' I returned, 'for we heard it up at home, and that's further away, and we were shut in besides.'

'Why, see now!' said he. 'When as man's alone on these flats, with a light head and a light stomach, perishing of cold and want, he hears nothin' all night, but guns firing, and voices calling. Hears? He sees the soldiers, with their red coats lighted up by the torches carried afore, closing in round him. Hears his number called, hears himself challenged, hears the rattle of the muskets, hears the orders 'Make ready! Present! Cover him steady, men!' and is laid hands on – and there's nothin'! Why, I see the mist shake with the cannon, arter if was broad day. – But this man'; he had said all the rest as if he had forgotten my being there; 'did you notice anything in him?'

'He had a badly bruised face,' said I, recalling what I hardly knew I knew.

'Not here?' exclaimed the man, striking his left cheek mercilessly with the flat of his hand.

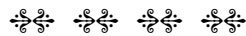
'Yes, there!'

'Where is he?' He crammed what little food was left, into the breast of his grey jacket. 'Show me the way he went. I'll pull him down, like a bloodhound. Curse this iron on my sore leg! Give us hold of the file, my boy.'

I indicated in what direction the mist had shrouded the other man, and he looked up at it for an instant. But he was down on the rank wet grass, filing at his iron like a madman, and not minding me or minding his own leg, which had an old chafe upon it and was bloody, but which he handled as roughly as if it had no more feeling in it than the file. I was very much afraid of him again, and now that he had worked himself into this fierce hurry, and I was likewise

very much afraid of keeping away from home any longer. I told him I must go, but he took no notice, so I thought the best thing I could do was to slip off. The last I saw of him, his head was bent over his knee and he was working hard at his fetter, muttering impatient imprecations at it and his leg. The last I heard of him, I stopped in the mist to listen, and the file was still going.

From *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens



Activity 3 *Highlight the structure of an argumentative/persuasive text.*

Consider Nuala O’Faolain’s article (page 132) on the political delegation to Cairo. Underline the key ideas and present them in an alternative form that displays the article’s structure of thought. Does it conform or not to a conventional structure of argument?



Activity 4 *Underline the words and phrases here that suggest energy.*

Leaving the main stream they now passed into what seemed at first sight a land-locked lake. Green turf sloped down on either edge, brown snaky roots gleamed below the surface of the quiet water, while ahead of them the silvery shoulder and foamy tumble of a weir, arm-to-arm with a restless dripping water-wheel, that held up in its turn a grey-gabled mill-house, filled the air with a soothing murmur of sound, dull and smothery, yet with little clear voices speaking up cheerfully out of it at intervals.

The Wind in The Willows, K. Graham



Activity 5 *Causes and effects*

This text is reflecting on the impact of the mass media on modern life. Underline, in different colours, causes and effects identified here.

By pushing aside the limitations of experience and schooling, mass media have created a nation of people who have opinions on just about every subject and mental pictures of places never visited, people never encountered, and events experienced only as tiny images on a screen. News and entertainment media distribute so much information about the world that many educators believe that schools are no longer the main source of learning for most people. Mass media have taken over the role of forming our mental image of the world.



Activity 6 *Itemising persuasive elements*

In the following advertisements itemise significant elements (either words, objects, other semiotic dimensions), that contribute significantly to the persuasive power of the advertisement.

Concentrated Volkswagen.

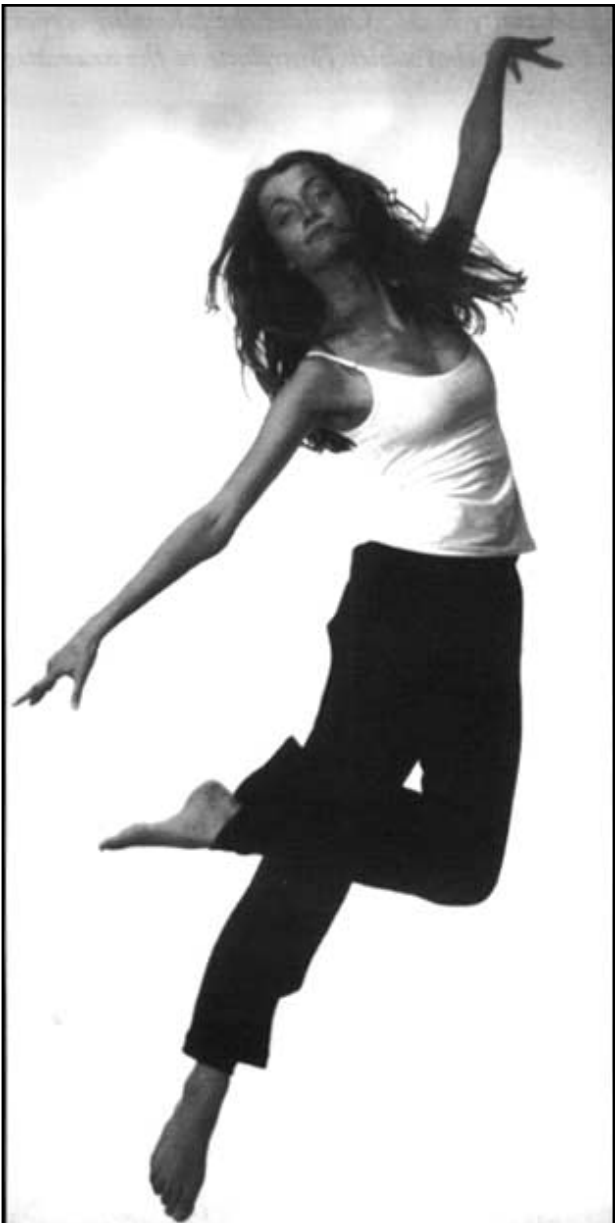


Introducing the Lupo.

Take everything that's great about a typical Volkswagen - its solidity, toughness, styling, reliability and economy - then condense it, and you've got the Volkswagen Lupo. Add in a 12-year body warranty and twin airbags and you've a car simply bursting with excitement.

Test drive the Volkswagen Lupo.

Because small really is beautiful.



TOTAL CONTROL with Ready to Go.

If you're on the move make sure you're always in control. A Ready to Go mobile phone is the perfect pre-paid way of staying in touch, especially for someone who's always on the go - whether its work or just having fun. And because you decide how much you spend and when you spend it, you're always in total control.



- No Bills
- No Connection Fee
- No Rental
- No Hassle





Activity 7 Consider the following scenes from two films. Itemise elements of the mise-en-scène and camera shot which contribute to the dramatic intensity of each one.



⑤ Segmenting/ Labelling

Segmenting and Labelling foster a reflective approach to the organisation of a text.



These techniques are useful for a variety of purposes. For example, they can be used for working out the mode of progress of a text in terms of ideas and/or feelings. They can also be utilised to recognise the kind of statements and sentences being used in a text. At best they are useful techniques to help a student re-present a text in a different form for a variety of purposes including the following:

- To give informal presentation to a group about certain aspects of the text
- To make a more formal presentation to a class re text
- To make a memo-like summary of the main points
- To present informal drama sketch to illustrate some issues encountered
- To rewrite text (or part of text) for a different audience, e.g. for children.

The following approach to a text illustrates the kind of activities possible within this context. Read this text and then complete the activities which follow.

TEACHERS

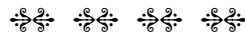
Par.1 The difficulty about teachers is that they are teachers. Being a teacher means becoming involved in playing a role which has been strictly defined by parents' memories, school attitudes and pupil expectations. The role whether it fits the person or not, whether it is how one likes to play the role or not, tends to be imperative as regards behaviour. There are just certain things one cannot do, or else one loses moral force in the classroom.

Par.2 In playing the role assigned teachers tend to become predictable and robotic. As Bergson said, 'a human being becomes funny when he becomes mechanical'; this is why teachers become such objects of fun – the young predators in their audience watch with irritated fascination every physical tic and vocal characteristic and respond with covert looks, sly giggles and out of earshot imitations.

Par.3 The dehumanisation of the teacher is further accomplished by the tradition of giving nicknames to teachers. In the war of the classroom the earliest to suffer is the personal name frequently on both sides. It is like the dehumanised view given to the enemy in all wars, e.g. Huns, Nipps, Argies. If by knowing the name of something or someone we come in a way to inhabit the house of its being, then by using a reductionist name we literally reduce its fullness of being.

Par.4. It is to protect ourselves that we dehumanise others. We avoid becoming involved with them as people for then the responsibility and price of

the relationship become too high, too demanding. Teachers, by going on holidays, by having children, by eventually dying remind us that they are human. The trouble with teachers is that they are human.



Activity 1 Make a flow chart of main ideas in Teachers – a segmenting exercise:

1. Teaching involves playing a role
2. → (*because*) Role-playing can become robotic.
3. → (*therefore*) Teachers become dehumanised and comic.
4. → (*but*) Teachers by being human in various ways resist that reductive tendency.



Activity 2 Outline the structure and mode of developments of each paragraph – a labelling exercise:

- Par.1:* Key sentence followed by commentary and analysis
Par.2: Key sentence followed by quotation, examples and comment
Par.3: Key sentence followed by illustrations and analysis
Par.4: Explanation and illustrations followed by key sentence.

Read the following text and then complete the exercises below.

LOST INNOCENCE

I was born in Launceston, a little market-town in north Cornwall, and went to the local National School: a huge, booming, granite-and-slate building stranded like a stone ark on the edge of the borough allotments. It had been put up in 1840, and looked it: the name and date over the front door had begun to crumble long before I first attended there in the 1920s. I went to three schools, but this was the one where I was happiest: possibly because most of the time I was there I was in a state of innocence. Lost innocence, of one form and another, is a strong thread in the work of many poets. I am not talking here merely about loss of virtue. I mean that in those days the world still seemed to me just made, Eden-fresh. Nothing had happened yet to change my scale of values.

Up to about the age of eleven, I don't remember hearing much poetry at all. We must have had some at school, because a few lines have struck in my mind, like waste matter that refuses to be dispensed of down a drain. For instance, there was this by Sir Walter Scott.

O young Lochinvar is come out of the west,
Through all the wide border his steed was the best.

Who young Lochinvar was, and why he had come out of the west, have remained hazy in my memory. But, undeniably, he is still there. Then there were some lines in Tennyson.

The splendour falls on castle walls
And snowy summits old in story.

Could those walls have been the slowly disintegrated lumps of Norman castle we could see through the high windows of the classroom? Probably not; poetry was about something that went on somewhere else, far away. I had a vague idea, though, that another piece by Tennyson may have been set a bit nearer home.

So all day long the noise of battle roll'd
Among the mountains by the winter sea.

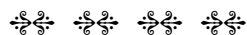
Didn't King Arthur fight his last battle in Cornwall, and wasn't his sword Excalibur finally thrown into the mysterious waters of Dozmary Pool, high on Bodmin Moor? That was only a dozen miles away, but I'd never been there. Nobody in our family had a car, and most people remained pretty solidly in one place in Cornwall in those days. Anyhow, if we did go away it was to the real seaside, with sand on the beach: to Trebarwith and Bude, by train, or to Polzeath by charabane on the annual Sunday School outing.

The sea made a profound impression on me. I sensed it instantly as a sulky, dangerous, beautiful, unpredictable element. Just as it was pretending to be at it friendliest, it could drag you under and kill you.

I hardly knew any poetry, but I read a lot of prose: anything, everything. One of my favourite books was an abridged version of *David Copperfield*. I never forgot the passage where Little Em'ly, on the beach at Yarmouth, says – after David has declared boldly that he isn't afraid of the sea – 'Ah! But it's cruel. I have seen it tear a boat as big as our house all to pieces.'

I can see myself now, reading those lines, cold with terror, as I lay on my stomach on the kitchen floor of our slate-fronted house at 18 St Thomas Hill; and the remembrance of reading it as a child came back to me again and again in 1940, when I found myself, scared stiff, bouncing about in a destroyer in the Atlantic.

Charles Causley



Activities

- Make a flowchart of the emotions created throughout this text.
- Draw a diagram of the changing relationship between the writer and literature.
- Write two brief paragraphs summarising the contrast between the child's attitude to literature and the adult's experience of it.
- Compose a role-play of an interview with Charles Causley based on the information contained in this text.

2. Developing Language Awareness

'Without knowing the force of words it is impossible to know men'
Confucius

1 Genre

Genre: A text shaped
for a particular purpose



As the *Teacher Guidelines* outlined, developing students' understanding of genre is central to the language development objectives in the new syllabus. The following suggestions are ways of achieving these objectives; teachers will be able to develop variations on these approaches to suit their own students and general context.



Activity 1 *Building on the students' implicit knowledge of genre*

- Show a series of decontextualised text extracts and ask the students to identify their context and genre. (Ideally these should be taken from real texts but it is also worthwhile for a teacher to write some exemplary texts.)
- What aspects of the language in the texts enabled students to identify the genre of each text?
- List the attributes of language use that are thought to be characteristic of the particular genre. Such areas to be considered would be:
 - choice of words and phrases
 - use of terminology and register
 - length of sentence; form of sentence
 - tone and mode of address
 - conventions of structure and content.
- Consider the following text and note the commentary below.

THE FAIRY TALE

Once upon a time in a certain kingdom there lived a miller who had a very beautiful daughter. This daughter was also extremely clever and shrewd in her ways. The miller was so vain and proud of her that one day he told the king of the country that his daughter could spin gold out of straw. Now this king was very fond of money and this information stirred his greedy instincts and he ordered the girl to be brought before him. Then he led her to a chamber where there was a great quantity of straw and he said, "All this straw must be spun into gold before the morning comes if you value your life". It was in vain the poor girl pleaded with him saying what he asked was impossible for her to do. The chamber door was locked and she was left alone.

Comment

- Conventional phrases and words throughout, e.g. *Once upon a time; very, extremely; so vain and proud; then led her; it was in vain*
- Variation in length of sentence to sustain narrative flow.
- Social informal tone . . . addressed for entertainment to a general audience.
- Conventions of fairy tale narrative: typical setting, stereotype characters, usual motives for action and seemingly impossible task to be done; action moves fast to keep interest of general audience.
- Consider the following text in the same manner as above. (See p. 103)

It was almost December, and Jonas was beginning to be frightened. No. Wrong word, Jonas thought. Frightened meant that deep, sickening feeling of something terrible about to happen. Frightened was the way he had felt a year ago when an unidentified aircraft had over-flown the community twice. He had seen it both times. Squinting towards the sky, he had seen the sleek jet, almost a blur at its high speed, go past, and a second later heard the blast of sound that followed. Then one more time, a moment later, from the opposite direction, the same plane.

At first, he had been only fascinated. He had never seen aircraft so close, for it was against the rules for Pilots to fly over the community. Occasionally, when supplies were delivered by cargo planes to the landing field across the river, the children rode their bicycles to the riverbank and watched, intrigued, the unloading and then the takeoff directed to the west, always away from the community.

But the aircraft that year had been different. It was not a squat, fat-bellied cargo plane but a needle-nosed single-pilot jet. Jonas, looking around anxiously, had seen others – adults as well as children – stop what they were doing and wait, confused, for an explanation of the frightening event.

Suggestions for other texts that could be used in this way

- A letter from a bank manager re an overdrawn account
- A prayer
- A newspaper advertisement
- A formal public speech of welcome
- An extract from a science text-book
- A political speech
- Extracts from the writers' texts in Section B of this book

As a follow-up to such activities, a written assignment in one of the genre (for a real audience if possible) would be a useful way of reinforcing students' knowledge and understanding of the structure, tone and register of the particular genre. It is a fundamental principle of the methodology advocated here on language teaching that the students are required to write as much as possible.



Teaching Point

Students should be producers of materials as much as they are receivers of materials; attempting to make texts is the best way of understanding how texts work.



Activity 2 *Focus on genre and context*

This involves recognising that genres are products of expectations and conventions, of what is considered appropriate or inappropriate in a variety of contexts.

Choose items from each of the columns below, i.e. Topic, Purpose, Type of text, Audience. Decide whether the combination selected is probable (acceptable) or improbable (unacceptable) in normal language use.

e.g. Are these acceptable or unacceptable combinations?

- food/to reprimand/formal letter/hotel manager
- sports event/to inform/recipe/police officer
- racism/to describe/fairy tale/teacher

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Text-types</i>	<i>Audience</i>
Waste-disposal	To reprimand	Personal letter	Self
Love	To instruct	Formal letter	Friend
Sport	To inform	Narrative	Parent
Food	To explain	Recipe	Teacher
Racism	To ask	Report	Public
Inequality	To compare	Argument	Garda
School	To describe	Editorial	Hotel
Weather	To reprimand	Advertisement	T.D.
Music	To plead	Lyric poem	Plumber
Flowers	To refute	Public speech	Disc-jockey
TV Prog.	To complain	Diary/Journal	Solicitor
Exams	To question	Fairy tale	Corporation

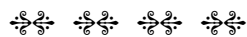
As stressed previously, genre are meant to be guides and structures, not determining frames. In the context of this exercise it might be worthwhile to engage the students in some exploratory encounters with genres. Invite them to attempt to write in a formal genre for an informal context, or vice versa. The opportunities for comic and satirical effects here are quite immense. Consider **Text A** and **B** in this light. What effects are achieved by mixing registers and genres in these texts?

TEXT A

And now, unveiled, the toilet stands displayed,
 Each silver vase in mystic order laid.
 First, robed in white, the nymph intent adores,
 With head uncovered, the cosmetic powers.
 A heavenly image in the glass appears,
 To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;
 The inferior priestess, at her altar's side,
 Trembling begins the sacred rites of pride.
 Unnumbered treasures ope at once, and here
 The various offerings of the world appear;
 From each she nicely culls with curious toil,

And decks the Goddess with the glittering spoil.
This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,
And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.
The tortoise here and elephant unite,
Transformed to combs, the speckled, and the white.
Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux.
Now awful beauty puts on all its arms;
The fair each moment rises in her charms,
Repairs her smiles, awakens every grace,
And calls forth all the wonders of her face;
Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,
And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.
The busy sylphs surround their darling care,
These set the head, and those divide the hair,
Some fold the sleeve, whilst others plait the gown;
And Betty's praised for labours not her own.

From *The Rape of the Lock*, Alexander Pope



TEXT B

The Brother is thinkin' of goin up.

Going up what?

The brother is thinkin' of standin'.

Standing what? Drinks?

The brother is thinkin' of having a go at the big parties.

Do you mean that your relative is considering offering himself as a candidate when a general election becomes due by reason of constitutional requirement?

The brother is thinkin' of goin' up at the elections.

I see.

Of course it's not the brother himself that is all made for this game. He's bein' pushed do you understand me. Certain influential parties is behind him. They're night and mornin' callin' to the digs and colloquin' with the brother inside in the back-room with the brother givin' orders for tea to be made at wan in the mornin'. Any amount of fat oul' fellas with the belly well out in front, substantial cattle-men be the look of them. No shortage of the ready there. And do you know what I'm going to tell you?

I do not.

It's not today nor yesterday this business started. Months ago didn't I catch the brother inside in the bed with the Intoxication Act they had all the talk about. He was havin' a rare oul' screw at it, burnin the light all night. Says I what's this I see, what's goin on here? Do you know what the answer was? Says he I'm makin – wait till you hear this – I'm makin, says he, COPIOUS NOTES.

That's a quare one. Copious notes is what the brother was at in the bed.

I understand. Your relative no doubt realises that the study is the true foundation of statesmanship.

And I'll tell you a good wan. The brother has books under the bed. I seen them.

The love of books has been a beacon that has lighted the way in our darkest hour.

Sure wasn't the landlady getting on to the brother for havin' the light on till four and five in the mornin'. Of course the brother doesn't mind the landlady.

I see.

The brother takes a very poor view of the Labour Party. Cawbogues he calls them. And what else are they?

I do not know.

Not that the brother fancies the other crowd either. Begob wan day there came a collector to the digs lookin' for election money. This is years back, of course. Well do you know what, he walked into it. Everybody thought the brother was out and the crowd in the digs was all for payin' up and looking pleasant. But begob the next thing the brother comes marchin' down the stairs. I needn't tell you what happened. Your man was humped out on his ear. A very strict person, the brother. He's not a man to get on the wrong side of.

I do not doubt it.

Well then the brother was workin' away at figures. Do you know what it is, says he. I think I can see me way to pay every man, woman and child in the country four pounds ten a week. That's a quare one. Four pounds ten and no stamp money stopped.

That is quite remarkable.

The brother was a bit worried about the ten bob for a day or two. But he got it right in the end. He'll be able to manage the four-ten. Begob I had to shake him by the hand when he told me the news. It'll be changed times when the brother's party gets in. And do you know what? Certain proof that the brother is goin' places . . .

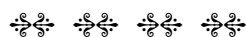
What?

The brother was down the kays the other day pricin' clawhammers.

An excellent omen.

Here's me bus. Cheers!

From *The Brother*, Flann O'Brien



Here are some possibilities that the students could try in this context :

- Write in a fairy tale style an account of a recent political event or an item of public gossip.
- Write in a formal genre, a legal document or solemn public speech, a description of an ordinary everyday event or process.
- Give a popular radio account of a short period in a specific formal event, e.g. a teacher starting a class, a person in the process of proposing marriage.
- Change the genre of a text (or the style of a text).

Playing with words, styles and genres in this manner brings the student up close to language and language usage: such approaches familiarise them with words and structures and they should come to see the logic of language practices not as hindrances but as enabling structures.



Activity 3 Variety of genre determined by communicative purpose

Choose a photograph and give variety of genre assignments to it:



Photography by Frank Nugent

Assignments: Write about this picture in one of the following ways:

- a description from a journalist's viewpoint
- a description from a personal viewpoint
- a moment in a novel
- a poem
- a critical analysis of the photograph as a photograph.



Activity 4 Writing in a variety of genre

Select three words, e.g. castle; morning; approaches.

- Students could work in a group if desired, but individual assignments are equally useful.
- Use the three words in a short text (about three paragraphs) in each of the following genres:
 - Romantic fiction
 - Auctioneer's sales pitch for house
 - Advertisement for perfume
 - Historical account of siege
 - Tabloid press article on film star
 - Political speech about the condition of the nation
 - Personal diary of a day's walk.

This type of activity can be stimulated by a variety of other approaches:

- Give the opening sentence of a genre . . . request students to continue as they think is appropriate, e.g.
 - The door creaked open ominously. John waited, frozen with fear, for he knew that there was no one else in that lonely house but himself and he remembered locking the door before going to bed.
 - Various views can be taken on the plan to make drugs available to addicts.
- Give title of text . . . students to write in variety of ways in response.



Activity 5 Comparison of genres

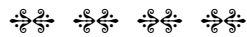
The two texts below are apparently on the same subject. Contrast their use of words and discuss the manner in which the language is used in each text to achieve specific ends.

THE LIFE STORY OF THE MUSHROOM

How the Mushroom Gets Its Food. Fungi have none of the green plant material called chlorophyll. Green plants with chlorophyll can use sunlight to prepare carbohydrates, a type of food they need. They manufacture it from water and carbon dioxide, one of the gases in the air. Mushrooms have no 'leaf green' and must use food that has already been prepared by some green plant. They may be found growing on old stumps or logs, decaying twigs or leaves, or even on rich soil. In this way they are able to get their food. Here and there is found a species which grows on the trunks or branches of living trees. Mushrooms which grow on living plants are called parasites.

The main part of the mushroom plant, the mycelium, lives entirely inside the material that gives it nourishment. When the mycelium grows in a log or tree it causes the wood to decay or rot. The decay makes more material for the mushroom to live on. Mushrooms need a great deal of moisture. After a spell of wet weather in spring, summer, or fall many of these fungi spring up suddenly.

How a Mushroom Grows. The story of the common table mushroom will give a good idea of the way other mushrooms grow. This is the mushroom that is often raised for food. It is grown in a specially prepared mixture of well-fermented stable manure. The mixture, called a compost, is arranged on benches or in boxes. When the temperature is right, pieces of mushroom spawn are placed just below the surface of the compost, and about 1 foot (30 centimetres) apart. The spawn is really the mycelium, the part of the mushroom plant that has grown underground.



MUSHROOMS

Overnight, very
Whitely, discreetly,
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses
Take hold on the loam,
Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,
Stops us, betrays us;
The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on
Heaving the needles,
The leafy bedding,

Even the paving.
Our hammers, our rams,
Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,
Widen the crannies,
Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,
On the crumbs of shadow,
Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.
So many of us!
So many of us!

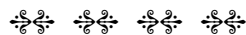
We are shelves, we are

Tables, we are meek,
We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves.
Our kind multiples;

We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door.

Sylvia Plath



Activity 6 *Transforming and mixing genres*

Students choose a resort or holiday destination (real or imagined). They compose a brochure for the destination. Then on holidays there they send a postcard to parents or friends. Finally they write up about where they have been in the style of a travel book, personal, reflective and evaluative. All of these genres will contrast significantly in their language use and make a range of demands on the students.



Activity 7 *Focus on transforming texts into different registers and genre*

Use text of the poem *Warm Babies*.

Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego,
Walked in the furnace to an' fro,
Hay foot, straw food, fro' an' to,
An' the flame an' the smoke flared up the flue.
Nebuchadnezzar he listen some,
An' he hears 'em talk, an' he say "How come?"
An' he hear 'em walk, an' he say "How so?"
Dem babies was hawg-tied an hour ago!"

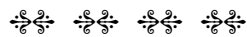
Then Shadrach call, in an uppity way,
"A little more heat or we ain gwine stay!"
An' Shadrach bawl, so dat furnace shake:
"Lanlawd, hear! fo' de good Lawd's sake!"

Abednego yell, wid a loud "Kerchool!"
"Is you out to freeze us, y' great big Jew!"
Nebuchadnezzar, he rave an' ramp,
An' call to his janitor, "You big black scamp!
Shake dem clinkers an' spend dat coal!
I'll bake dem birds, ef I goes in de hole!"

So he puts on de draf an' he shuts de door
So de furnace glow an' de chimbly roar.
Ol' Nebuchadnezzar, he smole a smile.
"Guess dat'll hold 'em," says he, "one while."
Then Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego
Walk on de hot coals to an' fro,
Gulp dem cinders like chicken meat
An' holler out fo' a mite mo' heat.
Ol' Nebuchadnezzar gives up de fight;
He open dat door an' he bow perlite.
He shade his eyes from the glare infernal
An' say to Abednego, "Step out, Colonel."
An' he add, "Massa Shadrach, I hopes you all
Won' be huffy at me at all."

Then Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego,
Hay foot, straw foot, three in a row,
Stepped right smart from dat oven door
Jes' as good as they wuz before,
An' far as Nebuchadnezzar could find,
Jes' as good as they wuz behind.

Keith Preston

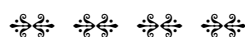


The Bible version of the story of the three boys in the furnace is as follows :

12. Now there are certain Jews whom thou hast set over the works of the province of Babylon, Sidrach, Misach, and Abdenago: these men, O king, have slighted thy decree: they worship not thy gods, nor do they adore the golden statue which thou hast set up.
13. Then Nabuchodonosor in fury, and in wrath, commanded that Sidrach, Misach, and Abdenago should be brought: who immediately were brought before the king.
14. And Nabuchodonosor the king spoke to them, and said: Is it true, O Sidrach, Misach, and Abdenago, that you do not worship my gods, nor adore the golden statue that I have set up?
15. Now therefore if you be ready, at what hour soever you shall hear the sound of the trumpet, flute, harp, sackbut, and psaltery, and symphony, and of all kind of music, prostrate yourselves, and adore the statue which I have made: but if you do not adore, you shall be cast the same hour into the furnace of burning fire: and who is the God that shall deliver you out of my hand?
16. Sidrach, Misach, and Abdenago answered and said to king Nabuchodonosor: We have no occasion to answer thee concerning this matter.
17. For behold our God, whom we worship is able to save us from the furnace

- of burning fire, and to deliver us out of thy hands, O king.
18. But if he will not, be it known to thee, O king, that we will not worship thy gods, nor adore the golden statue which thou has set up.
 19. Then was Nabuchodonosor filled with fury: and the countenance of his face was changed against Sidrach, Misach, and Abdenago, and he commanded that the furnace should be heated seven times more than it had been accustomed to be heated.
 20. And he commanded the strongest men that were in his army, to bind the feet of Sidrach, Misach and Abdenago, and to cast them into the furnace of burning fire.
 21. And immediately these men were bound and were cast into the furnace of burning fire, with their coats, and their caps, and their shoes, and their garments.
 22. For the king's commandment was urgent, and the furnace was heated exceedingly. And the flame of the fire slew those men that had cast in Sidrach, Misach, and Abdenago.
 23. But these three men, that is, Sidrach, Misach, and Abdenago, fell down bound in the midst of the furnace of burning fire.
 24. And they walked in the midst of the flame, praising God and blessing the Lord.
-
91. Then Nabuchodonosor the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and said to his nobles: Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered the king, and said: True, O king.
 92. He answered, and said: Behold I see four men loose, and walking in the midst of the fire, and there is no hurt in them, and the form of the fourth is like the son of God
 93. Then Nabuchodonosor came to the door of the burning fiery furnace, and said: Sidrach, Misach and Abdenago, ye servants of the most high God, go ye forth, and come. And immediately Sidrach, Misach, and Abdenago went out from the midst of the fire.
 94. And the nobles, and the magistrates, and the judges, and the great men of the king being gathered together, considered these men, that the fire had no power on their bodies, and that not a hair of their head had been singed, nor their garments altered, nor the smell of the fire has passed on them.
 95. The Nabuchodonosor breaking forth, said: Blessed be the God of them, to wit, of Sidrach, Misach, and Abdenago, who hath sent his Angel, and delivered his servants that believed in him: and they changed the king's word, and delivered up their bodies that they might not serve, not adore any god, except their own God.
 96. By me therefore this decree is made, that every people, tribe, and tongue, which shall speak blasphemy against the god of Sidrach, Misach, and Abdenago, shall be destroyed, and their houses laid waste: for there is no other God that can save in this manner.

From *The Book of Daniel*



1. Having read the poem and the biblical story:

- Contrast the two texts under the following headings: *purpose, language, syntax, register, audience.*
- Transform the first paragraph of the poem into Standard English.
- What effect does this have?
- Does the poem gain or lose impact ?

2. Write an anecdote/joke in the language of your locality using as much slang as possible. Then transform it into Standard English. Consider the outcome.

3. Compose a short glossary (in alphabetical order) to explain words from local or popular usage.

4. If thought appropriate it might be useful to discuss where and where not local words can be used. Why do such words come into usage? Where do they actually come from?



Activity 8 *Appropriate choice of words*

Martin Joos in a book entitled *The Five Clocks* (1962) suggests that there are five generic categories of social relationship that tend to determine the kind of words used in a context. This categorisation may ultimately be too simplistic but such distinctions and refinements can help students to become aware of the need to match language to context. Joos' categories are:

- *Frozen:* *ally*
- *Formal:* *acquaintance*
- *Consultative:* *friend*
- *Casual:* *pal*
- *Intimate:* *mate, buddy*

On this basis a series of activities could be worked out to develop students' sensitivity to appropriate choice of words and also as a result enlarge their vocabulary and range of synonyms.

- Identify the inappropriate words or phrases within the following sentences and explain why you think they are inappropriate within the apparent context of the statement.

– *Because he was so morally sensitive, Hamlet found it difficult to get his act together.*

– *It is most unbecoming for any fella to act in this manner in the precincts of this august establishment.*

- Change the words in the following paragraph that could be considered inappropriate in the context:

Once upon a time there was a widow who lived in a small cottage in the middle of a large afforestation. She had three sons. The first two sons were ignorant galloots but the third son was just a dote altogether. While she loved all her sons she had a special and tender affection for her third child who was named Alan. Alan's brothers were aware of this so an unhealthy sibling rivalry developed between them which ultimately led to the tragedy that this tale will unfold to you.

- Use of register to obscure reality of events

Students could search for reports on war that deliberately use language in a vague and non-specific manner. Phrases typical of such language use are:

- *Collateral damage . . . innocent bystanders killed or injured because of bombing missions*
- *Unintended consequences . . . killing of civilians during military attack*

- *Ethnic cleansing . . . racial hatred*
- *Final solution . . . the deliberate massacre of six million Jews by the Nazis*



Activity 9 *Looking at language in literary texts*

Consider an extract in which the characters' use of language suggests something about their values and assumptions. This is not a study of what they said or why they said it but rather how it is said and what that tells us about how language works in society and how individuals are influenced by the language world they inhabit.

Exemplar 1

Read the following extract from Frank McGuinness' *Someone who'll watch over me*

Two men, Adam, an American and Edward, an Irishman, have been hostages in the Lebanon for some time. This scene takes place soon after they are joined by another hostage, Michael, an Englishman.

Contrast the vocabulary, tone, syntax and length of sentences of the differing characters. What impact does the contrast in language use have?

MICHAEL Where we have found ourselves –

EDWARD Where we have found ourselves –

MICHAEL I fail to see how tormenting me –

EDWARD I fail to see –

MICHAEL Will in any way alleviate –

EDWARD Alleviate – alleviate – alleviate – alleviate – alleviate.

MICHAEL Do you wish me to admit I'm afraid of you?

(Silence)

Is that what you wish me to do?

(Silence)

Would that in some perverse way help you to be less afraid yourselves, because you are both very afraid, and I find it distinctly repulsive that you turn together against me for the sole reason of backing each other up in your fight against them. We are in this together. Don't forget that. If I go under, so do you.

(Silence)

ADAM Shoot the movie.

EDWARD There were three bollocks in a cell in Lebanon. An Englishman, an Irishman, and an American. Why they were in that cell was anybody's guess, and why they were in Lebanon was their own guess.

ADAM The American was the first to be caught. While he was on his own, he was frightened of going mad.

EDWARD The Irishman was second to be caught. He would have went mad without the American. They were joined, these two bollocks, by a third bollocks, an Englishman.

MICHAEL The Englishman did not know if being in the cell in Lebanon had driven him insane, being kidnapped strikes him as being

- madness, so he has attempted not to lose his head in the face of severe provocation –
- EDWARD In not being afraid of them he's convinced them they have not gone mad.
- ADAM And in their way, in so far as is possible, they thank him for that conviction.
- (Silence)*
- MICHAEL You both scare the shit out of me.
- EDWARD English people always scare the shit out of me as well. As for fucking Americans –
- MICHAEL Yes, they are all quite mad –
- EDWARD Can you imagine what it was like to land in here with that yankee –
- MICHAEL Yes, it must have been worrying –
- ADAM What the fuck is this?
- MICHAEL I do wish we could stop swearing. My language has gone to pot since meeting you both. I really do feel that we are giving in to them if we allow ourselves to descend to vulgarity – no, I'm being a sanctimonious prig. I apologise.
- (Silence)*
- I'd also like to say that I think Richard Attenborough's films are quite good. He spent over twenty years trying to make Gandhi, and it's a testimony to his decent, well-crafted and honourable political views –
- EDWARD Michael?
- MICHAEL What?
- ADAM Shite.
- MICHAEL Well, it was a bit long, the film of Gandhi.
- (Silence)*
- ADAM I wonder what Sam Peckinpah would have done with the life of Gandhi.
- EDWARD Gandhi would have been shot in the first reel.
- MICHAEL Actually, Gandhi is shot in the first reel of Richard Attenborough's film.
- EDWARD Is that fact?
- MICHAEL Yes.
- (Silence)*
- Are there any vultures in Lebanon?
- ADAM What do you mean?
- MICHAEL Well, in the film where Madonna is eaten by vultures, would that be realistic in Lebanon?
- (Silence)*
- That was meant to be a joke.
- (Silence)*
- Vultures are much maligned creatures, you know. I'm not an expert myself on their dietary habits, but I did once hear on Round Britain Quiz a fascinating description.
- ADAM Michael, I am Sam Peckinpah. This is a gun.

(He points his finger at MICHAEL)

You are dead.

(He shoots MICHAEL)

EDWARD What a senseless waste of human life.

MICHAEL Do you think we'll ever get out of here?

(Silence)

What can they possibly gain by holding us hostage?

(Silence)

My mother isn't terribly well. She'll be very worried about me. Do you think they will have at least let her know I'm alive? I know it may not sound very sensible to be worried about one's mother when we're in the position that we're in, but I do worry, I worry so much –

I was just wondering if they would have told her not to worry –

ADAM I'm sure they have.

EDWARD Yes.

MICHAEL Yes.

(Silence)

It is quite worrying, isn't it?

EDWARD Yes.

MICHAEL Yes.

ADAM It's just as well you're not afraid.

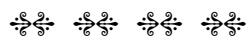
(Silence)

MICHAEL We could be here a long time, couldn't we?

(Silence)

ADAM That was my major reservation about Ghandi. It was too long, that film. Very long.

(Lights fade.)



Exemplar: 2

Read the following short story *Click* by Judith Stamper. Having explored the story imaginatively consider the range of language registers present and itemise some of the characteristics of each one.

- Western
- Quiz Competition
- Cartoon
- Soap-opera

Contrast the impact of these registers with the impact of the conversation between the mother and the daughter.

Some other TV genres are mentioned in the story. Students could be given the assignment of writing a characteristic piece of dialogue or voice-over text from any of these genres and explaining their choice of register.

CLICK. The television dial sounded through the room like snapped fingers. First there was soft static. Then loud voices swelled up.

‘The Sheriff will get you for this, Kid.’

‘You won’t be around to find out, Slade.’ BANG! BANG!

CLICK, CLICK, CLICK. Jenny turned the dial to Channel 4.

‘Mr. and Mrs. Williams, if you answer this question correctly, the water bed will be yours!’

CLICK, CLICK.

‘I’m Popeye the Sailor Man.’

‘Jenny what are you doing tonight?’ Her mother’s words floated into Jenny’s mind. But she didn’t answer.

‘Jenny!’ This time her mother’s voice demanded an answer.

‘Uh, I’m not sure, Mum.’ Jenny leaned forward to turn the dial to Channel 8. CLICK, CLICK. The last part of the *Secret Loves* was on.

‘Jenny, don’t watch television again all night. I have to leave you here alone when you father is gone too. But find something else to do. Promise?’

‘Sure, Mum.’ Jenny stared at the television, trying to hear what the mother on *Secret Loves* would say when she heard that her daughter was pregnant.

In the back of her mind Jenny thought she heard her mother say something. Then she heard the hallway door close.

‘See you later, Mum.’ Jenny didn’t say it very loudly. Her mother couldn’t have heard it anyway.

On the screen the mother was holding her daughter in her arms and crying, ‘What will the family think? What will the family think?’

Jenny thought about her family. There wasn’t much to it. Her father was on the road a lot, driving his truck. Her mother worked at night as a waitress. Jenny didn’t have any brothers or sisters. It wasn’t a real family. They never did much together.

Secret Loves ended and a commercial came on. It was for the sex appeal toothpaste. A beautiful girl with white teeth was sitting with her boyfriend in a sportscar. She smiled at the guy and ran her hand through his hair. The guy reminded Jenny of somebody in her class. Jenny daydreamed about being in a sportscar with him and looking like the girl in the commercial. She thought about it every time she brushed her teeth. She wouldn’t brush with anything but that toothpaste.

The wail of a police siren came into the room. Jenny started to go to the window. But she didn’t get up. Doctor Harding has started the girl’s heart again. The beautiful nurse wiped his forehead. Someone told the girl’s family that the operation had been a success. Doctor Harding took off his surgical mask and the camera zoomed in on her face.

A commercial came on. Jenny heard the sound of an ambulance coming down the street. She heard her neighbours’ voices in the hallway. They were talking about an accident.

Jenny decided to check out the accident during the commercial. She could probably get back in time before the show started again. She went out into the hallway and walked down the stairs until she got to the top of the stairs outside

the block of flats. From there, she saw the girl.

The white body and red blood were like fresh paint splotches against black footpath. The image froze into Jenny's mind. The girl's face was horrible and beautiful at the same time. It seemed more real that anything Jenny had ever seen. Looking at it, Jenny felt as though she was coming out of a long dream. It seemed to cut through the cloud in her mind like lightning.

Suddenly Jenny was aware of everything around her. Police cars were pulling up. Ambulance lights were flashing around. People sobbed and covered their faces.

Jenny walked down the stairs to the street where the girl lay. She was already dead. No handsome young doctor had come and saved her. No commercial interrupted the stillness of her death.

For a second, Jenny wanted to switch the channel to escape the girl's face. She wanted to turn off its realness. But the girl wasn't part of her television world. She was part of the real world of death and unhappy endings.

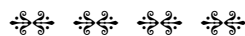
Two ambulance men came from the ambulance and gently put the dead girl on a stretcher. The crowd of people broke into small groups and whispered to each other as they drifted away. Jenny stayed until the ambulance drove away. She watched its flashing lights and listened to its wailing siren fade into the night air.

Finally, Jenny walked back upstairs to the flat. As she opened the door, she heard the sound of the television. The last part of *Doctor's Diary* was still on. Jenny eased down into her chair in front of the television. It was the chair that she always watched in. But now she felt uncomfortable. The television seemed too close.

Jenny tried to get back into the show. But all the characters' lines sounded phoney. And Doctor Harding's face wasn't the same. His smile seemed fake and he looked too handsome, like a plastic doll.

The words started running through Jenny's mind. 'People never die on *Doctor's Diary*.' At first they were just words that Jenny couldn't stop saying in her head. 'People never die on *Doctor's Diary*.' The words made Jenny remember the dead girl's face. 'People never die on *Doctor's Diary*.' The words started meaning something.

CLICK. The television switch sounded through the room like a padlock snapping open.



Activity 10

Book reviews

Exemplar 1 What is a good text-book?

Initially consider a number of text-books in terms of their cover design, general design, and overall presentation. Contrasting books is a useful methodology here.

Select one page as being representative of a specific text's approach and comment on it under the following headings:

- mode of address to the reader
- quality of instructional language
- quality of explanations
- use of technical terminology
- use of pictures and diagrams

Exemplar 2 What is a worthwhile book for young children? Focus on picture books as a specific genre.

Obviously resources here may be a difficulty. It may be possible to borrow books from a local primary school or library. Alternatively a number of famous children's books preferably of the picture book variety might be purchased for the school library. Having read a number of books a general discussion could be held where students reported on the books they had read. What were the common features and how did books differ in their approach? Look particularly at the way the language is used and directed towards the young audience.

If thought desirable students should be given the assignment of writing a short story for young children and then going to the local primary school and reading it to a class.

Some recommendations for picture books that could be used:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| – Where the Wild Things are | Maurice Sendak |
| – The Jolly Postman | Allan Ahlberg |
| – Goodnight, Bear | Martin Waddel |
| – Gorilla | Anthony Browne |
| – The Very Hungry Caterpillar | Eric Carle |
| – The Whale's Song | Dyan Sheldon and Gary Blythe |
| – Princess Smarty Pants | Babette Cole |
| – Grandfather's Pencil | Michael Foreman |

② Sentences and Syntax

Keep it simple!
Good writing means
the words in the sentences
are in the best order.



Basic Concepts

The traditional definition of a sentence – a group of words that make sense on their own – is reasonably adequate but not comprehensive. For example, despite not having the usual sentence structure, the following make perfect sense:

Stop! For Sale. Keep off! Run!

There is a major difference between sentences in written form and in oral form. We actually do speak in sentences but they are much more complex than the written form, e.g.

‘Well, on Monday, no it was on Sunday actually, I decided to go to the cinema to see the film, you know the one, the one about the hijacked submarine, that was reviewed on the paper last week or was it the previous week, I can’t remember any way it doesn’t matter as I said before I went to see it and d’you know what, you’ll never believe this who did I see there but your man’

If one wrote like this all the time then it would be very difficult to keep a reader’s interest. Why would a reader lose interest in this? How could this be rewritten so that it might become more readable?

With these aspects emphasised, the conventional structure and syntax of the written sentence can be looked at briefly.

Structure and Syntax

- A sentence states an action in time. So every sentence must have an action word, a verb or a verbal phrase in a specific tense, i.e. either past, or present or future.
- This action must be executed by an agent or subject . . . a doer or performer of the action, usually in the form of a named person . . . a noun or a pronoun.
- In some instances the action passes over to another person or object. This completes the action and can be called the object of the verb.
- To make sense in normal English the order of the words, the syntax, must follow a specific pattern viz.,

Agent → Action → (Object)

Noun/Pronoun → Verb (Verbal Phrase) → (Object)

Because English is largely an uninflected language, i.e. the basic form of a word doesn’t change very much irrespective of function, then it is predominantly through syntax that required meanings are created, e.g.

Here is a group of words that make no sense although it potentially contains an action and an agent: *dog the bit man the*. This group of words could be rearranged to make sense in this way –

The man bit the dog.

While this is a possible arrangement it is more than likely the arrangement required will be –

The dog bit the man.

So it is the arrangement of the words, the order of the words, which makes the needed meaning.



Teaching Point

In helping students to develop advanced literacy skills it is of fundamental importance that they come to understand that making meaning in written English very much depends on putting words in the best and generally most correct order.

Kinds of Sentences

Sentences can be categorised under one of these four headings.

- Statements: *give information*
- Commands: *give directives*
- Requests: *ask questions*
- Exclamations: *state feelings*

Being able to categorise a sentence obviously facilitates understanding and punctuation.



Activity 1

Categorise the following sentences under one (or more) of the headings above. How do you decide on the category? Would punctuation be of help?

- *There is no way out.*
- *I felt terrible.*
- *There is no way to get to your destination quickly from here.*
- *What a day.*
- *His car was certainly black.*
- *I know he won't return in time. He never does.*
- *Perhaps you might reconsider your position.*
- *Don't drive the car again without asking for permission.*

Active v. Passive voice

Depending on their structure, sentences can be described as being in either the Active Voice or the Passive Voice. An Active Sentence has the following structure : Agent → Action → Object.

The dog bit the man.

A Passive Sentence changes the order, inverting the position of the Agent and the Object and adds in some auxiliary words, e.g. *by, was*.

The man was bitten by the dog.

Active sentences are used most of the time because they make the words move more briskly and energetically. In personal writing they should be used as much as possible. However, when a statement needs to be impersonal, in formal, scientific and legal contexts, passive sentences can be more appropriate. For example it would seem inappropriate to write up a scientific report as follows:

Seán, Deirdre and Tom mixed the chemicals in measured amounts. Then while Seán observed the resultant chemical process Deirdre and Tom prepared the apparatus for the next stage of the experiment, the distillation of the mixture.

Why is it inappropriate? Principally because the focus in such a report should not be on the persons but on the actual experiment or process. So the passive voice provides the required impersonal style.

The chemicals X, Y, and Z were mixed in measured amounts in a test tube and the resultant process was carefully observed and noted. Subsequently the mixture in the test tube was subjected to a distilling process . . .

Clearly the use of the passive voice relates to students developing an appropriate style and literacy for writing in certain genres and registers. Some tasks on changing active sentences to passive sentences could be usefully given to familiarise students with the elements of this formal style.



Activity 2 *Changing Active sentences to Passive sentences*

Exemplar: Active (A) The cat chased the mouse.
 Passive (P) The mouse was chased by the cat.

Process:

- Move the agent of the active verb to the end of the sentence, making it the passive agent and add *by*.
- Move the object of the active verb to the start of the sentence, making it the passive subject.
- Replace the active verb with a passive one: place either *is*, *was*, *be*, before the verb and attach –*ed* to the verb itself.

1. Change the following sentences as necessary:

- *The storm damaged the house.*
- *The river flooded the streets.*
- *The computer printed the message.*
- *The dog was killed by the car.*
- *The full-back was tackled by the forward.*
- *The car was crashed by my son.*



Activity 3 *Focus on word order or syntax*

Re-arrange the following groups of words into a meaningful sentence. In some instances there may be more than one way of making a sentence from the words. Identify the kind of sentence it is and apply appropriate punctuation. Explain the function of the punctuation.

- *bank where is the in town this*
- *was last heavily it evening rained*
- *escape is no tunnel from there this*
- *crossroads the right at next turn take and a*
- *the your behaviour I understand fail recent reasons for to*
- *cannot you believe that opinion possibly*
- *take ounces flour mix egg two one and it of*
- *a wants politician be to brother my*
- *explain your how principal the absence to will to you the*
- *were intended not carry words sometimes meanings that*

Students should be repeatedly requested to check that their own syntax is most appropriate for their writing purpose.

Consider this extract from a student's work in the light of the previous exercise. How could the syntax be improved here?

I can still remember the day I broke my mother's favourite vase. It was of great sentimental value because it had been given to her by her mother who had in turn received it from her mother. However I was fooling around and I knocked the vase over. My mother was furious. I was so sorry for knocking it over and I told my mother it was an accident. However my mother did not beat me but she did stop my pocket money for a few weeks. I still do not know how she restrained herself from beating me up but I respect her all the more for it. I was more careful inside the house afterwards.



Activity 4 *On modifiers/descriptors (adjectives and adverbs) in word order*

The sentence above, *The dog bit the man*, could be made more vivid by adding some details of appearance, time and place:

Last week in Cork a wild, black dog savagely bit an elderly man's leg.

However, some variations are possible, e.g.

- *Last week a wild, black dog savagely bit an elderly man's leg in Cork*
- *A black wild dog, last week, bit a man's elderly leg in Cork.*

Students could comment on these sentences and what they feel is inappropriate in them.



Activity 5 *Focus on sentence combining*

Many students find it difficult to build up their sentences into the best structures to make communicable sense or meaning. As a result they either use no punctuation at all or they write short sentences or they continually use such linking words as *and* and *then*. Such practices make their writing pedestrian and therefore boring for the reader. Variety within writing no matter how achieved makes for more interesting reading. Therefore learning appropriate ways and the most effective ways of joining sentences is an important skill for students to learn.

Consider the following pairs of sentences and consider how they might be most effectively linked for clarity of thought and meaning.

- I did not come to school yesterday. I was ill.
- It was inconvenient. I went to Dublin.
- There was no escape from the consequences of my actions. I waited patiently for the outcome.
- I will call tomorrow. You will be there.



Activity 6 *Focus on sentence sequencing*

This involves developing an understanding of how specific kinds of texts are structured to achieve coherence.

Texts can be divided into two broad categories, chronological and non-chronological texts. Narratives and recounts, since their structure is governed by time generally, i.e. *this happened and after that this happened and then . . .* can be called chronological texts. Arguments, reports tend to be more dependent on logical steps, i.e. *therefore, because, as a result of*, can be described as non-chronological texts.

1 Give students the opening sentence of a text. They are required to write five more sentences that could appropriately follow on from the first sentence.

- *It was midnight when the phone finally rang . . .*
- *There are varied views on giving refugees permission to enter this country.*
- *There is no real solution to global warming . . .*
- *Who really cares about the speed of cars today? . . .*
- *Who could that be at the door? . . .*
- *The storm struck so furiously that he felt uneasy . . .*
- *It has come to my notice that your recent behaviour . . .*

2 Give sentences from a text arranged in an incoherent manner: students are required to re-arrange the sentences into an effective sequence. They should try to explain the reasons for their final choice of sequence and identify the genre of the text. (See originals on p. 103)

Text A

Others have trouble with syntax. The final product may look neat and illustrate correct mechanics, but the writing lacks vigour and wit. Still others expend their energies on sentence construction. Many students have learned to view writing as several disjointed activities that have little to do with expressing ideas. The point is that many traditional writing curriculums are designed to prevent students from developing a positive attitude toward writing. Some struggle relentlessly with spelling and punctuation.

Text B

They never tell you what to do when your eyeballs heat from the heatblast and start slithering down your cheek-bones, or how to avoid waking up one

morning inside a five-mile wide bomb crater. The film was old and black and white and crackly, and it broke down twice while they were running it. I couldn't understand why nobody'd told me about anything like that before. I've only been to one meeting of the peace group before now and that was to see a film they were showing called *The War Game*. They just act as if things like that could never happen. It showed you what the effects would be if a nuclear bomb was dropped onto a place . . . and it made me feel absolutely horrified. At school we have Health Education and they tell you things like how you've got to brush your teeth at night before you go to bed and wear sensible Co-op sandals so that your toes don't get squashed.

(The section that focuses on paragraphing (p. 80) is relevant to this type of language awareness as well.)

On tenses of the verb

A Identify the general tense of this text and ensure all the verbs are in the correct form.

I was happy in Kerry. The sun shone brightly for many days and the sea was calm. I swam for hours each day. In the evenings after the evening meal I sit talking to the Bean-an-tí. She is beautiful and kind, so I fell in love with her and wished that I was ten years older so that I could have asked ask her to marry me!

B Insert the appropriate form of the verb in the following text. (See p. 103)

Learning the language _____ hard work. I _____ trying to fill up gaps in texts. Sometimes it _____ difficult to understand why I _____ doing a particular exercise. I _____ it _____ important to learn to read and write properly but I _____ it _____ more exciting.



Teaching Point

In tasks and activities like these it is important that students read their texts aloud so that they can hear the language in action and use their own implicit knowledge of grammar, tense and intonation to establish which is the most appropriate form or structure.

③ Punctuation

Good punctuation produces writing which is well mannered!



Students need to develop an awareness of how punctuation works in written texts, that stops, commas and apostrophes should not be flung about like confetti but should be used to help the reader to understand the text.

In his *Encyclopaedia of the English Language*, David Crystal outlines four main purposes for punctuation:

- Facilitating coherence . . . *full stops, commas, indents . . . these identify units of grammatical meaning, e.g. sentences, clauses and paragraphs.*
- Pointing up prosody . . . *exclamation marks, question marks, quotation marks, dashes . . . indicate that someone is speaking and that the voice is being used in a specific manner, e.g. in surprise, querying, hesitatingly.*
- Establishing stylistic and rhetorical structures . . . *colons, semi-colons . . . these indicate the steps in an argument or explanation.*
- Semantic nuance . . . *indicating a 'special' meaning for a word or phrase.*

This extract illustrates all the functions of punctuation in operation. Students could be asked to identify the various functions.

There was no escape. The principal was entering the room and there I was standing, chalk in hand, next to the blackboard with his nickname 'Quasimodo' scrawled in large letters across it; he had been given that name because of his habit of crouching over pupils as he reprimanded them.

He looked at me over the top of his rimless spectacles and remarked, 'And what might you be doing, Sir?'

'No . . . no . . . nothing,' I stuttered.

'"No . . . no . . . nothing", indeed' he repeated, 'and pray why is the name of a character in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* on the board? . . . Have you taken up the study of French literature? . . . Or could I hazard a guess that the name refers to another "character" in this school?'

A total silence filled the room. We all seemed to hold our breaths . . . what was coming next?

Another useful way of thinking about punctuation is to see it as one of the means whereby oral texts are transformed and become intelligible as written texts. This insight suggests a whole series of approaches that could be employed based on the notion of interpreting oral texts in a written form.



Activity 1 Punctuate a text

Show text with no organisation, no spaces, no punctuation of any kind, e.g.

WhereareyourbagpipesIaskedIdroppedthemoffatchurchhesaidwheresyourfifehereItookitoutofmypocketitdidntlookveryimpressivewhydidyoujointhebandrileyaskediwantedtoplaytheLambegohrileysvoicewassoftbutIknewwhatthewasthinking.

Ask the students to try to make sense of this and for them to note down the difficulties encountered that prevented interpretation. Also ask how they decided on divisions, what guided them in their selections and decisions and how they indicated the units of sense.

Now show the text with spaces only:

Where are your bagpipes I asked I dropped them off at church he said wheres your fife here I took it out of my pocket it didnt look very impressive why did you join the band riley asked I wanted to play the Lambeg oh rileys voice was soft but I knew what he was thinking

Students should punctuate as best they can . . . focusing especially on getting the sense of the prosody of the passage (*rhythm, tone, intonation, hesitation*).

Finally show the text as in the original and ask the students to comment and compare with their own versions:

‘Where are your bagpipes?’ I asked.
‘I dropped them off at church,’ he said. ‘Where’s your fife?’
‘Here.’ I took it out of my pocket. It didn’t look very impressive.
‘Why did you join the band?’ Riley asked.
‘I wanted to play the Lambeg.’
‘Oh?’ Riley’s voice was soft but I knew what he was thinking.

Students could be asked to deduce some of the principles that might guide their own practice from seeing how a meaningless jumble of letters is transformed into a text.



Teaching Point

As with all the other activities on language it is of vital importance that students work on each other’s texts and that a workshop approach to the whole business of getting the conventions accurate and appropriate is an integral part of the writing process. Teachers should not be acting as proof readers for students’ texts. Students must be taught to proof-read their own texts and those of their class mates. This should be always done before any written work is handed into the teacher.



Activity 2 *Listen and Write*

Make a recording of a commentary on some public event, e.g. sports fixture, on the spot news report. Play it in stages to the students. They are to transcribe what they hear on the tape with agreed conventions of punctuation, e.g. dashes for a pause. They are then asked to change it from the reported oral genre into an account of the event that might appear in a newspaper, changing the language and the punctuation as is deemed appropriate.

The same transformation from oral genre to written genre can be achieved by asking the students to take notes on a talk given by one of them or reporting on a debate held in class.

Many students have problems about developing a sense of audience and they write as they speak. Exercises like this should develop their awareness of the difference between oral use and written use and of the differing conventions of vocabulary, syntax and grammar that come into play.



Activity 3 *Role-play*

Ask students to prepare a role-play of a specific situation: indicate that they must try to capture as best they can the appropriate language (register, syntax and tone) that the different roles, in their view, would need. This is best done initially in pairs. Exemplary situations would be:

- *Headmaster and student*
- *Judge and accused*
- *Garda and vandal*
- *Reporter and ‘star’*

- *Bully and victim*
- *Doctor and patient*
- *Improvised and imagined conversations between characters from literary texts: the characters could be from the same text or from different texts, e.g.*
From Shakespeare: Macduff and Lady Macduff; Macbeth and Hamlet
From Fiction: Heathcliff and Anne Bennet
From Drama: Christy Mahon and Gar

Students could be asked to suggest their own situation and develop the conversation.

The emphasis here is not on acting and performance, i.e. leaving behind self-identity and becoming another character, but rather adopting the social role as themselves and developing the language to cope with the role.

By way of preparation for this work some preliminary reading and research could be done in the media and any other texts for exemplars and models of the language needed.

If the pair work is successful then more sophisticated role-plays could be developed always with the focus on the language. For example, a family of refugees have taken over an empty house and are living responsibly there. However, certain local people have objected and an inquiry is set up to examine the situation. Present at the inquiry are a Garda, Doctor, Reporter, the leader of the neighbourhood opposition, a refugee-support group representative, the chairperson of the inquiry, local politicians. Each must initially make a statement as they deem appropriate, then there could be some restricted questioning.

Eventually this work could be developed into a series of composition assignments for the whole class with a range of options:

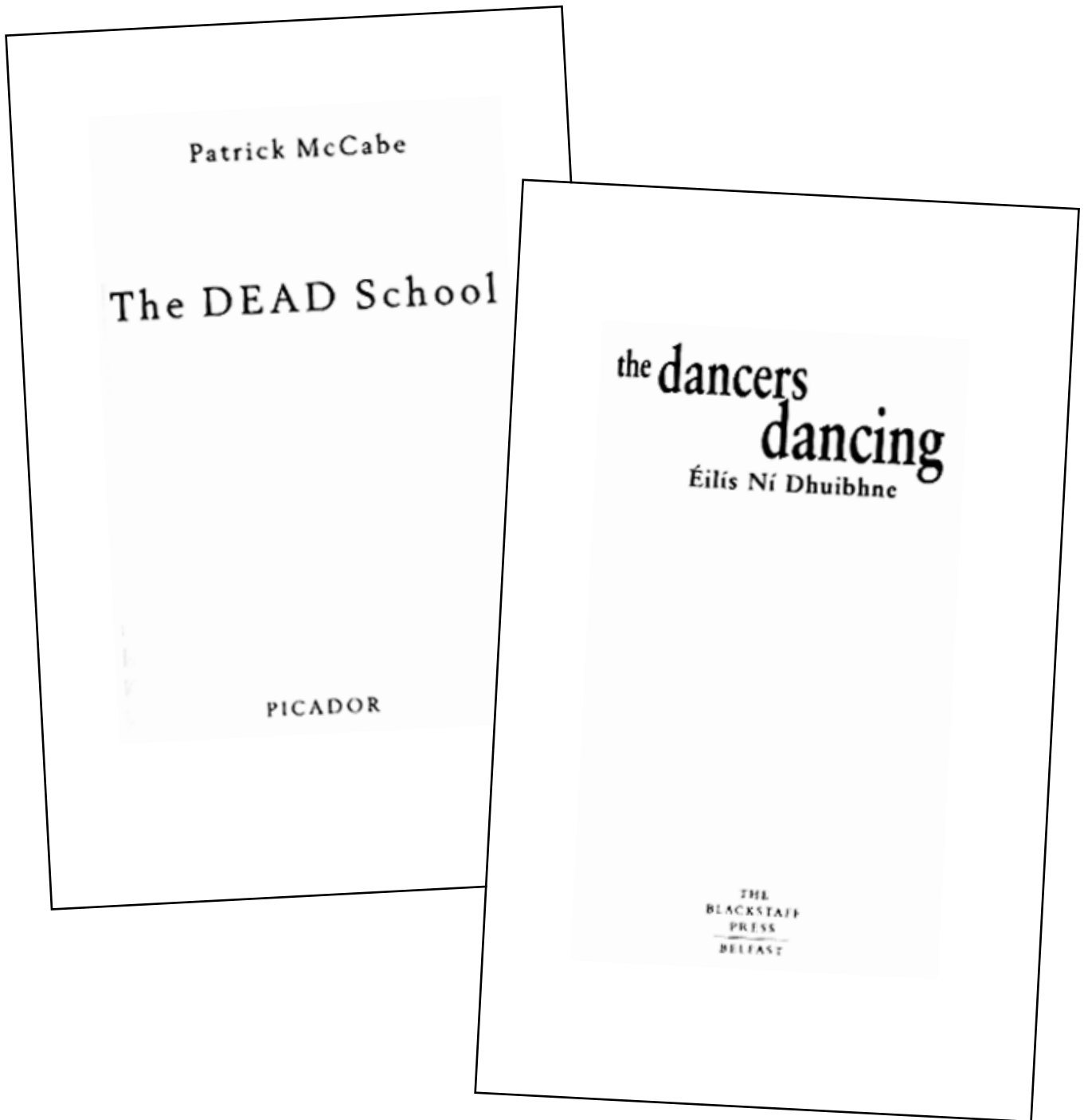
- *A newspaper account of the inquiry from a particular viewpoint with a particular target audience in mind*
- *A discussion essay on the refugee problem*
- *A narrative/dramatic script on the experience of being a refugee*
- *An argument for a popular magazine either for or against permitting refugees into the country*
- *A letter to a newspaper putting across a specific view on the issue.*



Activity 4 Space and lay-out

It is clear from the previous activity that spaces between words are fundamental in making writing comprehensible. The ideas of space and layout are important in coming to think of how texts make their meanings.

Consider the following two title pages of books. How do they differ in their impact? How are they similar?



What shape on paper would you associate with the following texts? Why do they have these specific shapes?

- *shopping list*
- *school report*
- *team selection*
- *a wedding invitation*
- *popular press report*
- *page in a serious journal*
- *a page in a children's picture book.*

Focusing on this aspect of text develops in students an important insight into how texts come to mean and have significance in society. The communicative messages in the design of any text need to be understood as having a serious social impact. In the light of the potential of PCs in the future (in the shape of desk-publishing software) this dimension of design will assume even greater significance.

④ *Some Perspectives on Spelling*

*'Do you spell it with a "V" or a "W"?' inquired the judge.
"That depends upon the taste and fancy of the speller, my Lord," replied Sam.
From Charles Dickens, Pickwick Papers*

Correctness in spelling
cannot be caught, it
must be taught!



There is a popular belief that Sam Weller's stance towards spelling has become common practice amongst students. Employers, academics and parents complain regularly about this deterioration in spelling and indicate it is symptomatic of the overall decrease in the standards of literacy of school leavers. Whatever the truth of the situation, this perception suggests that the issue of spelling merits some consideration by English teachers.

To approach the problem in the most effective manner some understanding of the linguistic and cultural factors which were and are significant for the condition in which English spelling is today would seem to be appropriate.

These are some of the relevant factors:

- Language is in a continual state of change; changes in spellings are a part of this and therefore will inevitably occur. What was previously unacceptable now becomes the norm. This does not imply that anything will do. A policy needs to be developed in schools re what is acceptable and not acceptable in the written texts. In general orthographic conventions and social expectations in public texts should be filled.
- Contemporary youth culture is dominated by the oral/aural/visual modes of communication and the presence of the written text has been minimalised. Today's youth does not in general respect the written word and becomes impatient with the challenge it offers. Consequently little

attention is paid to words in themselves; they are just rather awkward elements of communication, lacking in presence and interest.

- For many years the teaching of spelling was not given a high profile in English teaching. The emphasis was very much on achieving self-expression and effective communicability, both valuable and worthwhile objectives. However these need to be balanced with the study of language as a social semiotic system and the demands that this puts on the individual in the mode of expression used.
- The spelling and pronunciation patterns in English are irregular, i.e. the same letters can be pronounced in a variety of ways as the following humorous poem illustrates clearly:

Ough! A Phonetic Fancy

The baker-man was kneading dough
And whistling softly, sweet and lough.

Yet ever and anon he'd cough
As though his head were coming ough!

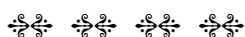
"My word!" said he, "but this is rough;
This flour is simply awful stough!"

He punched and thumped it through and through,
As all good bakers always dough!

"I'd sooner drive," said he, "a plough
Than be a baker, anyhough!"

Thus spoke the baker kneading dough;
But don't let on I told you sough!

W.T. Goodge



This variety in pronunciation and spelling arises from the complex history of the English language and the copious borrowings it made from other languages over the centuries.

It is in this challenging context that the spelling issue must be placed and therefore any simple, instant remedies should be suspect. Learning off decontextualised lists of spellings, as was done in the past, will assuredly not solve the problem; developing in students an interest in words, an understanding of how they work and the patterns they form is a more promising coherent approach. If mis-spelling is seen as the enemy then the only way to overcome it is to follow the old adage, 'If I am to defeat my enemy, I must learn about my enemy.'

The following are some strategies for developing students' ability to spell.

Resources

- Each student should have a good pocket dictionary.
- Each student should have an alphabetical notebook in which are written the particular words that cause difficulty for him or her. (An alternative is a notebook organised into graded sections: the beginning section of the notebook contains the words a student most frequently misspells, the next section the next common, and so on. Obviously both ideas could be contained with the same notebook.)
- A class spelling dictionary should be available and if possible an etymological dictionary.
- Any available I.T. programme would be of great potential.
- Arising from a suggestion made by Jim O'Donnell in his essay *Creating Information* (cf. Section B) a good idea would be for the teacher to make out the Top 20 list of misspellings in a class and concentrate on these for some time in various ways (crosswords, anagrams, word maps, word families, close procedures). Subsequently another list could be drafted.
- Try to develop a school policy towards the management of spelling so that the students experience a common strategy within all subject areas. Even the most vestigial policy of language across the curriculum can be most beneficial.

What are words? . . . Unpacking their secrets

- Words are arbitrary, conventional sound symbols for various things and experiences, e.g. there is no real reason why the sound of the word *table* should be identified with the object *table*; it could have been called anything else, as it is in Chinese, or Urdu, or Bengali.
- Likewise words are also conventional written symbols . . . they are an agreed code of graphic communication.
- Words differ from other codes of communication like mathematical symbols or computer languages in that they have a history, are culturally embedded and are in a continual state of flux of meanings depending on the context of their usage. Whereas $2 + 2 = 4$ will tend always to mean the same, the phrase, 'Please close the door' depends on its social context and the way it is said for its operative meanings to become clear.
- Students need to be shown that words have a history, are structured in certain ways and need to be used carefully and accurately if they are to fulfil their communicative purpose . . .

The history of words in English

The English language has developed over time and has drawn its vocabulary, its lexicon, from a wide range of linguistic sources; originally from Latin, Medieval French and Anglo-Saxon and laterally words from many more languages. So its vocabulary is very large and rich in meanings and shades of meanings. Studying the origin and development of words is called *etymology* and this can give a good insight into the particular character of words and how they came to be spelt as they are at present. Likewise studying the contemporary versions of English can also be of great benefit in raising students' awareness of words and their development, e.g. compare American English with Standard English or Hiberno-English.



Activity A *Comparing words of differing origins which have similar meanings*

Latin/Norman French	Anglo-Saxon
<i>amorous</i>	<i>loving</i>
<i>tempestuous</i>	<i>stormy</i>
<i>volume</i>	<i>book</i>
<i>ignite</i>	<i>light</i>
<i>revelation</i>	<i>show</i>

Students could be asked to characterise the kinds of words that emerged from the different sources and what they notice about the length and the spelling of the words. Subsequently they could be given the task of finding other paired words.



Activity B *Contrasting different versions of English*

When an American says ‘I just got a flat’ he/she means he/she has got a puncture in the car. If an Irish person says the same it generally means he/she has just got a place to live in.

There are many words which carry different meanings and exploring this difference can produce many worthwhile opportunities for focusing on different spellings and in general raising the students’ awareness of words in themselves.

Word Structure

This can be looked at in a variety of ways: each way can be helpful in giving students a better sense of how words are spelled.

1. Words are composed of units of sound (not necessarily units of meaning) called syllables. A syllable generally consists of either a vowel (a, e, i, o, u or equivalents, e.g. y) or a vowel and consonants (all the other letters in the alphabet besides a, e, i, o, u). Syllables can be composed of one letter e.g. *I*, or many letters e.g. *phone*.

For example the following words are one syllable words: *me, you, will, and, go, run, pull, tag, eye, I*.

Two syllable words: *today, begin, deny, copy, notebook, window*.

Three syllable words: *tomorrow, yesterday, computer, telephone*.

Four syllable words: *television, alternative, allocation*.



Activity A

The well known game of giving a large word to a class and asking the student to extract as many words as possible of varying amount of syllables is a useful exercise here, e.g. Make as many words of one/two/three syllables from the letters of the following words: each letter of the word can be used only in each word created.

Word: *incomprehensible . . . he, hen, pen, men, come, become, income, etc.*

Through exercises like this and any variations of it students should build up some awareness that the same syllables are used repeatedly in different combinations to make words. Knowing how a syllable is spelt in one word may enable one to spell it in another word . . . although this is not always the case as

we have seen earlier. Furthermore, students might notice or be shown that words are actually made by adding on other words. This leads on to the second aspect of word structure that is of relevance to the teaching of spelling.

2. Most words are composed of what is called a root or stem word to which other syllables are added to make other words.

Word Structure

- The main part of a word is called the 'root' or the 'stem'. This usually consists of a short word of one or two syllables, e.g. *love, do, come, give, page, time, nation*.
- These root words can be added onto in various ways to make other words, e.g. *lovely, re-do, become, forgive, paginate, timeless, international*.
- These additions, called affixes, to the root word come in many forms and carry out many functions.
- Affixes are of various kinds and are called by names that identify where they attach to the word or/and the role they play.
- The major names of these affixes are:
 - Prefixes: Added to the start of a word: *re, be, for, inter*
 - Suffixes: Added to the end of a word: *inate, less, ly*
 - Inflections: A form of suffix that points to the tense of a verb, e.g. call+ed=called: changes present tense to past time.

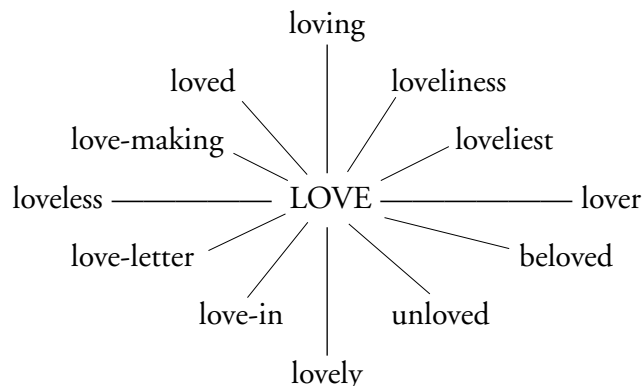
In the following list of words what function does the affix perform? What does it do to the meaning of the root word or how does it change its possible usage as a word?

Recover; rejoin; enlarge; belittle; bilateral

Approaching spelling with students might entail helping them to identify the root word and knowing how to spell it and also developing their awareness of how the affixes are spelled and how they might affect the usual spelling of a word.

The use of a *word-star* may be of benefit in this context showing how words are related in their spelling it may help to make the task of learning to spell accurately less formidable. Obviously consulting a dictionary in this context would be useful. In constructing a word-star students could be given a root-word and a list of possible affixes of all kinds and asked to proceed.

Exemplar of a Word-Star



- Students could be invited to add to the word-star.
- If thought useful students could be asked to identify the kind of word (noun, verb, adjective, adverb) each word in the star could be.
- This kind of practice can be most beneficial in building up the vocabulary of students.
- Another perspective on this would be to get students to think about how words go out of use and new words are created repeatedly. Students could be asked to list some words that appear to be dying out and some new words.

Spelling Rules

These are of limited use with students when used in a focused manner . . . even then in the haste and heat of writing they can be totally forgotten. However, in the cool appraisal of proof-reading periods, they might be of some benefit. Allied to the fact that the rules are beset with many exceptions makes this prescriptive approach suspect.

The following may be of some use:

- When a word ends in a final 'e' after a single consonant, this final 'e' is dropped if adding the suffix 'ing':
come → coming; give → giving; rage → raging.
- Double a final consonant if the word is pronounced as a short sound and ends in a consonant,
Run → running; chat → chatting; top → topping.
If the word has a long sound, e.g. *droop, drape*, the consonant is not doubled, e.g. *drooping, draped.*
- Double the final consonant if the stress in the word falls at the end of the word, but do not double the final consonant if the stress falls elsewhere:
Stress at end of word:
Omit . . . omitting, omitted
Instruct . . . instructing, instructed
Stress elsewhere:
Visit, visiting, visited
Offer, offering, offered
Exceptions:
words ending in l.
Travel . . . travelling
- The well-known rule I before E except after C is of limited application. It applies certainly to words like 'receive' and 'deceive' but is not valid in other cases, e.g. seize.

⑤ Paragraphing

The paragraph
is where writing
happens.



Effective writing is coherent: the words and ideas come in a sequence that is easy to follow and to understand. Furthermore there is a constant sense of forward movement towards a particular objective. Guided by logic, an argument leads to a conclusion; determined by cause and effect, a narrative unfolds to an outcome. There is an inevitability built into the process which makes the writing powerful and convincing. Skilful paragraphing facilitates this sense of movement and conviction.

Effective writing is also characterised by memorable details. These details are comprised of either relevant facts or appropriate references, either lively exemplars or interesting anecdotes, selected to give definite expression to the author's viewpoint. It is these details which engage the reader's imagination and sustain his or her interest. Well-shaped paragraphs provide the structure and focus for the selection and presentation of these desirable details. Ineffectual writing, writing which bores the reader, is usually disorderly and lacking in a sense of direction. There is no clear sequence of thought and there is constant repetition. Generalisations replace details and any details present are both random and inappropriate. It is the writer's lack of skill in writing paragraphs which causes most of these faults.

Amongst other things, all good writers are masters of paragraph writing in its varied forms. The paragraph is the essential building block of their work and each of their paragraphs will be carefully formed so that it creates comprehensible meaning in itself and also relates to the rest of the work.

Therefore in order to teach students to write well, teachers will need to focus frequently on the paragraph. They must seek to ensure that the students have a clear understanding of its structure, its modes of development and its central significance for their own writing. Finally it comes down to this fact: if students do not learn to write paragraphs they will not be able to compose much which is of interest either to themselves or to a reader.

Definition of a paragraph

A paragraph is a section of a composition in which one idea is presented in such a way that it establishes a comprehensible unit of meaning. A paragraph consists of one general statement supported by a series of detailed statements which amplify/develop the general statement. The general statement should be seen as a hold-all case whose contents need to be unpacked in order that its full weight of meaning can be realised.

The general statement in a paragraph is commonly known as the Topic Sentence, i.e. the sentence that states the subject of the paragraph.

A topic sentence should be composed of one statement about one subject, e.g.

In wintertime the sea is most threatening.

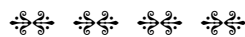
Here the subject is 'the sea': the statement is, that the writer finds it 'threatening'.

The topic sentence can occur anywhere in a paragraph but it is most usually found either at the beginning or the end. For students developing their writing skills teachers may find it useful initially to suggest that topic sentences should appear either at the beginning or the end of their paragraphs. As the students become more adept at paragraphing more freedom should be not only allowed, but encouraged.

Here is an exemplar of a simple, effective paragraph:

My first literary frisson came on home ground. There was an Irish history lesson at school which was in reality a reading of myths and legends. A textbook with a large type and heavy Celticized illustrations dealt with the matter of Ireland from the Tuatha de Danaan to the Norman Invasion. I can still see Brian Boru with his sword held high like a cross reviewing the troops at Clontarf. But the real imaginative mark was made with the story of the Dagda, a dream of harp music and light, confronting and defeating Balor of the Evil Eye on the dark fortress of Tory Island. Cuchullain and Ferdia also sank deep, those images of wound bathed on the green rushes and the armour clattering in the ford.

S. Heaney, *Mossbawn*



Students could be shown this paragraph and others (on an overhead) and requested to select the topic sentence in each one and list the supporting details.

Teaching Paragraphing Skills



Activity 1 *Differences between the general and the specific*

Since the concept of paragraphing depends on an understanding of the differences between general statements and specific/detailed statements it will be necessary to frequently highlight this difference. This can be done in a variety of ways.

- Ask for general words and specific words on a topic, e.g.
Language / Irish; Animal / dog; Tree / oak; Woman / Deirdre.
- Ask for general phrases and specific phrases on a topic,
e.g. *Getting dressed / putting on my shoes;*
I travelled far / I drove five hundred kilometres;
Weather affects people / My mother is always bad-tempered in the cold weather.

Each set of examples should be analysed to highlight the distinction.

- Give examples of both general and specific sentences in the same context.

General	Specific
<i>The weather is bad.</i>	<i>It rained heavily on Monday</i>
<i>Many people enjoy sport.</i>	<i>John loves football</i>
<i>The environment is severely damaged.</i>	<i>The Lee is polluted with silage</i>

- Then ask for examples of both general and specific statements in the context of such topics as: *Ireland; the Future; Fear; School, etc.*

This work can be quite successfully done in pairs or groups but it should be a written exercise.



Activity 2 *The topic sentence*

When it is felt that the distinction is reasonably well understood a further necessary refinement can be introduced relative to the general statement or topic sentence in a paragraph.

A topic sentence must be a limited general statement: it must be possible to develop the topic adequately in the space of a paragraph. Some general statements would need a whole composition or book to do justice to them, e.g.

- *Professionalism in sport is a welcome development.*
- *Fundamentalism is a threat to freedom of thought.*
- *Technology dehumanises the work-place.*

These statements are not focused, topic sentences. They are too expansive in their meaning. These are the kind of sentences frequently found in students' writing which lead them into the quick-sands of repetition and vagueness because there is no sense of specific direction in the sentence. All these sentences need to be reduced; the following versions are more useful.

- *Professional sportsmen have more time to train.*
- *The threat of violence from fanatics makes individuals fear for their lives.*
- *Many workers now feel their skills are no longer needed.*

Each of these sentences can be quite adequately developed within the space of a paragraph because the focus of thought is narrower.

It is to be expected that students will experience some difficulties in framing good topic sentences. This task challenges them to think out their ideas clearly and therefore it is hard work. So, more exercises will be constantly required to ensure their thought remains sharply focused. Obviously this is better done in the context of a particular class's work relative to the topic they are considering or the text they are reading. The following are models of the kind of exercise which might prove of value.

1 Ask the students to evaluate the suitability of the following statements as Topic Sentences:

- The oceans of the world are irretrievably polluted.*
- Politics has lost all credibility in this country.*
- Great leaders are rare figures in history.*
- Newgrange is an impressive place.*
- A mountain-walk is exhilarating.*
- Cities in Ireland lack both character and design.*
- A sunset in Connemara is memorable.*
- To be a great writer demands a life of dedication and sacrifice.*

*Guilt can unfortunately blight the life of many individuals.
A good play is consistently exciting.*

2 Students (working in pairs/groups) are asked to produce a list of details about a specific topic. Then once the list is complete they are expected to write a topic sentence that encompasses most of the details listed. Possible topics are:

*Lunchtime in school
The view from my bedroom window
My young sister
A walk by the sea in winter
Television advertising*

In relation to the topic ‘The view from my bedroom window’ a list like this might be produced:

Cars, traffic lights, people rushing past, high rise flats, tiny gardens, the dark river.

A topic sentence to encompass most of these might be:

The view from my window reveals an unpleasant aspect of city life.

The resultant paragraph might be:

The view from my window reveals an unpleasant aspect of city life. People hurry past, while cars wait with engines revving for traffic lights to change. The tall blocks of flats and the tiny gardens add to the sense of tension. Even the river, flowing past in eddies and swirls suggesting the presence of a different rhythm to life, seems to be chafing at the quay walls.

Again this exercise is best done in relation to the specific work of a class. This particular exercise has much potential in relation to the analysis of any text. Students could be asked to discover certain details about a character or scene in a text and then subsequently make a focused statement about what they have discovered. It is in this way that the development of language skills in a meaningful context for the student occurs and the integration of language and literature becomes a reality.

Shaping the Paragraph

But a good paragraph just does not happen when all the elements have been assembled; it has to be constructed and shaped into an effective pattern. (It’s like having all the parts of a jigsaw that can be put together in a number of ways to make various pictures.) There are several aspects of paragraphs of which students should be aware. Knowing these should help them to write more easily in well-shaped paragraphs.

- The topic sentence will frequently have in-built a directive for the most suitable supporting details.
- These details may consist of reasons, causes, results, components, steps or facts.
- These details can be organised in the paragraph in a variety of ways, e.g. description, narration, examples, factual list, explanation, analysis, contrast or analogy.

Teaching these aspects of paragraphing

1 Finding the directive within the topic sentence.

Show sentences such as the following and point to the obvious directive:

- *I hate Mondays for a number of reasons.* (Give the reasons)
- *The outcome of the accidents caused problems.* (What were the problems?)
- *This country has some remarkable contrasts.* (What contrasts?)

The students could be asked to suggest which mode of organisation could be used for each of the selection of details. Would it be a list, a description, a story?

2 Ask the students to find the directive in each of these:

- *I dislike spiders.*
- *Her fear of heights was the result of a recent accident.*
- *It is easy to get fit.*
- *His project was exemplary.*

Students could now be asked to write a series of topic sentences on given subjects. In each case the directive should also be written.

3 Give the following sentences to the students and ask them to decide in what form the paragraph should be developed.

- *My first date was embarrassing.* (narrative)
- *The teachers in school fall into three categories.* (analysis)
- *False promises and politicians seem to co-exist.* (explanation)
- *Last night's storm frightened me.* (description)
- *The motor-car is an evil invention.* (explanation)
- *Homeless people are on the increase.* (list of facts)
- *No great person has escaped criticism.* (examples)
- *Towns in Ireland are losing their distinctive character.* (explanation)

Students should now be given a range of tasks in this context. It will certainly take them a while to grasp the concepts outlined here. It will take much longer to actually put them into practice in writing.

Writing is a craft and, like any craft, it is only developed by the actual doing of it. A person learns to write by writing. If the students are to take ownership of the concepts outlined above they will only do so if they are repeatedly challenged and invited to write in a meaningful way in paragraphs of their own making and remaking.

Connectives

Richard Wagner, the composer, talking about music remarked, 'The art of composition is the art of transition.' This equally applied to writing either within the confines of a paragraph or in something larger like a story or an argument.

Sometimes when students write in paragraphs their initial attempts read like a shopping list.

I greatly enjoy the summer. The days are long and sunny if I'm lucky. There is no school. I can spend the long days as I wish. I go to the sea with friends. I like to swim and surf. I like to read.

Coherence and Movement. This 'paragraph' could be given more coherence and a sense of movement by the use of what are called transitional words or connectives.

I greatly enjoy the summer *because* if I'm lucky, the days are sunny *and* there is no school. I can spend the long days as I wish. *Frequently* I go to the sea with friends *where* I like to swim and surf. *Sometimes* I read for hours either hidden in the garden or sprawled on my bed.

Connectives are the simple supple joints of a paragraph; without them it will not move easily. Connectives make clear the relationship between the sentences and define the way the flow of thought is going. Students need to know the range of connectives that are available to them.

Connectives are perhaps best presented in a series of categories as follows:

- TIME: *then; now; since; afterwards; before; sometimes*
- SPACE: *here; there; above; below*
- CONTRAST: *however; nevertheless; instead; on the other hand*
- SEQUENCE: *firstly, secondly; again; moreover; and*
- RESULTS: *consequently; therefore; thus; so*
- EXAMPLES: *like; just as*
- LIKENESS: *as; in comparison*
- CONCLUSION: *so; thus*

To teach an awareness of these, it would be a useful exercise to undertake a series of close procedures on paragraphs where all or some of the connectives have been omitted. These should be taken from a series of different genres so that the students will see that certain kinds of writing tend to repeat, but not exclusively, the same connectives. An overhead is the simplest way of doing this exercise with a class.

Finally, students will experience difficulty in writing paragraphs, and drown the reader in vagueness, if they offend against any of these principles:

- Maintain the same viewpoint throughout. Keep the subject of the sentences in the same person. Do not within a paragraph change from 'I think' to 'One thinks' and then to 'We think'.
- Stay with the tense of the verb you start with wherever possible.
- Write active rather than passive sentences.

These three principles can be summed up in a sentence:

Be consistent in person, tense and action.

Students should be actively encouraged to look at their own writing with these principles in mind. Awareness of these will make the essential act of revising and rewriting their paragraphs more meaningful and rewarding.

3. *Developing the Art and Craft of Rewriting*

'Only the hand that erases can write the true thing'

Meister Eckhart

Commentary on students' texts

The *Teacher Guidelines* (p.16) suggest that a worthwhile way for developing language awareness and a more reflective approach to language use is for students to consider their own work as texts for commentary and analysis. This work must not be seen as simply a proof-reading exercise devoted to the correction of misspellings and poor punctuation: this would be a highly reductionist stance to take and would militate against the more sophisticated language awareness being sought after in this approach.

To offset this danger certain stances and ways of looking at texts need to be set up with the students based on their knowledge of genre, register and linguistic appropriateness. The approach should emphasise what is actually present in the text, not in an evaluative manner but just accepting the text as an attempt to make meaning, and reflecting on how that meaning was made by the use of language and genre. The following questions should prove useful in helping students to think about any texts and in developing a vocabulary for commenting on written texts in a general way:

1. What is the overall impact of this text?
2. What is this text trying to do? What is its purpose? To inform, narrate, persuade, entertain or some combination of these?
3. How does it do it?
4. What specific genre does it employ?
5. How does it use the genre?
6. How effective is this use?
7. How is the language used to achieve the effects?
8. Are there parts of the text that you think might require some further developments?
9. What aspects of the writing did you find the most effective?
10. What aspects of the writing need some revision?

Consider the following text from these perspectives:

Note: In all the following students' texts the original has largely being left untouched. Errors in structure, syntax, punctuation and spellings went uncorrected.

TEXT A

JUST AFTER SUNRISE

Just after sun-rise the sun-light glistened on the harbour waters in the early morning. Maria seemed to breathe in the newness of her surroundings, sharing the air with the child within her. Her black Mediterranean hair cascaded over her thick winter coat and her dark skin seemed pale, foreign to the crispness of the New York early spring morning.

Fear embraced her and she stepped on dry land, but she was determined to succeed for her unborn child. She would never return home – she was not welcome there, instead she would succeed in this foreign country; this unknown city.

Seven years later, she now experienced happiness she did not know existed. The Italian neighbourhood had accepted her and her daughter, regardless of circumstances. The days were spent creating beautiful porcelain dolls – a trade as natural to her as breathing and caring for her beautiful little girl – the centre of her universe.

Some other mothers marvelled at their unbreakable bond, Maria's undying love for her daughter returned with the child's unquestionable adoration for her mother – they were bound together with love. Maria still young, felt her life already complete. The heat of the summer meant the whole neighbourhood had flocked to the lake nearby that Sunday afternoon. As the children frolicked in the cool waters, the moms watched from a shore while many other relaxed grateful for the chance after the long week had near but drained the energy from them.

The heat of the sun, lapsed as the afternoon wore on, and Maria became less anxious about her daughter in the water, considering the older children were nearby.

Suddenly, a familiar cry shook her alert. She rushed to the shore or the lake and searched for her child, the seconds seeming like hours but she was no-where in sight. In the near distance she could see that there was an unusually commotion among the children in the water. They began to scream for help, their shrills causing panic. Maria with-out thinking, clutched the locket around her neck which held a small image of her child inside it and began to wade in the water towards the crowd but suddenly she stopped. The crowd were coming ashore in total silence. In the arms of one boy she saw a small limp body and she knew instantly it was her little girl.

The tiny body was laid down on the shore of small puddles and sand and Maria stood nearby in shocked, still clutching the locket as a crowd quickly gathered.

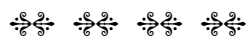
The girl lay peacefully, looking as though asleep. The sunlight reflected her innocence in her face, the water glistened on her small sweet features, which were very pretty and simple. The long wet curly dark hair, had spread on the sand next to her, the tresses framing her sleeping face. The loss was unbearable to Maria. She refused to enter the daylight after the funeral working instead alone at night. Each face she created was the same, each had the image of her lost child. The image was so obvious, each had different colour eyes and curly long hair, each with different beautiful clothes, but each and every one was an attempt to bring back the part of her that was missing, wrenched from her, with the death of her little girl.

Near morning by candle-light, she would carefully package the dolls and then go to bed. The light of day did not grace her dark hair and sallow complexion

for years, her grief prevented this. This was how she survived night after night, in complete despair and loss.

She awoke one morning to an unusual smell. She went to kitchen, now a workshop and as she had done years before. She clutched the locket without a thought. The doors opened and a cloud of smoke enveloped her, causing her to fall to the ground, gasping for air. She looked up into the room, to see flames destroying everything.. Her few possessions were beyond salvation, and her dolls, her beautiful dolls had been blackened by the smoke, and lay destroyed, their ringlets singed, their tiny gowns ablaze.

She ran out into the street, her shocked neighbours tried to comfort this distressed woman, many not even recognising her. Her black flaring tresses had turned grey and dull. The sun-light blinded her eyes confusing her even more, while highlighting her pale almost pure white skin. The image of the burning doll, flashed in her mind as well as her little girl as she had lay by the lake shore as she came towards that very place. The early morning sun reflected off the water, which lay still – almost rigid except for the gentle lapping of the small waves. She stood and stared at her complexion in the water not recognising the old woman that she saw before her. Gently she kissed the locket in her hand as she realised she had no reason to live. With the sun gently warming her near dead skin she allowed her self to slip into the dark depths of the lake to join her daughters and felt that happiness once more.



Commentary

This text aims at telling a melodramatic story with much emphasis on a sense of hopeless love and loss. It is intended to both entertain and move the reader by a series of awful events that the main character endures.

It has an effective narrative shape, with beginning, middle and end well defined. Furthermore it suggests a general location and context reasonably well.

Its choice of genre is reminiscent of the kind of tear-jerker story which are important ingredients of a range of popular magazines and which contribute significantly to the episodes of television soap-operas.

This story in an outline way has included many of the elements of such a popular narrative form:

- Characters are stereotypes: beautiful and vulnerable young woman with young adorable child coping heroically with injustice and loneliness
- Action more incidental than causal and organic: haphazard events control the story action; little character development or interaction evident
- Sensational happenings predominate: desertion, emigration, accidental drowning and suicide.

While the story is well formed and adheres well to the genre it loses impact by trying to cover so much human experience in so little space. It needs to be developed either by lengthening some episodes (making it more into a novel), or alternatively choosing one moment and through a series of flashbacks

giving greater intensity to the moment until the final event takes place (making it more into a short story). If it is to be left as it is then some more details about how the characters looked, how their ordinary life was lived would enrich the story and give it more rhythm and impact. Continual high emotion becomes tiresome and unconvincing; better to go for surprise and contrast in events and feelings. There may be less fun in writing about the ordinary but it can be done in a way that raises tension and expectation and therefore contributes significantly to the overall story. The actual use of language here is most typical of this genre. Many cliches and emotional overstatements are present, e.g. *unbreakable bonds, unquestionable adoration, small, sweet face, pretty and simple*. The writing would be more effective if instead of these cliches more detailed presentations were given or some metaphors introduced.

By focusing on Paragraph 1 some points about developing a more effective approach to writing can be indicated.

The sunlight glistened on the harbour waters in the early morning. Maria seemed to breathe in the newness of her surroundings, sharing the air with the child within her. Her black Mediterranean hair cascaded over her thick winter coat and her dark skin seemed pale, foreign in the crispness of the New York spring morning.

In this one paragraph there is a mix of location, action, and personal description with little sense of either pattern or organisation. Some sense of an orderly progression with a purpose could be asked for, time, place, person/action. Here is the same rewritten with that sense of progress in mind:

In the early spring morning the sunlight glistened on the waters of New York harbour. Standing on the deck of the ship, Maria, with her black Mediterranean hair cascading over her thick winter coat, seemed pale, foreign to the crispness of the morning. She breathed in the newness of her surroundings, sharing the air with the child within her.

Writing is a kind of free-fall that you then go back to edit and shape.



Even within this first paragraph there are many areas of developments to be indicated but it is preferable to concentrate on the obvious problem which is one of syntax and paragraph structure. This student has an abundance of ideas and a ready fluency with words; she needs help in organising them in the most effective way. The student could be asked to rewrite her story attempting to improve its impact by applying some of the guidelines given, particularly aiming for a sense of progress in the syntax and paragraphs and the elimination of cliches. (Quite clearly using this student's work in this way can be used as a general teaching point about writing narratives for the rest of the students in a class.)

TEXT B

JUST AFTER SUNRISE

It wasn't a pretty sight. My tired, angry, messy looking parents shouting and

screaming at me. All I knew was that it was just after sunrise when I arrived home, and as loud as my parents were roaring I couldn't hear them, my mind was objecting to the night before.

It was 7 o'clock when I met my friends on Saturday night. It was my first "real" party and I felt a nervous tingling in my stomach. It wasn't a nervous-scared it was a nervous – what do I do now? kind of feeling.

We arrived at the party at 7.30 p.m. When I walked in the party-room door, an overwhelming feeling of uneasiness came over me. The warm air made my head swirl and the sultry smell of sweat seemed if I was breathing with a pillow held over my face. To me the music was nothing but a constant noise, not one note distinguishable from the other.

As I pushed my way through the sea of people my eyes met upon a familiar face. Her pupils were dilated and she seemed a little more vivacious than her normal self but it was a familiar face nonetheless. Her walk towards me was nowhere near genteel and as she pressed herself against me she slipped something cool into my hand.

It was a small aluminium packet, the foil caught the glare of the disco lights and shot darts of lights at my eyes "Currystal" she whispered into my ear, ruffling the r's lightly off the roof of her mouth. Inside the packet was a small purple pill, Mescaline, I later learned.

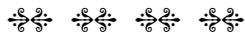
The pill had no taste and I swallowed it with ease. After a while my mouth tasted differently, as if my saliva had thickened. And my legs . . . my legs felt jittery, as if they wanted to tap along with the music as if tapping along with the music would relieve them and make them feel like legs again. I was starting to trip.

The music now seemed to fade in and fade out in syllables of three and when I spoke the words streamed musically from my mouth and in front of my eyes.

"Currystal" I said aloud, even though it was spoken from myself and when I said it I gave it a crusty bangled sound like an old blues song. I mumbled to people I knew but I refused to hold a conversation with anyone. I left puzzled faces in my wake as I drifted along. I could see more things than the eye of man was meant to behold.

Hours zoomed by like minutes and suddenly bang, cold turkey. Too abruptly I felt sunk, humble and inferior. The colour went from my eyes and I was on a merry-go-round that was going too fast. I felt dizzy, nauseous, revolted . . .

"Are you listening to me?" Reality check. I was lying down in a room which felt vaguely familiar and two deranged people looking at me. "Well?" My father inquired. "Currystal". I replied. An explosion went off in my brain . . . Then White.



Commentary

This student has a sense of narrative form beyond the conventional and the linear: he uses the circular recollection structure of present, past, present. The opening and closing paragraphs form parentheses around the central dramatic action.

The creation of the two worlds of adolescence is reflected in the narrative structure. The contrast between the peripheral world of the parents and the centrality of sexuality and peer approval in the teenage world is presented both dramatically and structurally.

The creation of a sustained narrative voice is most effectively done.

The selection of words is frequently quite poetic . . . especially in the attempt to describe the 'trip'. The exploration of the physicality of words and the use of some arresting metaphors are noticeable. The selection of detail for achieving some dramatic effects is also of note.

Possible areas of development:

- Locating of the narrative in a sense of time and place
- Fuller description of the characters encountered
- More exploration of perspective of feelings and experience
- Reconsideration of the closure
- Consideration of what kind of story is being composed here. Short story, moral fable, teenage magazine anecdote?
- What actually is the purpose of the narrative? What impact would the writer like to achieve? Some of the possibilities are: fear, sympathy, issuing a warning, revealing a dilemma, exploring a problem, searching for reasons, any combination of these.

Frank O'Connor re-wrote
Guests of the Nation 25
times before he was
satisfied with it.



TEXT C

MY OWN PLACE

The toilet seat was still warm. This was certainly a change from yesterday's episode when he left the seat up and wet. How is it humanly possible to miss a crater of a toilet bowl?

I've accepted that the used cotton buds was an accident. A temporary memory lapse, but he knows what I will do should the incident reoccur. It doesn't matter that much today anyway because the toilet seat brightened my morning.

Sigfried has learned over the past two years that here silence is a virtue that got lost outside the great walls of infinity. This obviously means that we, on the inside, take to whimpering, wailing and whining at every available and

convenient moment.

Sigfried and I arrived here on the same evening. Both on similar charges. Both of us learned that society has no place for those who behave in such an outrageous manner.

So now both of us live here in a comfortable box with pretty idyllic green costumes. We wear rubber lace-less shoes which also act as an alarm system for security. They squeaked constantly!! Even whilst breathing. The shoes prevented suicide – a place we were driven to occasionally.

My friend Sigfried and I are unique. We have teamed up to provide mutual understanding and escape from the other side.

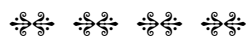
On his good days Sigfried is tall and on his bad days is stooped. He can make men from newspapers faster than I, that's a remarkable feat in itself. As thirty-seven he still has a problem expressing himself to others, but I understand fully. He really can't help being dumb, that is, physically unable to speak.

I was framed as was Sigfried, but not of the same crime. That fact is purely coincidental. We both discovered that we have much in common, each of us having led two and even three separate lives.

I feel that everyone should have someone, Sigfried was an ideal candidate for friendship as I was able to relay all my problems to him and unearth the bare necessities from him.

The words "lunatic" and "schizophrenic" are used too frequently. I prefer mentally unstable while Sigfried my other half prefers eccentric. We, or should I say that be I feel that the terms "hysteria" and "psychosis" are uncalled for as I (or we) are made to feel like deranged mad scientists.

Frank Crow once said, "Roses are red, violets are blue, I'm a schizophrenic, and so am I". That's how I feel, Sigfried does not agree, but that's an on going argument I have with myself day in day out in here.



Commentary

This text makes a strong imaginative impact. It consists of a series of short scenes related through context and avoids conventional narrative structures. Nevertheless, as a text it has all the qualities needed for the short story genre. It has a spare, tense quality about it which stays with the reader after the text has been read. It has a remarkable cohesion achieved by a sustained tone and voice, unity of viewpoint and continually surprising changes in perspective and narrative action. There is a dramatic immediacy within the narration that comes from the writer's ability to choose particular details that brings the experience being explored very much alive. The quiet, controlled intensity of the relationship between the speaker and Siegfried gives a real edge to the narrative; one isn't quite sure

when it is going to snap.

There is a sense of ‘hidden depths beneath’; if conflict can arise over the toilet seat and cotton buds what might occur over some more explicitly serious issues? Furthermore the narrative has many gaps which invite the imagination in, wondering about what exactly did happen and whether it was real or imagined. The text reads and looks like entries in a journal or a selection of observation notes that a professional of some kind might make in such a situation. As well there is a sense of the narrative being plucked out of a continuing story. There is no sense of either beginning or ending in the formal narrative sense. One is eavesdropping on the stream of thoughts in the speaker’s mind.

Areas for Development

In many ways perhaps this text may be best left alone. It achieves what it apparently set out to do: to tell a story which frightens and intrigues. There might be a case made for changing the occasional phrase and ensuring that each one actually contributes to the narrative. The last two paragraphs might also be looked at again. Perhaps they say too much, make unnecessary statements which lower the tension and make explicit what might have been better left implicit. Finally there might be a case for encouraging the writer to go for a more powerful moment of insight (Joyce’s ‘epiphany’) . . . but this is a matter of opinion and taste.

TEXT D

ANIMAL EXPERIMENTS DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD

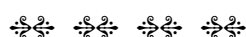
In an iron prison, bare and cold, a little, once timid and beautiful rabbit writhes in fear and agony, each movement shooting bolts of fresh pain coursing through her little mutilated body. Her infants lie dead around her, their bodies frozen in eternal rest only their coats are proof of the horrendous onslaught they were forced to endure. She knows that soon she’ll join them, but first the rest of her shiny, soft coat will be plucked from her body and an acidy burning spray or liquid will mar her innocent being. No help is offered, no comfort is given only the cold, terrifying truth is seen.

Almost every 10 minutes an animal is mutilated, burned, scarred or killed. Almost every 10 minutes an innocent life is taken in the name of vanity. Every bit of make-up we use, every time we wash out hair, every time we use sprays an animal has died for us. If we only take a minute to think about it, a life can be spared, not only is an animal killed but a bit of us is to. Our hair weakens and breaks, our faces wrinkled and dry out. This only proves that no matter how many animals are killed, the products will never be safe. Most products carry the sign “CFC’s” in order to keep the ozone but what good is the ozone if no animals are left here to enjoy it.

A few years ago my sister’s friend found a tiny rabbit in a field behind a cosmetics company, its coat hairless and its body was burned out, cut and near death. She had no idea what happened to it, but she knew that the tiny, gentle

creature was dying so she brought it to the Vet's, where my sister worked. The vet was called and pronounced it dead. After an autopsy and tests the Vet believed that the rabbit had undergone cosmetic tests. When the Company was approached they simply said that they don't experiment on animals. 4 months later they shut down and left, it was rumoured that the Government Health Officials had found a lab with mutilated animals locked in caged.

Why do we use this crap when deep down we know that animals have died for it? Why do we insist on inflicting this kind of torture on innocent lifes? What have those timid, harmless creatures done to deserve this abuse.



Commentary

- An attempt at a persuasive speech or article taking a specific stand against experimentation with animals. Shows an outline sense of the necessary shape, tone and popular register.
- Opening achieves some dramatic and emotional impact by focusing on sensational details.
- Uses repetition of phrases and sentence structure for cumulative emphasis.
- Shows some fluency.
- Shows some awareness of audience in the tone and style.

Areas for Development

- Appropriateness of register: in the first paragraph there is uncertainty about tone and word selection. Such phrases as *eternal rest*, *soon she will join them*, *terrifying truth*, do not fit easily into the general orientation of the paragraph. The syntax and the structure of the sentences in this paragraph need some attention.
- The use of slang in the final paragraph is also an interesting discussion point. Does it strengthen or weaken the impact of the conclusion?
- Overall coherence and linking of paragraphs. No obvious link words or phrases evident. Students could be requested to insert these.
- Paragraph structure needs consideration. In the second paragraph a number of key ideas are bundled in together, e.g. Tests are useless: CFCs are another problem: the products actually damage us. None of these ideas are properly stated, developed or linked into a coherent pattern of thought.
- Conclusion does not appear to be built on or emerge obviously from points previously made.
- While the point of view taken emerges it would be a guide for the writer to actually state the thesis being asserted and build the composition with that end in mind.
- Persuasion usually calls for action . . . a more explicit statement on the desired outcome would be a more effective closure.
- Context of the writing not defined.

TEXT E

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE IRISH

Firstly I would like be start off and say that I'm proud to be Irish and of our wonderful country Ireland but quite frankly in the eyes of others countries not

all admittedly but quite a few. We are a shower of backward idiots.

Take the British for example not so long ago the English Grand National was a shambles as far as the organisers were concerned with Jockeys flying off half strangled in the starting line and horses unseating riders the whole thing was in chaos. After the event a well know paper stated "Even a backward little country like Ireland could run the event better". This made a lot of Irish people's blood boil and the person received death threats warning him not to set foot on Irish soil. But should we ask ourselves the question "ARE WE A BACKWARD NATION?" If you took the time out to look at Ireland and her many problems, you may well think that the answer is "Yes".

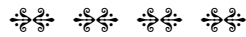
Take our roads for example they are an absolute joke, dirt-tracks is a more appropriate name or term to use. They are an absolute disgrace with potholes the size of craters in them and people are actually forced to drive on them. The Government are improving the road network in Ireland slowly but all they are doing, in reality is building big highways which in turn are destroying our beautiful countryside and leaving the ordinary country roads go to rack and ruin. People that are forced to use these roads are constantly complaining that these cars are being damaged and it is costing them a lot of hard earned money to fix them up again. But these people have a point.

My second point is on our extremely high unemployment rate, out to a country with a population of 3^{1/2} million we are faced with a staggering high employment total of just under three hundred thousand people. Ireland as a country has one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe, I would put this down mainly to the fact that we are too dependent on other countries for financial support or creating industries. These are only some of the points which might make you look at Ireland more closely. Now it is time to say some positive things about being Irish.

One of the major feats that Ireland is renowned for is that we are an extremely easygoing, friendly race of people, which you must agree is hard to come by this day in age. If you have ever been fortunate enough to travel abroad then it truly heartwarming to be treated like royalty. On some occasions when we Irish are confused with the English We might get treated rather abruptly but it is a nice surprise when you announce that you are Irish and the attitude changes completely. The Americans have the greatest love for Ireland in my opinion than anybody else including some of us Irish. They celebrate St. Patrick's day with us, which is an amazing spectacle, extremely big parade, everybody dressed up, as leprechauns or paddy's and green rivers flowing wherever one cares to look. The powerful American President, Bill Clinton, has a special place in his heart for Ireland also. He gave great assistance to the peace talks last year with his wife Hillary, Ireland comes very high up on their list of priorities. It warms my heart to see for such a small nation that we have a huge powerful country of devoted people looking at us through green tinted spectacles.

My next and final point about Ireland is our beautiful scenery which some of us take for granted. I didn't realise or appreciate that beauty of the Irish

countryside until I spent a week on holiday. Everywhere you looked nothing but roads or cramped estates. Car zooming everywhere and nobody would even bid each other the time of day. It was only after this encounter that I realised how beautiful and unique Ireland is and that it should be kept that way. I hope you have enjoyed my essay. “What’s it like to be Irish” and remember we might be a backward nation but I wouldn’t change it for the world.



Commentary

There is an energy and honesty about this text that makes it readable. The writer has a broad concern about the topic and is able to produce a series of appropriate anecdotes and references to support whatever viewpoint is being adopted or point being made. There is an outline attempt at an appreciative and balanced overview of the topic, itemising the good and bad points about Ireland. There is some sense, if rather ill-defined, of an audience and a direct appeal is made to this audience.

Areas for Development

- Organise the text in a more coherent and cohesive manner, focusing on paragraph structure and the link words between paragraphs.
- Within paragraphs itemise the key sentence and the mode of development to be used.
- Decide on a specific genre and match tone and register to audience.
- Decide on specific point of view and select and organise materials to present and support the chosen viewpoint.
- Eliminate contradictory statements.

TEXT F

SPARE THE ROD AND SPOIL THE CHILD

One often asks themselves how true is this saying “Spare the rod and spoil the child”. Some think that it is true and that a good ‘whack’ of the stick would do a child all the good in the world. However others tend to disagree and they believe that the rod is not needed in bringing up a child properly.

However I believe that the rod should be avoided as much as possible I think that a parent may tend to take all his/her anger out on the child in beating it and that a child could well become injured as a result of a beating from a hot-tempered parent.

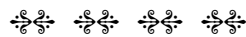
However on the other hand is the parent that doesn’t punish the child at all. This is very wrong and serious for the child. The child may actually come to blame the parents for not punishing them in later years.

Sparing the rod does not spare the child. A child could be punished in many ways without using the rod. However the rod could be kept as an added safeguard a threat of a beating from the rod does come in very handy from time to time.

Some very old faithfuls as regards forms of punishment are stopping the pocket money, no television, being grounded or a good old scolding. These are very effective ways of punishment, believe me. I know, and one need not resort to the rod. A child often would in later years respect a parent mostly if the parent did not have to resort to violence when punishing him/her.

I can still remember the time when I broke my mothers favourite vase. It was of sentimental value because it had be given to her by her mother who had in turn received it from her mother. However I was fooling around and I knocked over the vase. My mother was furious. I was so sorry for knocking it and I told my mother it was an accident. However my mother did not beat me but she did stop my pocket money for a few weeks. I still do not know to the day how she restrained from beating me, but I respect her all the more for it. I was more careful insider the house afterwards.

Don't take a bad day at the office out on your child. Use the rod as little as possible. There are many effective ways of punishing a child and these ways do not spoil the child. Sparing the rod does not spoil the child as long as you are punishing the child when it is necessary.



Commentary

- Attempts to take an overview of the topic; seeks to present both sides of the argument.
- Attempts to explore the implications of the two positions.
- Achieves some sense of structure, two viewpoints indicated and some compromise between them finally advocated.
- Keeps the focus on the topic.
- Shows some awareness of the need to use link words to achieve coherence.
- Knows about the need to paragraph.
- A vestigial sense of a personal voice is evident occasionally.

Areas of Development

- Overall thought structure needs to be clarified and developed mainly by the introduction of more evidence by way of illustrations, references and anecdotes.
- Paragraph organisation needs detailed attention; there are many assertions made which remain undeveloped either by analysis or examples.
- Actual intended audience and genre are difficult to identify. (Consider the appeal in the last paragraph.)
- Length of sentences and syntax needs attention.
- Most of the problems that this student has are exemplified in the third paragraph of the text:

However on the other hand there is the parent that doesn't punish the child at all. This is very wrong and serious for the child. The child may actually come to blame the parents for not punishing them in later years.

- Three statements with little sense of coherence between them.
- No sense of paragraph structure.
- No development of the statements evident.
- Uncertainty about agreements (The child . . . them).
- Unnecessary words and phrases: However; at all; very wrong; actually.

4. *A Note on English and IT*

There can be no doubt that at present, and increasingly in the future, the subject English will have to face up to the challenges and the opportunities coming from the contemporary revolution in technology. Nowadays students can come from homes in which the PC is a part of the household equipment and already in many schools within a range of subject areas, access to the computers is seen as an integral part of the learning experience. It is unlikely that such students will be patient with modes of reading and writing which are limited to the laboriously written word or to texts which do not avail of the potential of the multi-media facilities. Even if students have no access to PC at home it will be most unlikely that the school of the immediate future will not have access to one for every student across all subjects.

It may not be the English teacher's role to teach the students to be computer literate. But it will be an integral part of the English teacher's role to use the computer in a way that fosters literacy skills and equips the student to comprehend and compose in new genres that the resources of the PC are making possible, e.g. e-mail, faxes, web-sites, desktop publishing options and programmes.

Basic skills

At the most fundamental level the potential of the PC to focus students' minds on proof reading any texts they produce should be helpful and hopefully will release teachers from their traditional red-pen wielding role. The use of such applications as spell checks, grammar corrections and a thesaurus can stimulate the students into more language awareness and demand a greater attention from them to matters of accuracy, syntax and selection of words. No doubt there are programmes available and on the way that will challenge them as well into a fuller awareness of structures and registers. Even at present the templates for faxes and letters provides a new organising tuition facility that focuses and simplifies the assignments.

Composing

At a more advanced level instead of presenting just verbal texts students might be expected to present texts which include appropriate visuals and illustrations; it is also entirely possible that students might be asked to compose multi-media texts where words, pictures and sounds are exploited. In such situations the students will be presenting their work on discs and not in the traditional dog-eared English notebook. (One shudders to think of the endless perspectives of excuses for incomplete work that become available to the less than conscientious student in this scenario!)

The great potential of the PC for all students is the opportunity it offers for

- drafting and revising texts in all kinds of ways without the labour of burdensome rewriting
- composing well presented final texts: they will look like the real thing, something of which they can be proud and pleased.

Information and research

The opportunities presented by the PC and its ability to access such services as email and the Internet are rich and exciting. The possibilities of communicating outside the classroom to an almost unlimited range of audiences and receiving replies from these audiences gives a new dynamic to writing and reading and moves them into a new area of significance for students. Also the potential of the Internet/ and the World Wide Web for research means that gathering information necessary for writing meaningfully on many subjects becomes possible.

Critical literacy

In both of these highly interactive contexts the need for students to be critically literate becomes of supreme importance; with access to the world in all its endless variety of viewpoints and assumptions students will need to learn more than ever before how to question, to resist and to discriminate.



Appendix 1

Complete texts of language exercises

p. 18

Health Insurance Document

Thank you for choosing this company. It would be nice to think that you'll never need us. But in case you do, it's good to know we're here.

p. 18-19

Poem:

Good Friday, 1991

The low tide reveals him
tangled in the plastic and branches
snagged at the foot of Capel Street bridge.

How he came to be there,
whether he jumped off
the quay wall or slipped
quietly into the green water,
another city ~~mystery~~.
And what
of the children watching?
The fire brigade, the grappling hooks,
and the boat inching up the shallows;
what of the soul manhandling
the body over the stern
who looks up suddenly to our staring faces?

Though we glimpsed his face
but briefly, it's there before me now
white as the snow of Komavaro,
his slender drenched body
that no arms can succour,
his song and pattern ended
under the fast spring clouds,
a strong wind from the east
ruffling the low Liffey waters.

Paula Meehan (From *Pillow Talk*, Gallery Books, Meath, 1994)

p. 19-20

MAP Lough Navar Forest

From the car-park on A46 it's an abrupt 600 ft (183 m) climb up the wooded scarp from the road to wonderful views of Atlantic, Donegal and the Sperrins. The official UW route heads west briefly, then waltzes off south, unmarked, through deep heather and grass for 1/4 mile (0.4 km). See sketch for less boggy alternative. Follow the UW round the loughs. Look out for hen harrier and russet coloured hares. A sharp descent brings you to natural hardwoods, birch and rowan, at the Sillees river-bridge. Continue to the sweathouse. Return to bridge and turn R up scenic drive route to complete circuit.

p. 20-21

Macbeth Plot Line

1. Macbeth is tempted by the witches for the first time.
2. Macbeth encouraged by Lady Macbeth.
3. Macbeth kills Duncan.
4. Macbeth becomes King.
5. Macbeth has Banquo murdered.
6. Banquo ghost appears to Macbeth.
7. Macbeth is reassured of his invincibility by witches.
8. Macbeth has Lady Macduff and her family killed.
9. Lady Macbeth goes insane.
10. Macduff kills Macbeth.

p. 21

Paragraph structure: Oscar Wilde on House Decoration

There is nothing to my mind more coarse in conception and more vulgar in execution than modern jewellery. This is something that can be easily corrected. Something better should be made out of the beautiful gold which is stored up in your mountain hollows and strewn along your river beds. When I was at Leadville and reflected that all the shining silver that I saw coming from the mines would be made into ugly dollars, it made me sad. It should be made into something more permanent. The golden gates at Florence are as beautiful today as when Michelangelo saw them.

p. 22

Racing car driver

Race drivers contend with g-forces so great that they are subject to three or four times the normal force of gravity. From a standing start, a Formula One car will reach a hundred miles an hour in just under three seconds. And in that first second the driver's head is pushed back so violently that his face distends, giving him a ghostly smile.

Within another second he has changed gears twice, and each time he does so, the acceleration force smashes him back into the seat again. After three seconds,

accelerating upwards from a hundred miles an hour towards two hundred, his peripheral vision is completely blurred. He can only see straight ahead. The 800-horsepower engine is screaming at 130 decibels, and each piston completes four combustion cycles 10,000 times a minute, which means that the vibration he feels is at that rate.

His neck and shoulder muscles are under immense strain, trying to keep his eyes level as the g-force pushes his head from side to side in the corners. The strong acceleration makes blood pool in his legs so that less is delivered to the heart, which means that there's less cardiac output, forcing the pulse rate up. Formula One drivers' pulses are often up to 180, even 200, and they stay at 85 percent of that maximum for almost the entire length of a two-hour race.

Breathing quickens as the muscles call for more blood – speed literally takes your breath away – and the whole body goes into emergency stance. A two-hour emergency. The mouth goes dry, the eyes dilate as the car travels the length of a football field for every normal heartbeat. The brain processes information at an astonishing rapid rate, since the higher the speed, the less the reaction time. Reactions have to be not only quick but also extraordinary precise, no matter how great the physical strain. Split seconds may be mere slivers of time, but they are also the difference between winning and losing a race, or between entering and avoiding a crash.

In short, a Formula One driver has to be almost preternaturally alert under conditions of maximum physical pressure. Obviously, the adrenaline is pumping . . . But in addition to the physical fitness of top athletes, he needs that chess player's mind as he assimilates telemetry data, calculates overtaking points, and executes a racing strategy. All of which is why speed is so dangerous for most of us: we simply have neither the physical nor the mental stamina to handle it.

Psychologically, what happens in a race is still more complex. The muscles, the brain chemicals, the laws of physics, the vibration, the conditions of the race – all these combine to generate a high level of excitement and tension in the body, making the driver feel absolutely clearheaded and alert. And high.

p. 22-23

Pet Bees: Conclusion

You leaned back against the short cliff grass, satisfied, saddened, stung with loneliness.

p. 26

Possible thesis statement: *School uniforms should be banned*

p. 27

Possible conclusion to argument: *To be content a human needs both physical and spiritual nourishment.*

p. 47

Text extract

Opening paragraphs of a science-fiction novel for adolescents

p. 68

The point is that many traditional writing curriculums are designed to prevent students from developing a positive attitude toward writing. Many students have learned to view writing as several disjointed activities that have little to do with expressing ideas. Some struggle relentlessly with spelling and punctuation. Others have trouble with syntax. Still others expend their energies on sentence construction. The final product may look neat and illustrate correct mechanics, but the writing lacks vigour and wit.

p. 68-69

I've only been to one meeting of the peace group before now and that was to see a film they were showing called *The War Game*. The film was old and black and white and crackly, and it broke down twice while they were running it. It showed you what the effects would be if a nuclear bomb was dropped onto a place and it made me feel absolutely horrified. I couldn't understand why nobody'd told me about anything like that before. They just act as if things like that could never happen. At school we have Health Education and they tell you things like how you've got to brush your teeth at night before you go to bed and wear sensible Co-op sandals so that your toes don't get squashed. They never tell you what to do when your eyeballs heat from the heatblast and start slithering down your cheek-bones, or how to avoid waking up one morning inside a five-mile wide bomb crater.

p. 69

Learning the language was hard work. I hated trying to fill up gaps in texts. Sometimes it was difficult to understand why I was doing a particular exercise. I knew it was important to learn to read and write properly but I wished it were more exciting.

Section B

The Writers Speak . . .

*“Good writing takes place at intersections, at what you might call knots,
at places where society is snarled and knotted up.”*

Margaret Atwood

Introduction

This section is intended as a form of in-service in writing for teachers, to reinvigorate their approach to writing in the classroom by facilitating contact with the views of a range of professional writers. These writers in various ways find the act of writing important and central in their lives either for work or for play, either for money or for love. All the writers who contributed tell us something about how to effectively make meaning in writing. From their ideas and insights teachers should be able to develop some strategies for working with their students.

Each writer was asked to

- write a short reflection on why he or she writes
- supply a short sample of some of his or her own writing
- comment on the sample.

Some adhered strictly to the rubrics. Others took a different approach. Nevertheless in all the contributions one gets a sense of the work and commitment it takes to conquer the blank page and catch a meaning in the 'cool web' of words.

Finally, these pieces will hopefully give English teachers some new insights into how writers actually work at their texts and therefore how real writing or writing for real might be taught.

1. *The Language of Information*

Creating Information:

Jim O'Donnell

Sports Reports:

My grandfather's cabinet

Tom Humphries

Portrait of a golfer

Dermot Gilleece

Feature Writing:

The Second Law of Thermodynamics

William Reville

Grave Thoughts

Brendan McWilliams

Jim O'Donnell

Jim O'Donnell is Assistant Director General of the Institute of Public Administration where, for over thirty years, he has developed the publishing programme; he is the originator of the IPA's celebrated *Administration Yearbook and Diary*. He has written a number of books including *Wordgloss*. Secretary to the Constitution Review Group (1995-1996) and to the All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution (1996-).



Creating Information

Everyone studies literature to enjoy it; a few who study it become creative writers. However, we all use the power over words the study of literature gives us to create information. The creation of information consists in gathering data and composing it in such a way that it conveys what you wish it to convey to the person or persons you are addressing. It is a key skill for those seeking work. It is a skill in which Irish people with their traditional feel for words seek to excel.

The skill must be practised. In the school setting, data is gathered and composed in

1. presenting a project
2. reviewing the literature on a subject
3. describing the results of a survey or an experiment
4. summarising a play, novel or poem
5. analysing historical events
6. describing geographical features.

The skill is applied in every subject but its development falls largely upon the English teacher. However, the English teacher is expected by tradition to be concerned primarily with high literary values. In such a context the utilitarian task of creating information is apt to be given a lowly status and only low performance standards may be expected from the pupil. My argument here is that exacting standards should be applied to the task because it is an important one. Moreover, the skills that are developing in doing the task rebound to the study of literature. The following ideas may be worth putting to students who wish to develop the skills required in creating information.

The first step

Think about whom you are addressing. This will determine what you should say and how you should say it. If you are a specialist addressing a group of specialists on a topic in their area – an engineer, say, addressing a group of engineers about an engineering topic – you will know, broadly speaking, how much your audience knows. You do not have to explain basic concepts or processes. You may use jargon. However, if you are speaking to a group of non-specialists, you must explain any specialised terms as you go along and refrain from the use of jargon – unless you explain it, too, as you go along. If you are speaking to a mixed group, courtesy requires you to speak in terms which the least specialised segment of your audience will understand. Broadcasters, who sit alone in a studio before a microphone,

are advised to imagine themselves speaking to someone sitting in the room with them. It is equally helpful for people who are creating information to imagine themselves addressing some particular person. It greatly eases the problem of what to say, how to say it, and in what order. In giving exercises in creating information, the teacher should specify a target-audience, whether the student's peers, adults, or say, a group of young foreigners.

Gathering data

Data (the plural form of the Latin datum 'a thing given') are the building blocks of communication. Data are made up of words. Clarity and accuracy are the qualities one looks for in words. Thus if the datum one wishes to capture is that there is a dog lying in front of the door, one captures it less clearly if one says, 'There is an animal lying in front of the opening'. Of course greater accuracy might require one to say, 'There is an Irish wolfhound lying in front of the backdoor'. Apart from clarity and accuracy, what one crucially looks for in data is reliability. Data may be found in a wide variety of sources – in newspapers, magazines and books, on radio, television and the other electronic media – and from talking to people. Data may be created by surveys, by observation of phenomena and by scientific tests. These sources differ widely in their reliability. Students should train themselves in how and where to seek the most reliable data.

Composition

Building blocks are put together to create a structure – a house, a bridge, a tunnel. Data are put together to create a particular kind of information: data are composed. The functional report, as opposed to the creative work, should follow a strictly logical, linear path. You do not jump *in medias res* (Latin 'into the middle of things') as many novelists do. You have a beginning, a middle and an end. In the beginning, describe what the task is, how you went about it, what the data sources were, and whether you had to delimit the task in various ways because of limited data or resources. In the middle, present, in due order, all the information you have compiled. In the end, present any reflections you have or recommendations you wish to make.

In composing a report, keep your audience clearly in mind and be on the alert for that bane of report-writing – *non sequiturs*, statements that do not follow logically from the previous statements.

House style

Every publisher has what is called a 'house style' – a set of rules for dealing with the range of presentation issues that recur in setting a text. It is very useful for someone who creates information to develop such a style – it produces consistency and makes for efficiency because decisions on style do not have to be made continually.

A house style often seeks economy in wordprocessing. For example it may eliminate full stops as much as possible – thus UCD, TD, Mr, Mrs, Dr instead of U.C.D., T.D., Mr., Mrs., Dr. It may prescribe single quotes rather than double quotes – thus 'Give me that pen!' rather than "Give me that pen!" For dates it may favour, for example, 10 December 1996 over the 10th of December, 1996. Even though collective nouns may correctly govern a plural or singular verb it may opt for one or the other – thus 'The Army thinks a political solution should be sought' rather than 'The Army think a political solution should be sought'. It may favour -ise verbal endings over -ize endings: atomise, energise, synchronise. Such examples show how useful such a set of rules can be. Classes should be encouraged to develop and agree a house style.

General style

Conciseness. Owing to the virtual disappearance of Latin and Greek, from which a preponderance of the words used in sophisticated discourse in English is derived, the grip people have on the meaning of many words is often loose. This leads to an overloaded style of writing. Thus people may say, ‘After that outburst she reverted back to her normal pleasant self’, even though ‘reverted’ means ‘turned back’ (Latin *re* ‘back’, *vertere* ‘to turn’); or they may signal their intention to ‘repeat again’ what they have already told you even though the *re-* in repeat is the Latin *re* this time meaning ‘again’. Young people, then, might be encouraged to check what they hear on the radio or read in newspapers and magazines for examples of such pleonasm, so that they may avoid it. Thus, since one cannot plan for the past or for the present, do not the expressions ‘pre-plan’ and ‘plan ahead’ contain redundant elements? Since the word ‘consensus’ means ‘the agreement in opinion of most people’ should one even speak of ‘a general consensus’? Since ‘prerequisite’ means ‘somethings required as a previous condition’ should one even use ‘necessary prerequisite’? Since a ‘demagogue’ is a political agitator who appeals to the desires or prejudices of the mob (it comes from the Greek *demos* ‘people’ and *agogos* ‘leading’) surely one should never refer to ‘a populist demagogue’? This kind of verbal weed luxuriates in common speech – ‘old adage’, ‘past history’, ‘added bonus’ – and young people should train themselves to recognise it and pull it from their thought.

Capitalisation. In general, organised groups tend to capitalise the name of their area of activity and the names of the positions of authority within them in order to create a certain distinction and dignity – thus the State, the Government, Ministers; the Civil Service, the Secretary of the Department; the Church, the Pope, the Archbishop; Education, the School Principal, the Board of Management; the Law, the Judiciary, the Judges, the Courts; Voluntary Work, the Honorary Secretary, the Executive Committee. Excessive capitalisation gives a text a flushed look. One should exercise restraint, therefore, in the use of capitals. Look how cool our list becomes if one does: the state, the government, ministers; the civil service, the secretary of the department; the church, the pope, the archbishop; education, the school principal, the board of management; the law, the judiciary, the judges, the courts; voluntary work, the honorary secretary, the executive committee.

Cliché. Clichés are hackneyed phrases. They give writing a torpid air and students are rightly urged to avoid their use. Easier said than done, however. After all, every cliché is an extinct epigram.

Spelling. Draw up a list of frequently misspelt words and keep adding to it. The following would probably find themselves in many people’s Top-50 chart:

accommodate	desperate	handkerchief	mischievous	proceeds
anxiety	disasterous	heroes	niece	received
Arctic	dissatisfied	humorous	noticeable	relieved
argument	embarrassed	independent	occurred	rhythmic
bachelor	exaggerate	indispensable	occurrence	seize
believed	existence	irresistible	parallel	separate
budgeted	February	livelihood	pastime	supersede
deceive	fulfil	lose	permissible	tendency
definite	fulfilled	losing	privilege	unnecessary
desirable	grievance	medicine	procedure	woollen

Exactitude. Unnecessary words in a text are like static on a radio – they make it more difficult for you to put your message across. A good writer continually revises his or her text in order to eliminate redundant words. Since we in Ireland have a tendency to exaggerate – our minnows often talk like whales – we should be restrained in our use of ‘very’ (‘a very fine day’, ‘a very, very nice woman’) and of multiple adjectives (‘It was a miserable, wet, windy, overcast, cold March day’). We should avoid hyperbole simpliciter (‘Last year millions of people turned up for Manorhamilton’s Jumping Frogs Festival’).

Exactitude is achieved by selecting the precise words to convey what you wish to say. That means having an exact understanding of a large stock of words. We tend to develop our understanding of words by encountering them in a variety of contexts. As a result we tend to get approximate rather than exact meanings. Thus we encounter the word ‘russet’ in contexts which suggest the meaning ‘red’, but its exact denotation is reddish brown. How can young people gain precision? Looking up words in a good dictionary is certainly a help but it does not have the pedagogical strength that comes from clustering. I would suggest that the teacher should explore with students the categories of words they need to describe the world about them. Take colour. I know from my own experience that, since I never studied the different shades of colour, my descriptive powers in that respect are unsubtle: I may say a thing is yellow without considering such options as primrose, buttercup, lemon, golden, chrome, saffron, crocus, jaundiced. Yellow, after all, is the colour of the rainbow between the orange and the green. Moreover, it is not enough merely to distinguish gradations – there is the question of understanding any nuances attaching to the words that denote the gradations. ‘The boxer in the yellow shorts’ is one thing. ‘The boxer in the buttercup shorts’ is something else. Categories other than colour readily suggest themselves – shape, sound, movement, feel, taste, attitudes, are examples.

Conclusion

People are motivated by what they are interested in. They may be interested in the sense of either being curious or seeing a benefit for themselves. As I have explored it here, the creation of information can motivate young people because it can be presented to them as a practical skill that can both advance them in their work and enlarge their social capacity. It can also be presented as a source of endless interest in the world about them because it engages them in the primordial Adamic task of giving everything its proper name.

Tom Humphries



Tom Humphries is a sports journalist who writes mainly for *The Irish Times*. He has also published a book on the GAA.

Why I Write

'You're lucky,' says my friend, 'you can write.'

'No' I say, 'you're lucky. You can peek into the bonnet of a car and see what's wrong with it.'

'Nah,' he says, 'it's different.'

'Why?' I say.

'Just is.' He says and shrugs his shoulders, 'just is. You're dead lucky.'

Nobody ever tells a juggler that he is dead lucky to be able to juggle. They wonder about how many skittles the juggler had to drop on the floor before he came out to the world as a juggler. Nobody thinks that a juggler stands on the side of the street catching clubs all day just for the joy of it. They know to toss a few coins at his feet because the juggler has taken the time to learn the art.

Nobody is born knowing how to juggle and nobody is born knowing how to write. They are both talents which depend to a small extent on nature and to a large extent on persistence. Anytime I hear some scribbler announcing that he writes because it is necessary for him first to write before he can breathe and that without writing he would shrivel and die, well, my heart breaks with laughter.

When it comes to writing and the reasons for writing I'm firmly behind crusty old Samuel Johnson who announced that 'No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.' Johnson captured the small romance of it. Evicting the words from your head until they are numerous enough and fit enough for somebody to pay you for them beats not being able to draw a breath until you are near a word processor.

Writing might be a creative process but it starts with the more basic human needs. Hunger and ego. The extraordinary notion that somebody will pay for what you write and somebody will read it. Even the most sensitive souls aren't too crippled by shyness or cured of ego to pop their pages into a buff envelope with a note informing prospective publishers that the world badly needs to read them and that the advance should be paid by cheque.

There is a hierarchy of needs after the ego business and the money business are taken care of, however. Every writer likes to be read. Every writer likes to improve with practice. Every writer likes to push along until the limits of what he or she can properly express are found.

With journalists things are even a little bit more skewed towards pragmatism.

There isn't room for creativity. When we start off in the business we get paid by the amount of words or lines we produce. There is scarcely room for developing an individual style by the time you have paid

due attention to deadlines and space restrictions, observing also the laws of libel and the demands of the house style and squeezing in the parts of the story that need to be told plus the relevant background which the reader needs to be filled in on. If you still remember why you liked writing after all that you are doing well.

When somebody asks me why I write or tells me I am lucky that I can write I think of my grandfather's house. For many years the wall behind the door in the parlour was adorned by a glass display cabinet and this was his best piece advertising his art while concealing its secrets.

Inlaid woods set flush and perfect. Invisible tongues joined concealed grooves. The doors were lattices filled with old style lily hued glass and they swung on clean brass hinges. Four sweetly turned legs held the whole sturdy and strong. Finally the dark mahogany was finished with a polish in which we could see our childish faces.

My great grandfather wasn't lucky to be able to make cabinets. He banged his thumb with a hundred hammers and wasted a wilderness full of wood till he got it right. Towards the end of his life when his apprenticeship was long done and the need of money was no longer constantly pressing him down he made the perfect little cabinet in the parlour.

Why do I write? Why did my great grandfather make wooden cabinets? Hunger. The rush of ego and fulfilment which comes from learning a craft through persistence and seeing somebody read something that you have written.

There is always the need to feed the children and pay the bills. Just desire to get better in the same way that anyone with any trade wants to get better. There's so much to learn. I can still see the splinters and banged-in nails in everything I write but some day with persistence I might produce something as perfect and seamless as the cabinet in the parlour. Somebody will probably tell me I'm lucky to be able to write.

WE'RE COMING HOME; THANK YOU, LADS

Tom Humphries in Orlando

The long journey through America is over, the band-wagon halted by two moments of defensive madness in the light humidity of the Citrus Bowl in central Florida yesterday. In defeat there were tears, but on reflection there should be just pride.

The moments illuminate the memory like popping flashbulbs. Ray Houghton's looping goal. Paul McGrath's sweet sorcery. The gorgeous elegance of Phil Babb. The electric running of McAteer and Kelly. John Aldridge heading home for salvation. Andy Townsend with soccer highlights in his hair. Jack Charlton touring the airports of America. There was joy and laughter, and yesterday there were tears and embraces and a stoic heroism.

There were no excuses. To the old ailment of blunt attacking was added a new foible of defensive lapses. Two Dutch goals in the first half both sprang from silly mistakes. Packie Bonner, who has given us so many wonderful cherished moments, left the World Cup stage with his head in his hands. Terry Phelan at least has time to atone.

From there on the incline was too steep. For a team that has never scored two goals in a game at major finals, carving through the Dutch a couple of times, was too much to ask. They tried, though.

McAteer with his giddy enthusiasm arrived as the great tumult of Dutch Brass Bands heralded celebration 45 minutes too early. There was running and opportunity and there were bravura performances, but never a goal.

Shots rained in on the Dutch area, but the long-felt want of a great international-class finisher was once again the team's failing.

Afterwards, in the centre of the pitch, sweat-drenched jerseys were swapped and arms were flung around each other. The Irish players lingered, slow to leave the great circus they ran away to join weeks ago. Fans and players applauded each other, united in that unique bond of which those in the press box were deprived. Then the tunnel sucked the heroes away.

For an hour or more the singing reverberated around the Citrus Bowl. At first, in this soulless synthetic place the sound of human voice was drowned out by piped pap; but the lungs and the throats prevailed, and in the dressing-room and the media area the sounds of celebration were heard and tears came.

'See you at home,' said Jack Charlton to the media. He didn't mean it, but the sentiment of the moment fitted.

And what was being celebrated in the hour of defeat? Participation. Pride. Always looking on the bright side of life. That we are an enduring and passionate people and that what we love is only diminished by the crime of not caring. What was being celebrated? An Irish love of celebration itself. The sweetness of living our dreams for a week or two, the chances to be outside ourselves without convention or inhibition or regret.

World Cups are a special time. The past month has been laden with escapism and make-believe. Maybe when they go home they are just 22 hard-bitten soccer professionals, but for four games they have been our property and our friends and our heroes.

Now it is finished. Coming home. Thank you, lads.



Comment

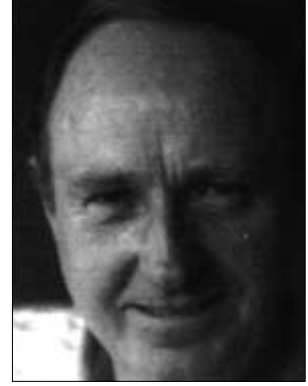
Being a sportswriter is sometimes about taking a week to write a considered article or profile and then taking a day to rewrite it. Sometimes though it's about getting stuff out to the paper in a hurry. Writing words quicker than you can think about them because it's deadline time at home and the editor needs three pieces within an hour of the end of the match. Sportswriters judge each other in terms of how they do in those circumstances. You're good 'under the cosh' or you're not good.

This piece dates from the afternoon when Ireland got bumped out of the 1994 World Cup. It's not great literature and only passable good writing but it's what sportwriting is all about.

It was already pressing deadline time when the game in Orlando ended. This is one of three pieces I wrote within ninety minutes of that final whistle blowing. In that time myself and my herd of colleagues attended a sour press conference and tried to wheedle quote out of the dejected, surly players, we humped our portable word processors around and cursed the crummy American telecommunications system. Then we went back to our hotels and slept for ever. None of us had any detailed sense of what we had written till we got home and flicked through the papers.

I produced this front page colour piece, a ghosted article with Phil Babb and a colour report of the press conference in the helter skelter aftermath. Looking back on it now it captures something of the sentiment of the afternoon and the time in general as well as including the relevant news details. Anyway the paper printed it. That's all I could have hoped for.

Dermot Gilleece



Dermot Gilleece has been the Golf correspondent of *The Irish Times* since March, 1981. He has been a sports journalist since 1958 and has worked on *The Irish Press*, *The Daily Mail* and the *Irish Independent*. He is married and has two children and lives in Sutton, Co Dublin.

Why I Write

Firstly, let me make it clear that I consider myself to be a craftsman rather than a creative writer. In other words, I'm someone who applied himself to the actual business of writing, without having had any great talent in that direction. In that context, the most important tools I took with me from school – honours English and a pass in Latin in the Leaving Certificate – were an ability to spell and a solid grounding in grammar. I later discovered that spelling was not all that important if one had ready access to a dictionary. While on this point, it may be appropriate to add that I rely heavily on a dictionary and would never approach a serious piece of writing without it. Strangely, my children find this difficult to understand, despite their obvious problems with spelling!

I found myself in journalism largely by accident but was extremely fortunate to join *The Irish Press*, in 1958. It happened that at the time, the journalistic hierarchy in the Press thought it would be a good idea to take lads like me directly from school and teach them journalism from square one: the accepted route into a national newspaper was through the provincial press. Douglas Gageby, who would later edit *The Irish Times*, was then editor of the *Evening Press* and he took me under his wing. This meant that I was encouraged to dabble in some modest freelancing for one of the three newspapers in the group, while actually working as a glorified messenger boy.

I started out doing small reports of Dublin inter-club GAA matches. One paragraph (about 45 words) to start with, followed by two paragraphs and, eventually, three or four-paragraph pieces. With such relatively few words in which to tell my story, I found I had to think a piece through very carefully before committing anything to paper. The process also made me conscious of picking out the most newsworthy elements in a match. Eighteen months later, I was appointed to the staff as a junior sports reporter. Now I could write seriously on a daily basis, through match-reports at the weekends and shortish news items on weekdays. This was when I first became aware of the reporter's arch enemy: the sub-editor.

As with all jobs, there were good sub-editors and some dreadfully infuriating ones. I was fortunate in that much of my early work was handled by one or two enlightened practitioners who invariably changed it for the better. And I studied those changes to see where I had gone wrong. Usually it was in a simple matter of grammar, or repetition, or a lack of proper emphasis on the nub of the story.

By this stage, I had come to appreciate some of the key ingredients of newspaper writing. The most important one was to grab the reader's attention and then try to hold it until the final full-stop. As with the early, one-paragraph pieces, I became keenly aware of the importance of thinking things through.

If I were to hold a reader's interest, I realised that I would have to spread attention-grabbing facts through the piece, while saving an appropriate tailpiece for the end. So, effectively, the story had to have a top, middle and end.

I also learned the importance of the manner in which it was written. For instance, long sentences – of more than 40 words – were to be avoided. And where unavoidable, they should always be followed by short sentences, otherwise the overworked reader would soon lose interest.

Then there was the challenge of achieving a flow to the writing. When great composers such as Mozart, Handel or Beethoven worked on a piece of music, they firstly established a basic melody. Later, so-called grace notes were added with a view to achieving a sense of rhythm to the musical line. These grace notes were superfluous to the melody but essential to the listening ear. I believe that one should adopt a similar approach to writing. Adjectives, adverbs and conjunctions, superfluous to the actual meaning of a sentence, can be included purely for the purpose of rhythm, bearing in mind the objective must always be to facilitate the reader.

This extract, from a piece about Muhammad Ali at the Olympics, is a good example: 'This sporting summer has run its crowded course and its images scurry by like the leaves of autumn, yet that single image remains as sharp and as poignant as it did on a July evening in Dixie.' It would be possible to cut that sentence in half and still retain the meaning, but at what cost to its readability?

Having graduated to more lengthy pieces, sometimes as long as 2,000 words for a feature article, I found the overall planning of the piece to be absolutely critical towards its success. What do I want to say? How do I plan to say it? Am I absolutely clear about the subject matter before I write the first line? Do I know how the piece is going to end, before I start? Then, when I start, do I construct the opening paragraph in such a manner as to heighten the reader's interest, even curiosity? Am I conscious of having little nuggets on hand, to be introduced at those stages when the story might be in danger of flagging? Above all, I must remember never to underestimate the intelligence of my reader. Patronising prose is extremely difficult to stomach.

There have been countless times, when facing tight deadlines, that I have had to cope with the horror of a totally blank mind. In these circumstances, I have learned to write something, anything, simply to get the process started. These words of desperation will probably undergo radical change before the piece is completed but they have served their purpose of un-blocking the mind. In this context, the word processor has been a tremendous boon to writers of all categories, largely for the scope it affords to fiddle around with phrases. Writing by hand is similarly adaptable, compared with the strictures imposed by the typewritten sheet and the bottle of Tippex. Finally, I rarely enjoy the actual process of writing, which can be tedious and tiring, depending on one's mood. But when finished, a well-written piece is immensely satisfying. Indeed, more often than not, it's the hope of ultimately delivering a well-crafted story, that gives one the enthusiasm to make a start.

PORTRAIT OF A GOLFER

When David Graham was 16, he announced to his father that he would like to drop out of school to take up a career as a professional golfer. His father warned: 'If you do, I'll never talk to you again.' He held to his threat: they never exchanged another word.

Years later, when the older Graham died, it was months before his son heard about it. 'Most definitely it made me more determined,' he said, while contemplating his fiftieth birthday next Thursday. 'I went on a personal mission to prove to him and some others that I could make it in golf.'

After Graham captured the US Open at Merion in 1981, some wicker was suggested that he had eventually become as good as he thought he was. Now, though inactive for five years, he is set to prove himself all over again on the US Seniors' Tour, starting in the Bell South Senior Classic in Nashville next Friday.

Irish Open enthusiasts will remember Graham's appearance at Portmarnock in 1977 when he shot rounds of 75 and 76 to miss the cut. And they will recall that in 1981, two months after winning the US Open, he returned to Portmarnock, this time playing all four rounds for an aggregate of 284 and 11th place behind Sam Torrance. 'I felt I owed it to the sponsors,' he said at the time.

Graham has always been his own man. Which explains why, on being asked as a long-time friend of Jack Nicklaus what he thought of Muirfield village, he replied: 'It looks like they copied a bunch of holes from other courses.'

Now, with sadness in his voice, he says: 'That comment was devastating to my relationship with Jack.' But typically, there was no apology. Graham, beaten 69-74 by Ronan Rafferty in the final of the 1988 Dunhill Cup, remains one of a kind.

Comment

This piece was written by me last summer for my 'Golfing Log' which appears in the sports pages of *The Irish Times* on Saturdays. I recall being pressurised for space at the time, so it had to be tightly written, which, at 315 words, it is. Looking back on it now, the piece pleases me because: 1. The writing is clear and simple; 2. Despite its relative shortness, there is a wealth of information about Graham's career; 3. The anecdotes about his father and Jack Nicklaus provide valuable insights into the make-up of a complex man who has always been unpopular with his peers.

Its topicality at the time lay in the fact that Graham was approaching his fiftieth birthday the following week, which would make him eligible for competition on the US Seniors' tour a day later. But through research on the Irish Open and the Dunhill Cup, I was able to give the piece an Irish relevance.

Footnote: Those cynics who would dismiss sportswriting as semi-literate, cliché-ridden hyperbole, should consider the simple beauty of these opening four paragraphs by Patrick Collins in *The Mail* on Sunday on October 8th, 1999.

On a sultry night in Georgia, he came shuffling from the side of the stage, blinking in mild surprise as the arc lights tracked him down.

He seemed almost timid, a stranger to celebrity. But we knew better.

Muhammad Ali peered out at the world with the shadow of a smile flickering

across his face, as if recalling some private joke. His left arm was shaking with uncontrolled urgency. His right arm was holding high a torch.

The audience rose, united in astonishment, as the greatest athlete of the century stood before them. A roar came rumbling across the stadium, wavering for a few seconds as Ali fumbled with the fuse, then rising once more in full-throated relief as the Olympic flame burst into life.



William Reville



William Reville has worked at UCC since 1976. He is a senior lecturer in Biochemistry and Director of the Central Electron Microscopy Unit. From 1986 to 1994 he wrote a science column for *The Examiner*. He now contributes weekly to the *Science Today* section in *The Irish Times*.

Writing Popular Science

My primary motivation for writing a science column is that it gives me pleasure to explain science to a general audience. I always enjoyed explaining scientific concepts to non-scientific friends. I like to think that I have a knack of getting difficult concepts across in an easily digested way and I get intrinsic pleasure out of exercising this ability.

Secondly, I enjoy giving pleasure to people through my writing. Everyone has a natural curiosity about the world, and delights in understanding how things work. 'All men, by their very nature, feel the urge to know', is how Aristotle put it.

Thirdly, I believe that it is very important to foster an appreciation of science amongst the general public. Modern civilisation is entirely dependent on science-based technology. Many issues that require political decision have important scientific and technological components, e.g. whether or not to develop nuclear power. And yet, by and large, the general public has little understanding or appreciation of science. This is a most unhealthy situation.

All other things being equal, when picking a subject for an article, I choose a topic that particularly interests me. I am always confident that, if I find the particular topic interesting, it will probably be of general interest, and I should also be able to present the material in a manner that will grab the attention of the reader. Of course, it is often necessary to write on a topic that doesn't particularly fascinate me. In these cases, a little extra effort is called for in order to ensure that the material is presented in an interesting manner and that it doesn't lapse into either stodginess or opacity.

The first thing, and the last, to remember when presenting science to a general audience is to keep things clear and simple. All the concepts must be understandable by the general reader of average intelligence who has no specialised background or education in science. If you achieve this you have basically succeeded. The reader will get great pleasure out of gaining new knowledge and insight. Once the material is clear and easily understandable, it will survive being presented even in a flat or dull fashion.

However, if the material is, in addition to being clear and understandable, presented in an interesting way, it will soar above the satisfying and the acceptable, to become a delight and a memorable experience. This is the goal of all serious writers.

There are many devices that can be used in order to liven up a presentation. A particularly useful and basic technique to use when presenting science to the general reader is the use of analogy. A vivid mental picture composed of familiar images is a great way to imprint a concept in the mind. For example, a useful analogy that helps to visualise how the universe expands is to imagine painting spots equidistant from each other on a balloon, then blow up the balloon and observe how the spots move away from each other on the expanding balloon surface.

The familiar example, or the interesting example, is a first-cousin of the analogy, e.g. rub a plastic biro shank in your hair and observe how it now can attract small pieces of paper – static electricity.

Finally, humour, or an interesting story, is always welcomed by the reader as a special treat, and helps to re-invigorate flagging concentration.

THE SECOND LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS

Often when I look around my office I am struck by the relentless power of the second law of thermodynamics. Books, magazines and miscellaneous papers cover all available raised surfaces, and some of the floor, in higgledy-piggledy fashion. I have a vague idea about where some particular items are located, but no idea about many others. I think back wistfully to the nice situation I had several weeks before when I tidied up, filed many items away, and arranged the rest in a few orderly piles. What has happened in the meantime? Entropy has increased and I have made no effort to reverse that increase.

Entropy is a measure of randomness or disorder. The second law of thermodynamics, one of the most fundamental laws of physics, states that all physical and chemical processes proceed in such a way that the entropy of the universe increases to the maximum possible.

Let me illustrate the second law as follows. Imagine you have two blocks of copper. One of the blocks is hot, and the other is cooler. Place the two blocks together and what happens? Heat will flow from the hotter to the cooler block. The cooler block will warm up; the hotter block will cool down. After a while both blocks will reach the same intermediate temperature and heat will stop flowing.

The process as just described is what will always happen. You will never observe that, as time passes, the hotter block remains just as hot, and the cooler block remains just as cool. Neither will you ever observe that, after the two blocks have achieved the same intermediate temperature, heat again flows from one block into the other so that you get a hotter and a cooler block once more.

In the initial state of this mental experiment you start with a hot block placed beside a cold block. In the final state you end up with two blocks each at the same in-between temperature. The initial state is more ordered than the final state. In the initial state heat energy is partially segregated into the hotter block. In the final state the heat energy is completely randomised between the two

blocks. Entropy has increased in going from the initial to the final state.

All spontaneous change that occurs in the world proceeds in a direction that increases the entropy of the universe. A house of cards, left to its own devices, will always collapse. The collapsed heap of cards will never spontaneously assemble into a house of cards. If you ever notice that it does, please make your way carefully to the accident and emergency department of your local hospital and describe your experience.

It is possible to create localised order in the universe by doing work, i.e. expending energy. For example, you can perform work on the jumble of cards and produce an ordered house of cards. Biological life on earth is ordered, but only at the expense of harnessing the energy of the sun. And, overall, when the sums are done, localised decreases in entropy in particular parts of the universe, brought about by doing work, are achieved at the expense of an overall increase in the entropy of the universe.

Eventually the universe will run down to a final maximum state of randomness. At this stage all of the high-grade energy in the universe that can be harnessed to do work, e.g. the energy of sunlight, will be randomised and unavailable to do useful work. This is the heat death of the universe, and is referred to as entropic doom. Life will no longer be possible. It 'will end with a whimper, not with a bang'.

That's the bad news. The good news is that entropic doom will not occur for many many billions of years. In the meantime the best policy is, in the spirit of the Guinness ad – 'Don't ponder the big point, just wink at it'.



Brendan McWilliams



Brendan McWilliams is a meteorologist, and Deputy Director of Met Éireann. Since 1988 he has written the daily Weather Eye column for *The Irish Times*. A typical piece takes about an hour and a half to research and a similar period to write, with about half an hour's revision the following day before going into print. He has published several collections of these in book form.

My Approach to Writing

I have a sign above my desk which tells me 'Do Not Bore!' an injunction which may well be shattered before this page is ended. Normally, however, I write for a newspaper, and I find it necessary to remind myself constantly that nobody owes me a reading; newspaper browsers are notoriously fickle, and will only read a text in full if they find it to be immediately and throughout its length, a pleasurable experience. Even if one's subject of the day is fascinating, the newspaper reader, despite an interest in the topic, will almost unconsciously wander off to something else unless the words presented are very easily read and understood.

The first requirement is to catch the reader's eye. A pithy heading often does the trick, but even more important is the opening sentence. Nearly everyone who scans the page will notice it, but only those in whom it arouses some feeling or emotion, a sense of puzzlement, amusement, curiosity, or just the reaction 'That's an interesting thought, and nicely put!' will read on further.

Having caught it, the secret of keeping the reader's attention, I believe, is in variety, in offering a regular change in rhythm, thought and texture. If the subject is dull, it may be lightened now and then with humour; if it is somewhat technical, a folksy simile or two will make the uninitiated feel at home; highly scientific content can be leavened with a modicum of culture; and if the subject itself is rather light, a paragraph treating an aspect of it very briefly at a deeper level reassures those of a more serious turn of mind that they have not wasted valuable time in mere frivolity.

A text in which all the important words are long is indigestible. Equally, if all the words are short, a passage becomes an uncomfortable staccato read. I have personally never found the adage 'Do not use a long word where a short one will do' to be totally convincing; sometimes one must quite deliberately search for a lengthy multi-syllabic ending to a sentence in order to bring it smoothly to an end without a jolt.

The words should also happily combine to provide the passage with an easy rhythm. This normally demands sentences of varying length, the whole providing an undulating flow in which the reader is led effortlessly along to the kernel of each paragraph, and then let down gently in such a way that he or she has no need for a full-stop to know that a passage has reached its natural end. Sometimes indeed, one finds that a well-written passage almost scans, just like a poem does – as, for example, in the opening line to Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* ('Last night I dreamt I went again to Manderley') which sets an evocative rhythm for the whole first paragraph, if not indeed for the entire book.

Rhythm is also assisted by a judicious choice of adjectives. It is often said that, having written a passage, one should go over it and strike out every adjective that is not absolutely essential. I would add the proviso that some adjectives may be unnecessary for meaning, and may even be tautological, but acquire their *raison d'être* in rhythm, to provide a smooth and agreeable ride for the all-important reader.

In treating the subject matter, it is important to gauge the sophistication of the readership. Explaining the obvious, or presenting something that everybody knows as a fascinating fact, will quickly be perceived as patronising. To assume too much, on the other hand, is to make your prose a mystery to all except a small elite, who more than likely have no need to read it anyway. And the information should be presented in a clear and logical order, giving a reader the secure feeling that what he or she must digest has a definite beginning, a middle, and most desirable of all, an end.

My personal approach in attempting to achieve this epitome of perfection is rather like that of the potter, who throws a lump of clay onto his wheel and then moulds it into an artefact. I throw all the words and ideas that I think may be required onto the page, without any thought initially of order, punctuation or of spelling. The total amount of this raw material might amount to perhaps 150 per cent of what will ultimately be needed. Then I choose the opening passage, something that will set the scene, and which may well be based on a concept that has appeared somewhere in the middle of the scattered text. Then the task becomes an iterative process, in which the desired statue gradually emerges from the marble. Paragraph by paragraph the text is smoothed, moulded, polished into a happier form, first to get the meaning right, then to refine the phraseology and eliminate any repetition, and finally to adjust the rhythm by altering the punctuation, inserting or deleting words, or choosing synonyms where necessary.

A good piece can rarely be produced, by me at any rate, in just one sitting. Inevitably, re-read the following day, repetitions and infelicities of phrase become apparent that had gone unnoticed, even on repeated readings, at the first attempt. A fresh mind provides an entirely new perspective. Indeed, looking back over past work, it becomes obvious that those pieces on which one has spent the most time, re-writing and refining over several days, shine out as by far the best and most informative.

The final step is to adjust to the required length. At this stage the advantage of a text that is too long becomes apparent, because it is much easier to snip out a sentence here and there, than to force in extra, and perhaps extraneous, material. Indeed shortening, within limits, almost invariably improves a piece; more often than not you will find that somewhere in the text you have said the same thing twice in different words, or included a thought that may be totally unnecessary.

GRAVE THOUGHTS

Let us begin this Friday morning on a sombre note: 'The pomp of power', says Thomas Gray,

*And all that beauty and that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour:
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*

Now, the grave, without a doubt, is a damp inhospitable spot, but surprisingly perhaps, and contrary to accepted wisdom, it is not particularly cold. At times, indeed, it may be warmer six feet under than it is on top.

Before we shuffle off this mortal coil, we live on the surface of the earth, where the ground responds quickly to heating by the sun and loses energy rapidly when it is absent. But just beneath the surface, the soil reacts slowly to temperature changes overhead, and the deeper down you go, the less the surrounding temperature tends to change with the passing days and weeks.

At a depth of 4 inches, for example, the difference between the average temperature of the warmest month in any year, and the average temperature of the coldest month, is about 13°C. At a depth of 4ft, this difference between the two decreases to about 7 degrees, and at thirty or forty feet below the ground there is hardly any seasonal variation; the soil temperature remains more or less constant right throughout the year.

Temperatures underground are slow to vary because the layers of soil act as an efficient insulator. They make it difficult for the heat of the sun to penetrate, and also retard the loss of heat on cold winter nights. In the summertime, therefore, the temperature near the surface is significantly higher than that some feet below; conversely in winter, since cooling takes place at the surface, it is normally warmer underneath.

The diurnal variation of temperature, the way it changes through the day, also decreases with depth. Air temperature rises during the day to reach a maximum in the early afternoon, and drops to a minimum around dawn. This pattern, albeit less marked, is detectable beneath the ground to a depth of about 4ft, but below this level, the temperature remains more or less constant throughout the 24 hours. And not too far beneath the surface, the extremes of a hard winter are hardly felt at all. Freezing in the wintertime at a depth of, say, 4 inches, is not uncommon; below 8 inches it occurs only during a prolonged cold spell; but sub-zero temperatures at depths greater than 12 inches are never found in Ireland.

Comment

This passage is about the temperature on and underneath the ground. It is not, *prima facie*, the most exciting subject in the world, so to make the piece alluring it is necessary to lighten it from the very start, hopeful that the reader, once hooked, will continue through the rather dull but informative bits that comprise the real message.

Here the leavening comes as a little verse, and to provide a rhythm the opening sentence has been given almost the same metre as Gray's poem. One could, of course begin 'This morning we will investigate a serious subject'; the meaning is almost the same, but it would require a complete change of rhythm on the reader's part to continue into the poem. Likewise, the words 'says Thomas Gray' are inserted in the position and in the order shown, perhaps after a number of experiments with other sequences, to preserve the desired continuity and rhythm.

Then, having caught the reader's attention with an excerpt from a poem that he or she will probably remember with nostalgia, we provide a small surprise, that a grave may not be as cold as one might think. It may make the reader say 'Well fancy that!', and then read on. And the third paragraph contains a hidden quotation from Hamlet, which the more astute will take delight in recognising.

The passage also quotes inches instead of millimetres. This is contrary to common practice nowadays, but many of the readers of *Weather Eye* are middle-aged or older, and have to perform inconvenient mental gymnastics when presented with a metric measure. They feel much happier in the older units, and while the ultimate objective of the writer may well be to inform and to educate, he will succeed in neither if most of his readers have switched off because the reading is not perceived as worth the effort.

Copious use is made throughout of semi-colons, invaluable tools, I always think, for preserving continuity of thought without allowing sentences to ramble on interminably. Indeed mastery of the colon and the semi-colon, and of the difference between the two, should be one of the first tasks that any writer sets himself.

The length of the paragraphs is chosen with the aim of making them long enough not to make the piece disjointed, yet not so long that their appearance is intimidating, leaving the reader liable to get lost around the middle. This is particularly important where the text, as printed, will be separated into columns; each paragraph then appears about twice the length it would seem to be if stretched in the normal way across a page.

And finally, the ending should be smooth and give a feeling of completeness. In this example the final sentence is split into three with semi-colons, aiming at a nice concluding rhythm, and providing in its information a 'wrap-up' that the reader is likely to remember, for a little while at least. He or she will leave the text, we hope, with the pleasant feeling that the read has been worthwhile.

2. The Language of Argument & Persuasion

Matching your Audiences

Martin Drury

Creating the Image

Nuala O'Faolain

Debating the Issue

David Gwynn Morgan

Putting a Case

Garret FitzGerald

Using Satire

Martyn Turner

Martin Drury

Martin Drury has had a varied career as a secondary teacher, Arts Education Officer, Artistic Director of Team Theatre Company, Education Officer of the Arts Council and various other roles. He is at present the Director of The Ark, Europe's only custom designed arts centre for children.



Why I Write

My job as director of an arts centre for children requires me to write often. A review of my writing in the past week has shown me that I wrote *inter alia* an application to The Arts Council; a letter of invitation to the Dutch ambassador; a memorandum to staff; a brochure for distribution to schools about a visual arts project; a reference for a former colleague seeking promotion in her present place of work; a fax to a hotel in Lille reserving a room for several nights.

The greatest proportion of my writing is informational in its function. Doubtless this is common enough. What is less common perhaps is the fact that I address a range of readers from children to artists and from public servants to commercial sponsors. It is this range and the fact that I might be in any one of a variety of modes – supplicant, adviser, persuader or expert – that require me to be comfortable in a range of writing registers.

Like most signals sent by human beings, letters, memoranda and documents carry explicit messages as well as more implicit ones. Teachers are familiar with the notion of the hidden curriculum. In microcosm, letters and written communications carry such hidden signals. To use a phrase like *inter alia*, as I have done above, assumes certain things about the readership of this piece and in turn reveals certain things about me. To misjudge my readership may produce all sorts of unintended effects, even to the point of cancelling or obscuring the effect of my intended explicit message.

Very often, both consciously and unconsciously, I am calculating the effect of a letter on my reader. This will have a particular influence on the point of the continuum between very informal and very formal where the letter will rest. Most memos to staff will be informal and adopt a telegraphic style, ending in a deliberately friendly way, so as to counteract the effect of issuing a memo in the first place which is a rare form of communication in a small organisation. If I needed to, however, I could move a staff memo very far along towards the formal end of the continuum in the sure knowledge that the tone of the memo would bear much of the weight of its intended effect.

More generally, getting the attention of certain readers will involve me invoking a lexicon with which they are comfortable. Thus I might describe a programme of work in The Ark to different readers and invoke a different set of references. I might in representing it to the Department of Education, stress its cognitive dimension, its appropriateness to particular developmental levels, its contribution to the professional development of teachers and the sensitivity of its costs to schools serving disadvantaged areas. When informing the Arts Council I might address the aesthetic concerns of the programme, the employment of professional artists to implement the programme, the possibility of the project touring to other arts centres and so contributing to their programmes. When writing an application to a sponsor

seeking support for the project I will be conscious of indicating how association with the project will have public relations benefits for the company and I will indicate a range of ways in which more direct marketing benefits might accrue.

Perhaps this sounds very opportunistic, even cynical, but I believe that it reflects the way in which language operates as a communication tool. Just as it is impossible to imagine a 'pure' message, unsullied by any expectations of how it will be received, it seems to me that there is no such thing as pure 'information'. As with the gradated range of registers between very formal and very informal, a similar continuum operates between information and persuasion.

The text I wrote for the brochure promoting the Children's Season of the 1995 Dublin Theatre Festival is a case in point. The opening paragraph strikes a balance between information and persuasion:

The Ark's beautiful new theatre, seating 150 people in an intimate and well-equipped semi-circle, plays host to the best of children's theatre from Ireland and abroad. 2 weeks – 4 companies – 30 performances – 4,500 seats. Book early. This ever popular season is sure to be a complete sell-out.

The rhythm of this piece: a long opening sentences, which mirrors the scope of the space and its embrace of diverse work is followed by a series of staccatoed bursts of information which work cumulatively to create a sense of urgency within the reader. I hasten to add that I was not constructing the paragraph consciously in this way. Rather is this my analysis reviewing the brochure fifteen months after writing the text.

I think that much of the language of promotion and persuasion is about painting pictures or finding similes or analogies which mean something particular to the intended reader. The parables of the New Testament remain among the best examples of this kind of use of language. In persuading parents or teachers to bring children to a show, the colour of the language used in the promotional material, its emotional resonance, the allusive qualities of certain words, have a particular significance. Here for instance is how I tried to persuade adults to bring their children to a show called *Pyjamas* by an Italian company in the 1995 Theatre Festival:

This is that rare and wonderful thing: a play for everybody from 7 to 70, for children and for the child in all of us. *Pyjamas* is an exceptional piece: an hour of laughter, tenderness, and visual invention. It is the hour before bedtime when pyjamas, slippers, talcum powder, story books, umbrellas, pillows and, above all, two madcap and gifted Italian actors conjure up a series of games, fantasies and diversions. If you don't have or know a child, find one to take you to this show. *Pyjamas* is European clowning of a very high order.



Nuala O'Faolain

Nuala O'Faolain, a graduate of UCD and Oxford, has worked as a lecturer, a TV producer with the BBC and RTÉ and as a journalist and media commentator. She has published a memoir, *Are You Somebody*, and is now working on a romantic novel.



My Approach to Writing

I was always good at 'essays' in school, but I made nothing of that, because when I was a child I thought that writing essays was like more or less everything else we were taught – a completely useless skill, which would be utterly irrelevant to my future life. Well, now. Here I am. Middle-aged. And earning my living by writing an essay a week for *The Irish Times*. It is true that they're not about 'The Best Day of My Holidays' any more, or 'The History of a Penny'. But the same things the teachers of English wanted are what newspaper editors want of their columnists. There is a certain fixed length which you are asked to fill with words so chosen that they make your subject clear, and at the same time attract the scanning eye of the reader, and persuade that reader to pause, and read.

Columns must be focused, not vague. And language must be used attractively, not repellently. But while those qualities (when I achieve them) might make people read my pieces, they wouldn't make them agree with my arguments. And I am argumentative. I want to persuade people to my point of view, if I possibly can. I have never analysed how this is done. I just set off and use whatever rhetorical devices the momentum of my argument throws up. They're the usual ones – the same ones anyone would use in an argument around the family table, or in a pub conversation. Mockery of the opposite point of view, exaggeration, pathos, and so on. We all share certain conventions in the late-twentieth century English-speaking world, the conventions of persuasion amongst them.

It used to be thought that if you learnt certain tricks – certain ways of putting things – you could seduce almost anyone into agreeing with you. But not in our day. There are few things that mass audience is more alert to than insincerity. And few things more admired than sincerity. And I have been astonished to find that sincerity is indeed the secret of effective persuasion. When I sit down to choose a topic to write on I try to quieten myself enough to ask myself, 'What is it that's REALLY on your mind at the moment?' I might have been researching something quite different. There might be some other story in the news that I know I'd be expected to comment on. But if I can discover what I really want to say, my job is easy. At least – the writing part of it is easy, because I'm not writing at all – I'm just calling up words to say something.

The genuineness of the concern will dictate not just the topic but the manner of the column. For example, suppose someone wants to build a road through the old part of an Irish town I love, I'll change mood throughout the column; from sniping at the Philistines who want to do this, to nostalgia for the untouched town, to a lyrical fantasy to what the town might could be like if the money for the road was spent, instead, on conservation and improvement. I don't figure these moods out in advance. I listen to my own inner voice moving through them. Then I find words for them. The reader's ear knows that I began at the level of feeling, not verbal manipulation.

The stuff we did in English class long ago stands by me. When I grope for words, they're there, because a succession of teachers drowned me in them. Being too literate is good for you, because you can always pare expression away. But if you haven't the words to express yourself at all, you're stuck. The other girls used to give me a hard time. 'Did you swallow the dictionary?' they used to say. Well, I'm having the last laugh. I did swallow the dictionary, and its been eating and drinking to me since.

WOMAN FOR CAIRO ADDS INSULT TO INQUIRY

It's like a Paddy joke. Question: Whom did the Irish Government send to Cairo to a conference on reproduction with themes like 'Gender Equality, Equity, and Empowerment of Women'? Answer: a dozen men. They couldn't find a woman, not a single one, to empower. Equality and equity were too much for them. So they arranged an all-male delegation. Last Friday, just as they were leaving, and after furious protests, they added one woman to the dozen or so men. I don't know whether this is more pathetic than insulting or the other way round. All I know is, left to themselves, they saw nothing odd about sending only men.

If I were a Northern woman – or a Northern democrat of any gender or any persuasion – and I was at the Cairo conference, and I looked down at the Irish delegation in their suits – lining up with other all-male outfits like the mullahs and the Vatican priests – I would think twice before entrusting myself to an all-Ireland institution. And this is not a question of yoking one thing – sending the boys to a conference on having babies – to another thing, the great change in the North. They belong together. The IRA ended a stalemate last week. Now we move towards a future. Well, what future? In paragraph 6 of the Downing Street Declaration Albert Reynolds said that he would go out of his way to make the 'Irish State' acceptable to unionists. Anything – it is specifically said – which 'is not fully consistent with a modern democratic and pluralist society' Mr. Reynolds undertook to remove. Let me point out that blatant misogyny is inconsistent with a pluralist democracy.

The Cairo conference is about Population and Development, so it is, of course, a men-and-women's – a human – affair. At the centre of it there is reproduction (an activity in which women have all the experience there is, but let that pass). Reproductive issues are being looked at in the broad context of 'economic growth, sustainable development, and advances in the educational and economic status of women'.

The sheer weirdness of the Republic of Ireland in dispatching a group of men to discuss the status of women is one thing. But when it comes to the formal endorsement of objectives, weirdness comes very close to hypocrisy. The Irish delegation will be endorsing in Cairo the paragraph that enshrines the objective that 'governments, international organisations and non-governmental organisations should ensure that their personal policies and practices comply with the principle of equitable representation of both sexes, especially at the managerial and policy-making levels . . .' Equitable representation. 12:1. Ha, bloody ha.

Tom Kitt, Minister of State at Foreign Affairs, and Brendan Howlin, Minister for Health, don't have female counterparts, and neither does our Ambassador to Egypt, and neither does John Connor TD, who is going to represent the Overseas Aid sub-committee of the Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs. But the very fact that nearly all positions of importance in this society are filled by men should make them sensitive to co-opting – if only to give them a chance to learn from women coming along in the same field.

What is the point, after all, of one Labour Minister, Niamh Bhreathnach, bravely trying to combat gross gender imbalance in college governing bodies, when other Labour Ministers – in this case Ministers Spring and Howlin – think nothing of letting their departments send only men to a powerful, official, conference, while throwing a few pounds to women to go, second class, to the accompanying non-official conference? Could condescension be more blatant?

And don't tell me that there are no women in the Department of Health and Foreign Affairs, of in the Dáil, in the Seanad, who could contribute to a conference on reproductive issues. I don't at all criticise the male civil servants who are going. I'm sure they're experts at their jobs. But there's something wrong with the service if they have no female colleagues.

Such female colleagues would not be token women, any more than the male delegates are token men. But, if it is the case, as the composition of the Irish delegation suggests that there are no women in the Departments of Health or Foreign Affairs who could cope with going to Cairo, if they're all thick bimbos who can't be let out, then a token woman or two would have been welcome. A symbolic gesture doesn't always come amiss. I would rather there were a few women, even if they were just stuffed dummies, in the Irish seats at this conference, than that the world would think Ireland has no women worthy to be there.

These things matter. Not to all women, of course, but not to just a few lunatics, either. It hurts, it stings, to realise that a whole half of the human race – the half with which a woman has no choice but to identify – can be casually and comprehensively insulted. That maybe we're such nothings when the blokes decide who's going where, that they didn't even notice that there were no women in the delegation.

It makes you wonder what you can do, when you're persistently, year in year out, treated as second class. Can you hope ever to be treated with natural, not forced, respect? To have your experience accepted as fully authentic, and as being as valuable and weighty as male experience? The parallels with a minority are obvious. When you want equality that is what you want. Real equality, that doesn't even have to be thought about. That's the ideal, the thing yearned for.

It's against that burning desire that things like Cairo are measured. It seems like nothing to some people. But if they look around they'll see perfectly sensible,

good-humoured women not one bit amused at 12 or so men going off, on the taxpayers' money, with the blessing of Government, to a conference about having and rearing babies. Women turn away, almost spitting with helpless anger.

If I were a Northern democrat I would be impatient to see the Southern politicians, now very understandably garnering accolades, return as soon as convenient to the motes in their own eyes. The South is not so perfect. Northern Protestants habitually mention their distaste for Catholic Church control of education and healthcare in the republic, when they're asked to imagine a shared future. But the ethos of a society matters just as much as its institutional forms. What it respects and values, and the general standard of thoughtfulness the powerful in it display to the less powerful, Protestants, women, are even more expressive of its everyday self.

It is possible to make a life almost untouched by oppressive institutions in the Republic of Ireland. But a life free of overbearing male chauvinism? Of gender-based discrimination? Of being alternately bullied or ignored by this clique of men or that? You haven't a chance. The men don't even notice. And the Cairo affair indicates that even if they did notice, frankly, my dears, they don't give a damn.

Comment

This opinion column was prompted by the news that the Irish Government had arranged to send an all-male delegation to a UN conference in Cairo, the subject of which was the implications for the planet of women having babies, or alternatively, not having babies. This seemed to me a very obvious subject for a sarcastic column, because the decision offended female self-respect in two ways. One: the subject matter of the conference was of the utmost concern to the people who bear and on the whole rear the babies, women. Two: more than half the citizens of the Republic are women. The nation is never adequately represented by an all-male delegation.

However, obvious as the outrage was to me, it clearly wasn't obvious to the men who made the decision in the first place. It was those men and the men like them – at the top of the civil service, and in government – I was addressing. There was no difficulty in finding ways to jeer at the decision. Most readers, probably, and certainly most women readers, would have had exactly the same reaction to hearing about the all-male delegation as I did. So I didn't really need to argue.

Though I do argue, in a rapid kind of way. I took the opportunity of this gaffe happening just after peace came to the North, and there was hope of new, all-Ireland, co-operation, to imagine what a Northerner would think of it. Early in the piece, and again towards the end – it is always a good idea to try to enclose an argument within two references to the same thing – I try to show that this decision is not irrelevant to North/South relations. Women are treated in the South, I claim, with the same kind of arrogant thoughtlessness as the minority in the North. (This may seem an overstatement. But I did and do believe it.) And I searched out the quote from Albert Reynolds – which I'd vaguely noticed a few days before – to accuse the South of offering a sensitive democracy to the North, while slighting its own women citizens. A quote – especially a self-indicating one from the enemy – is a good weapon.

I try all the usual ploys. Scorn ('Equitable representation. Ha, bloody, ha.') Rhetorical questions, which pull the reader into the process of the argument ('What is the point, after all . . .'). A dramatised tone ('Don't tell me that there are no women . . .'). Exaggeration ('I would rather there . . . were stuffed dummies . . .'). But as I say, I didn't need to argue. The situation was much worse than that. The men who did this were so deaf and dumb to how women feel that no argument, I felt, would get through to them.

So the last few paragraphs are just a despairing outburst. All I was hoping for was to shame the more public relations-conscious politicians into not allowing this kind of thing to happen again (even if in their hearts they couldn't see what was wrong with it). So the phrase about '12 men or so going off – on the taxpayers' money and with the blessing of government – to a conference about having and rearing babies' was deliberate and important. The mention of tax payers transforms us outraged women into outraged citizens. If we were just outraged women, and there were no element of public spending, the men who make this kind of decision could more easily write the protests off.

My mood of bitter anger was genuine. I imagined a group of old, grey, slow, male civil servants, and imagined them saying – surprised by the stir the all-male delegation caused – 'Oh, it's those bloody women again.' I imagined their contempt. It was easy to – rhetorically – invite Northern democrats to join me in imagining that contempt. The quote from Clark Gable in *Gone With the Wind* ends the column smartly enough. Its rhythms are brisk. But its associations are too glamorous and pleasant for the overall feeling of the piece. I should have found a more bleak note to end on. 'Frankly, my dear . . .' makes me sound merely exasperated.

David Gwynn Morgan



The writer is Professor of Law at UCC. In addition to legal text-books, he has written a certain amount of journalism on constitutional law for such newspapers as: *The Irish Times*, *New Society* and various newspapers in Africa and Asia.

Why I Write

It is rather humbling to write under a banner bearing the title ‘Why I write’ since that phrase is the title of one of George Orwell’s best-known essays. For of all the twentieth century authors working in the field of political writing, it was he who struggled hardest to think his own thoughts, free of extraneous influences like fashion or propaganda, and then to express them on paper in a clear and readable way.

I write mainly in two fields: technical legal writing, which I shall not mention any more here; and, secondly, that small corner of political writing, which one may call constitutional law for lay-people. This often takes on a surprisingly central position in the politics of this state because so much of political change and controversy has come packaged as constitutional law.

Let us turn to clear writing. There is no point in writing at all unless one writes clearly. For otherwise people won’t read you and the writing will have been a total waste of time. We live in an age where more and more people are writing and, in the jumble of other activities for entertainment and other media instruction, fewer and fewer people are reading. They can only be enticed to read what you have written, if you take pains to be clear and accessible so that you can at least say, ‘I may be clearly wrong; but at least I shall be wrong clearly.’

In regard to writing clearly, law offers peculiar opportunities and also peculiar difficulties. Admittedly, it could be said law exists in the form of people obeying it or suffering some disagreeable consequences, if they do not. However law exists at its purest in the form of language. This sets a premium on exact use of language in the form either of a faithful summary – or, even, quotation – of the law. Neither of these is necessarily palatable so that the writer has to walk the tight-rope between accuracy and boredom.

In writing about law, one particular difficulty lies in the fact that it has its own jargon. Much worse, for various historical reasons, it would be tedious to recount, often the technical nature of legal terminology is obscured by the fact that the jargon consists of ordinary words upon which the law has foisted its own distinctive meaning. For example: common law; leading question; misdemeanour; convention; government. Unless this difficulty is kept well in mind, here is a trap for the unwary reader. Possibly, the best way of avoiding it is not to use jargon in the first place, something which can usually be achieved if one makes a not impossible effort.

Next, one can usefully distinguish between the law – its content, field of application and means of enforcement; and on the other hand, the policy underlying the law. In other words: what is the objective of the law; is the law broadly successful in its objective; who benefits; who loses? (the ‘why’ questions

rather than the 'how' questions). Generally speaking, in conversations with lay-people, which is what a newspaper article really is, policy will loom larger than law. But the important point is always to be clear as to whether one is writing about law or policy: for a silly law may still be the law.

Basically law is a serious matter dealing in such hard matters as: prison sentences; foreclosing a mortgage; or contempt of court. It is said that the only joyful character in the law's rich galaxy of colourful hypothetical personalities is 'an employee off on a frolic of his own'. The fact that the law is taken seriously (and takes itself seriously) means that the writer who may be the only expert in the area who is willing to write in the public prints, has an obligation to get it right and to get it exact. If he fails in this duty, awful consequences may follow. Some-one may be unfairly disturbed or misled or the newspaper may be sued for libel.

Since the law is usually a grave matter, one ought not to despise a little joke or irrelevance to ease the path of the reader. The occasional well-chosen quotation may also help: it isn't 'showing-off', if one has something worth showing off.

Finally, how much does the reader want to know? Selecting the correct quantity of subject matter is a more difficult question of judgement than it might seem. The reader in all probability will not want to know everything that the writer knows on the subject. If one includes too many illustrations of the same argument; too many incidental points, then he or she will become bored. And if one keeps it up much longer, he or she will stop reading altogether. Remember Hemingway's remark: 'The test of how good a thing is lies in how much good stuff you can throw away.'

In the case of law, I feel that if the reader has chosen to read the article at all, then it is safe to make the assumption that he or she is a member of that large and distinguished group, the hob lawyers, in whom a fairly high level of basic knowledge and understanding can be taken for granted. Nevertheless one is under a duty to recall that one is writing about a fairly technical area for a largely lay-audience. So while too much repetition is undesirable, an epigrammatic summary of what has gone before, especially in a fairly long piece of writing, helps to punch home the message and reassure the reader that he is on the same wave length as the writer. Do not despise the occasional use of sentences beginning: 'In other words . . .' or 'in summary,' or 'the thing to avoid is . . .'

To end on a dying fall – something which should be avoided where possible – I learned a lot of the above, the hard way, namely: from experience (that is the name that men give to their mistakes). What I mean by this is that, as with other crafts, most of the things one needs to know about writing can only be learned by doing rather than watching. Good hunting!

A recent example of my legal journalism is *The Irish Times* article (November 15, 1996) which is reproduced below. The background to this was that the Government 'de-listed' (or terminated the appointment of) Judge Lynch as a member of the Special Criminal Court, in August, 1996. However, the judge was not notified of this decision and consequently went on carrying out his duties. It seemed possible that serious legal consequences (e.g. the release of prisoners on 'a technicality') might ensue. The central point of the article, however, was not the consequences themselves but whether the Minister for Justice (whose Department had failed to notify the judge) should herself be held 'responsible' and also what that pregnant word might mean. One of the ways in which the Government sought to show that it had a firm purpose of amendment was to announce the establishment of a Courts Service, and a Prison Board, in each case on a new footing, independent of the Department of Justice. This feature of the episode is referred to, towards the end of the article. Now, as they say, read on.

IS THE DOCTRINE OF INDIVIDUAL MINISTERIAL RESPONSIBILITY SENSIBLE, FAIR OR USEFUL?

Collective Government responsibility to the Dáil is what brought down the Reynolds Government (so far as technical constitutional doctrines were responsible for that unbelievable episode). It is a distinct, though parallel, doctrine – that of individual ministerial responsibility – which is engaged in the case of Mrs. Owen.

With ministerial responsibility the type of error which attracts a duty to resign may be of two broad types. The first of these is some personal act of indiscretion or mismanagement. The other, which apparently arises in regard to the present episode, concerns an error made presumably by a civil servant in the Minister's department.

Plainly, the essential difficulty of the doctrine is whether the minister should be responsible for the acts or omissions of a huge number of civil servants. Is such a doctrine sensible, fair or useful? One response, which Mrs. Owen appears to adopt in this case, is to say that she is 'accountable' in that she must relay information and answer questions, but not 'culpate' in the sense of being subject to a sanction if things go wrong.

The trouble with this distinction is that it appears to leave no person against whom a sanction, however well-merited, can be applied.

It is worth noting that Seán McEntee drew a similar distinction in 1961 in the context of a scheme under the Mental Treatment Act, for the involuntary detention of mental patients. This required the permission of the Minister for Health for every six-month period of detention. The junior civil servant whose task it was to pass on the applications for detention to the Minister became ill and failed to do his work. The result was that almost 300 patients were falsely imprisoned.

Responding to calls for his resignation, Mr. McEntee said: 'In these matters there must be some realism. It is all very well to say that constitutional theory requires that the Minister should accept full responsibility for everything the Department does. But is there anything I could possibly have done to ensure that this would not have occurred?'

While there is no reference to individual responsibility in the Constitution, it has been accepted that the rule does exist here: as has been evident over the past few days, politicians certainly speak the language of responsibility. Yet an obvious difficulty with the enforcement of this rule arises from the fact that there is no non-partisan agency which can establish authoritatively that the convention has been broken. Usually, as in the present case, the Minister resists calls for resignation, and the Taoiseach declares or implies that he regards the issue as one of confidence in the Government, thereby shifting the matter on to the plane of collective responsibility.

The defects of the individual ministerial doctrine, as a way of providing accountability to the Dáil and the public and imposing sanctions in the case of a significant mistake, are easy to identify. It is more difficult to devise a practicable alternative. One suggestion, which has taken centre stage recently, is to establish bodies which enjoy a semi-detached status from the Government, the Oireachtas and the political system in general.

The two most recent proposed additions to this family, the Courts Service and the Prison Board, were unveiled by the Government earlier this week. Leaving aside the murky circumstances of their birth, these developments seem very desirable. Critics have expressed concern, however, over the statement that the Minister for Justice will retain some vestigial responsibility for these new bodies. But there is no way one can avoid such a situation.

If the critics really want these bodies to be accountable, clearly they must be accountable to some public body. And presumably this means, in one way or the other, accountable to the Oireachtas. It is inevitable that a Minister, presumably the Minister for Justice, would have to speak on behalf of the Court Services in the same way as the Taoiseach accounts to the Dáil for the office of the Attorney General. Presumably members of the Prisons Board could be subject to the scrutiny of the Dáil committee system. However, since most of the members of the Courts Service Board would be judges, it would be most unlikely they would agree to appear before the committee. That, inevitably, means that the Minister must be involved.

In short, people who want a Courts Service which is both detached from the hurly-burly of the political process and also fully 'accountable' may be asking for the impossible. The best compromise may be to appoint trusted people as members of the Courts Service and then to trust them, accepting whatever form of annual report they publish and without requiring anything further in the way of accountability.

There is a final point. It is asserted confidently, by the Government, that the Courts Service will be set up next week on a non-statutory basis. This seems very precipitate. It would surely be better to wait until the service can be set up on a statutory basis, lest it take some decision which has been vested legally in the Minister for Justice and cannot be transferred save with the appropriate legal sanction. Accidents, after all, can happen, as the past week has once again demonstrated.

Comment

The following features of the article may be worthy of emphasising:

- It is always a good thing to try to start with an arresting or alluring opening. Most readers begin at the beginning and, often, if they do not find anything to their taste there, will not proceed to sample any further. Secondly, any material which is needed to understand the rest of the article

– the ‘framework’ as it were – should obviously be given early on so that the reader knows approximately the direction in which he or she is being driven. The opening of my article does give some help in regard to the second of these two objectives; but is not very good on the first.

- In the fifth paragraph, there is a quotation of what Mr. McEntee had said to the Dáil. This takes us back to what I said in the earlier part of this essay, about the need for quotation in writing about legal subjects. I thought the quotation was justifiable on this occasion since it was short, apt and fairly punchy.
- In the original article, I reflected in the ninth paragraph on the fact that the establishment of an independent Courts Services had been considered earlier; but its actual establishment only hurried forward, when it suited the Government to do so, because of the political crisis. I had said about this that the Courts Service had been ‘born by Caesarean section’. The newspaper left out this remark. When I protested to the relevant editor, at the loss of my only and rather minor joke, the response was: ‘Someone who has just had a Caesarean section might not think it all that funny.’ On balance, I believe that the newspaper’s judgement was correct. What do you think?
- It is well, if possible, to end that article not just by stopping – but by some kind of a ‘rounding off’. This may be a summary which, if it accords with the reader’s open impression of what the writing was about, helps to confirm that he or she is finishing on the same wave-length as the writer and, thus, that they have probably kept reasonable company throughout. Or it may be, as above, a little squib or dart which follows on from the material of the article.

Garret FitzGerald

After a career as a businessman and academic, Garret FitzGerald became Taoiseach of Ireland. He is now retired and writes frequently on a range of social, economic and political issues.



Why I Write – And How!

There are a number of reasons why I write. First of all my father wrote poems, articles, fairy stories and several plays – while my mother wrote letters to her many relatives. In their youth they had both learned shorthand and typing and I grew up to the sound of them rattling away on their typewriters. Every 20 years or so they replaced their typewriters and their old ones were handed down to my three elder brothers and myself – I, as the youngest child, receiving the oldest typewriter!

When I was seven my next brother, then thirteen, copied out from a book in the National Library some of the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of the Quechua language of the Inca civilisation in Peru. He persuaded me to type out his notes on the late nineteenth century typewriter, I had been allocated, using two fingers and a thumb. That was a big mistake, because I never learnt to type properly, using all my fingers. As a result, being manually clumsy, I still hit all the wrong keys, and on a word processor have to go over every line again to eliminate the extra letters that I have hit by mistake.

Once I had learned to type, however badly, I wrote long letters as a teenager and started writing articles when I was 19 or 20, hoping to earn some money. After I secured my first job, in Aer Lingus, and got married when I was 21, I began to supplement my income by writing about Ireland for papers in other English-speaking countries – and about international affairs for the *Irish Independent*. My knowledge of international affairs soon became literally encyclopaedic: for I acquired the material for these articles in the National Library from the latest edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, updated by material from a current news service known as Keesings Contemporary Archives! For many years I earned in this way about £350 per annum, the equivalent of about £7,500 a year today.

Eventually writing articles became a habit: I found I enjoyed telling people things, both facts and also my ideas about politics, and later economics. Since the school-yard in Belvedere College I have always enjoyed arguing my case, trying to persuade others of my point of view.

I also liked lecturing, but I soon found that this requires a quite different approach: more informal and relaxed in style, with a good deal of repetition, and as many humorous asides as one can think of on one's feet.

Presenting information pure and simple is relatively easy; arguing a case, or seeking to persuade readers or an audience, is a lot more complex.

Of course information and argument may be complementary: it is often necessary to present certain facts before entering upon an argument. This is illustrated in the example below – an article I wrote in *The Irish Times* at the end of 1996, about the possible impact upon our Voluntary

Health Insurance Scheme of the entrance to the Irish market of a competitor in the form of a British firm, BUPA.

To make it easier to follow the analysis of this article set out below, I have numbered the paragraphs, although paragraph numbering is quite common in the case of reports.

Pars. 1-4 of this article set out the way our present VHI system works, i.e. through a system called 'community rating', under which usually healthier young people pay the same premiums as – and thus cross-subsidise – generally less healthy older people.

Par. 5 says something about other countries which have, or may be thinking of introducing, a similar system, and about the view of the European Commission in Brussels on community rating.

Pars. 6 and 7 explain why and how our VHI, hitherto a monopoly insurer, now has to face competition, and Pars. 8-10 explain how the British company, BUPA, has set about competing with the VHI and why the form of competition proposed by BUPA could undermine the community-rating basis of our present VHI system.

Par. 11 shows this danger has been foreseen and that a member of the Government had earlier warned that any attempt by a new competitor to undermine community-rating would not be permitted.

Pars. 12 and 13 explain why there is a threat not just to the VHI but to our whole health service system, and Par. 14 explains how and why the Minister for Health had reacted to this threat some days earlier.

The final Pars. 15-17 argue that BUPA should be stopped from introducing their scheme in its present form, and stress the urgency of taking action to this effect.

A problem which I have in writing articles like this is keeping my sentences short. My instinct is to get all my ideas on one point, including any qualifications to the point or argument, into a single sentence. Perhaps sub-consciously I am afraid that if I omit some qualification from the sentence and put it into a subsequent sentence, the unqualified sentence might be taken out of context and misconstrued!

If you look at the second sentence in Par. 14 you will see an example of this over-elaboration: the sentence is really far too long and complex for easy reading. Leaving aside the brief parenthesis which gives the name of the Minister for Health, there are no less than four parenthetical or qualifying clauses which interrupt the flow of the sentence. In retrospect it would have been better to have broken it up and re-written it something like this:

‘The Attorney-General is reported to have advised the Minister for Health, Michael Noonan, that the BUPA scheme was illegal. Accordingly on Friday week the Minister made a cautiously-worded announcement on the matter. He pointed out that the BUPA insurance package comprised a community-rated indemnity product and an age-rated cash plan. And he said that this ‘may . . . contravene etc. etc.’

No one should follow my bad example in relation to long sentences!

Incidentally I find English a difficult language in a number of important respects. One of these is the

ambiguous position that sometimes arises in connection with the sequence of tenses. Thus in my revised version of that over-long sentence I have used the past tense twice: ‘ . . . was illegal’ in the first of the new shorter sentences, and ‘comprised’ in the third new sentence. Given that I was talking about a scheme that exists today, not about something in the past, should I have used the present tense, as I had actually thought of doing? Perhaps on reflection I should, but I am still not sure.

I also have difficulty with the order of words in English (especially in my too-long sentences!), and I often shift words around several times when I am revising an article, which I always do at least twice.

Thus in that same too-long sentence, should I, perhaps, have brought the words ‘on Friday week’ back to an earlier point, thus: ‘on Friday week the Minister for Health, Michael Noonan, announced in cautious language . . .’? I think perhaps I should: for one thing, this would have eliminated one parenthesis involving two commas, those before and after the phrase, ‘in cautious language’.

I can see now quite clearly that I should have revised that article more than twice!

Now, you will have seen that this article presents in logical order the points I wanted to make. But that’s not necessarily the best way to proceed. Indeed most people believe that one should start an article with a striking sentence or paragraph, perhaps highlighting a key point, or setting out at the very beginning the conclusion one is going to reach. Or, perhaps better still, make the readers curious by some ‘teasing’ reference at the outset that will encourage them to read on in order to satisfy the curiosity thus aroused!

In arguing a case, how selective may one be, choosing points helpful to one’s argument, and ignoring others that are unhelpful? Whatever about the ritual of politics – where one is positively expected to be a bit one-sided! – in normal journalism the other side of the argument should be presented, together with a reasoned statement of why one has chosen to come down in favour of one particular view. Of course articles by people who want to put a point of view to which they are strongly committed are also useful, but these are not in the strictest sense journalism. And even when arguing a particular case it will usually be more effective to state or refute the opposite view rather than simply ignoring it.

Finally the quality of journalism, as distinct from partisan advocacy, depends upon the quality of research done and the thought given to the subject. If facts or figures are involved, they should be carefully checked, rather than relying on memory, and if at all possible checking should be with primary sources; it is unwise as well as lazy to rely on the home-work someone else may have done or not done.

Writing articles can be remunerative but it can also be a satisfying occupation informing and entertaining readers. As someone who for over fifty years has written well over five million words, I recommend it warmly!

PS. My mother told me that the way to measure the length of an article was by counting five letters and a space as one word – multiplying the average number of words arrived at in this way by the number of lines on the page and then multiplying that by the number of pages. That saves counting the actual words.

THE HEALTH INSURANCE THREAT

1. Our three-tier health service system, comprising a medical card system and a general medical service system, topped up by a voluntary health insurance

system, is, no doubt, open to criticism on a number of grounds. If in the past we had been a wealthier country we might have arranged things differently. But this system has the merit of ensuring that all our people are looked after regardless of income and of age. The contrast with the much richer United States is particularly striking: in most US States, provision there for the poor and the elderly is inadequate and for some totally absent.

2. By European standards we are unusual in that no less than two-fifths of our people fund their own health care through a non-profit-making State-run health insurance scheme; in Britain the proportion doing so through more than 20 private companies is only 11 per cent.

3. Under our system everyone pays the same premiums for any given level of cover regardless of their age or state of health. No one has to fear that when they retire on incomes lower than earned during their working lives, and/or when their health deteriorates, they will be required to pay increased premiums that they cannot afford or else lose their health insurance cover.

4. This is achieved through cross-subsidisation: the younger population pay the same premiums but make less heavy calls on the health services, and thus in effect subsidise the older population in the scheme, a process that is described as community rating.

5. A somewhat similar system operates in Australia and in three American States (New York, Vermont and Minnesota). In Europe it exists in the Netherlands and there are apparently proposals to introduce it in Germany and in France, where President Chirac has expressed strong support for it. And two of the relevant EU Commissioners, Monti and Flynn, have expressed themselves strongly in favour of community rating.

6. A disadvantage of the Irish system, however, has been that the VHI is a monopoly, and there has been general recognition of the desirability of allowing competition with it on a community rating basis. Provision for such competition is in any event an EU requirement.

7. Accordingly a Health Insurance Act was passed in 1994 providing for such competition, provided that it was on a community rating basis, i.e. not discriminating between clients on the basis of age or health risks. In order not to interfere with normal insurance provision, this legislation had to be limited to health insurance, exempting policies unrelated to health insurance which provide normal cash benefit when people attain a certain age.

8. It is on the basis of the provisions of this Act that a major British health insurance company BUPA has decided to extend its activities to Ireland from 1st January next. Its proposed scheme involves a basic premium for 'essential services', which provide cover more or less equivalent to VHI's Plan A at a roughly similar premium.

9. BUPA is not offering alternative Plans with higher cover, equivalent to VHI's Plans B to E. Instead they are offering what they describe as 'Cash Plans' with premiums which for people under age 50 are substantially lower than the VHI rates for the equivalent Plans B to E. For cover equivalent to Plans C to E they are about 20 per cent lower but are jacked up by 30 per cent at age 50 and a further 10 per cent at age 55.

10. In order to evade the provisions of the legislation designed to safeguard community rating these 'Cash Plans' are, however, expressed as being unrelated to health needs. But they are, of course, a very thinly disguised health insurance provision, their purpose being self-evident: they would enable BUPA to undercut the VHI for all age groups under 50, leaving our State scheme to carry the high-risk over-50s.

11. This scheme has been proposed in defiance of the fact that last May the Minister of State for Health made it clear in the Dáil that 'any move which would threaten or undermine the core value of Community Rating will be met decisively either by the use of existing laws and regulations or, if necessary, by new legislation. Community Rating has served the Irish people too well over a long period of time to allow any interference with it to be tolerated.'

12. It should be made clear that the effect of the proposed BUPA scheme would be disastrous, not just for VHI but for our entire health service. For, faced with the loss of premiums from the three-quarters of their members who are under-50 and who make limited demands on health insurance, the VHI could stay in business only by raising astronomically the premiums on the one-quarter of their members who are over 50 years of age.

13. This would inevitably lead to many members becoming unable to afford to remain in the scheme, while others would downgrade their cover. This would in turn entail a major shift from private to public treatment, disturbing the established private/public balance and shifting much more of the burden of care on to the already over-loaded public hospital system. The cost to the taxpayer of replacing private by public beds on a substantial scale could ultimately become very large indeed.

14. Clearly we cannot afford, and must not tolerate, this kind of undermining of our health services. Accordingly, following receipt of advice from the Attorney-General, which is reported to have found the BUPA scheme illegal, the Minister for Health, Michael Noonan, announced on Friday week, in cautious language, that in effect the BUPA integrated insurance package comprising a community-rated indemnity product and an age-rated cash plan 'may . . . contravene the definition of a health insurance contract as set out in the Health Insurance Act, 1994'. And he added that eight days ago his Department met BUPA to begin intensive discussion with them on their schemes, and that he hoped recourse to legal action could be avoided.

15. Given that BUPA proposes to start selling its scheme on 1st January, it is vital that before that date this issue be satisfactorily dealt with, by the withdrawal of the present BUPA schemes and their replacement by a genuine community-rated scheme. Should this not be agreed within the next three days, the Minister should not hesitate to take the necessary legal action to halt the initiation of the present BUPA scheme.

16. Moreover, if necessary, he should announce at the same time his intention to announce amending legislation to remove any purported ambiguity in the present law, upon which BUPA may have sought to rely. There would, I am sure, be unanimity between the political parties on whatever small amendment might be required.

17. What is at stake over these few days is far too important to our society for anything to be left to chance.

Martyn Turner

Martyn Turner graduated from QUB in 1971 and joined the Belfast current affairs magazine 'Fortnight' where he became editor. He has been a political cartoonist with *The Irish Times* since 1976. He has won many awards for his work and has published fourteen books of cartoons.



Writing

To tell you the truth – and don't I always? – I haven't the foggiest notion how I write so I'm looking forward to reading this as much, or as little, as you are.

I write, and draw, and satirise effortlessly, without giving it a thought (I know, and it shows). I don't know any other way of doing it. It's me. A note to the milkman will contain at least one pithy retort and a quick sketch. My marriage vows probably included a dark and sarcastic quip after the 'I do' which only myself and herself would have heard. Can't help it. It's what I do. Always had the last word in teacher/pupil intercourse (still making intercourse jokes after all these years) in the classroom and have the scars to prove it.

You don't ask someone how they ride a bike, do you? If you started thinking about pushing down on one pedal, maintaining balance and posture, keep your eyes open for oncoming juggernauts, lightly on the brake, push down on the other pedal, don't sway, pull up with the left leg – you would, ninety nine times out of a hundred, fall off. Of course you don't have to believe a word of this . . . it's satire.

I can tell you what I think I do when I write. Firstly, as herself is wont to remind me, I always write about myself, stuff that's going on in my head. And I drag in family, friends, relatives, whoever, and abuse their rights to privacy and dignity in the hope of getting a cheap laugh and scoring a point. This isn't completely true. I always write about a character in my head who approximates to myself but who is a lot more naïve than myself and who is blissfully able to edit what comes out of his mouth. I wish I could do that in real life. I'd get out more. This character has a voice. I hear it all the time as I write and I try to write exactly as he speaks. So I use misspellings and bad grammar and italics and capital letters. WOT FOR? . . . For effect. So, if I have a grand theory on writing it is this . . . write as you speak (and hope that you speak rite).

The satire bit is, I plead again, just the way I think. A lady psychiatrist on the Pat Kenny Show was once explaining how, as we reach adulthood we take a lot for granted, assume things, stop questioning. 'Except Martyn Turner', she said, and explained that I was the perpetual child who sees that none of the Emperors have any clothes – except I get paid for it, and I'm 2 metres tall – quite big for a child. I just think of it as seeing events and attitudes and situations at their simplest, reducing them to their basics and seeing what gives.

The accompanying piece is, I guess, an example. 'Putting Marx on Your Card' was written for *The Irish Times* one summer when I was filling in for Maeve Binchy (but without the book sales). It has the usual

ingredients; politics, golf, embarrassment for a close member of my family, and a completely watertight argument proving that the most right wing organisations in the world are actually the most left wing. To think, *Irish Times* readers got all this and the rest of the newspaper too. What a bargain at 85p., now also available on the Internet, includes political cartoons too . . .

Speaking of which. When I do the little sketches, as my non *Irish Times* reading neighbours are wont to call my cartoons, the technique is different. Writing means expanding on an idea, wandering around, trying to be coherent and ending the journey 800 word later. Cartoons are meant to be simple, pithy, to the point and immediately impactful (nice word, use if yourself if you like).

There is an old cartoonists tale which is recounted wherever old cartoonists gather (yes, they are pretty boring events, come to think of it) which involves a cartoonist trying to sell a cartoon to the editor of the *New Yorker*.

‘How much do you want for this cartoon?’ says Harold Ross (the editor).

‘\$300’ says the cartoonist.

‘But it’s only got three lines of a caption’, says Ross.

‘If I’d got it down to 2 lines,’ says the cartoonist, ‘I would have been looking for \$500.’

(note; these are rates of pay unknown to Irish cartoonists.)

Trouble is I’m worthy by nature so I spend most days trying to cut my cartoon captions down to size. I tend to think in words rather than pictures, not necessarily the best way for a cartoonist. However, the space I am afforded in *The Irish Times* every day allows me to use strip cartoon formats. So I can write more, sometimes, than I would if I was working for a different paper. I tried to think what technique these cartoons involve and have reached the conclusions that they are intended to lead the reader up the garden path in the first few panels and then hopefully drop them over the cliff in the last one. It would be the same technique a stand up comedian would use. The panels slow down the reader, add timing to the piece. Sometimes the penultimate panel is empty, to add a pause and thus emphasise the punch line. I never thought of that before. Here are two examples of the non strip things chosen at random, one featuring a politician, and the other about a teacher’s strike. Thank heavens no teachers will be reading this.

PUTTING MARX ON YOUR CARD

We recently had a guest from across the water who devoted some portion of his visits to regaling us with the wonders of Thatcherism. Despite what I can see as evidence to the contrary, he assured us that a return to primitive selfish economics was doing Britain a power of good. ‘Hard work’, he said, ‘bicycle riding in search of same, etc., never did any harm. They’re being mollycoddled.’ Later in the week we went to play golf. We reached the first green, a par five. I was 12 feet away after three shots. He was on the edge of the green after four.

‘How many shots are you giving me?’ he said.

‘Shots!’ I said, ‘Shots! I thought you were a Thatcherite!’

‘What do you mean?’ he said.

‘Well,’ I expounded, ‘as I understand it you are a Thatcherite. You believe in Standing On Your Own Two Feetedness. I happen to be a better golfer than you. My handicap, at the last count, was 21 shots better than yours . . . I wasn’t born with a low handicap. It was achieved by the sweat of my brow. I spent many, many days as a teenager slaving away on a golf course when I could have been going to school, learning how to be a financier or playing snooker. I have

callouses on my hand from the thousands of shots I hit on the practice ground

...

'If I understand your present philosophy right you believe that it is open to everyone to play off single figures. It only takes application, good old-fashioned hard work. If I start giving you *short* it would only encourage you in your slothfulness. Where would the incentive be to better yourself? Why should I give you a hand out of shots just because you happened to be, in the economics of golf, worse off than myself. I wouldn't insult your dignity by feather-bedding you.'

He tried to speak but I was in full flow now.

'You have opened my eyes,' I said, 'I now see the Handicapping System for what it is. A socialist conspiracy intent on making us all equal. Merit on the golf course achieves no reward. It seems to me that the Handicapping section of the GUI must be some sort of front for Moscow. They must be, at the very least, members of the Worker's party of the Emmet Stagg wing of the Labour Party. I thank you. After 30 years I at last realise that golf is a game played by capitalists but organised by communists. I will have a new respect for those people in blazers with badges that run the whole show.'

'Is that a no?', he asked, 'am I not getting any shots?'

'It's up to you', I said. 'We can play it your way, survival of the fittest. Or we can play according to the true revolutionary Marxist principles of the game and I will support you, my weaker comrade. And anyway, I suppose I should be kind to my father.'



3. The Language of Narrative

From Reading to Writing

John McGahern

Jackdaw Habits

John Quinn

Shaping a Story

Éilís Ní Dhuibne

Portrait of a Friend

Patricia Donlon

Reflections on Place

Tim Robinson

John McGahern

John McGahern was born in County Leitrim. He became a primary school teacher and then a full-time writer. He is now recognised as one of Ireland's finest writers of fiction. Amongst his most celebrated works are *The Barracks* and his latest novel, *Amongst Women*.



Reading and Writing

I came to write through reading. There were few books in our house, and reading for pleasure was not approved of. It was thought to be dangerous, like pure laughter. In my case, I came to read through pure luck. I had great good fortune when I was ten or eleven. I was given the run of a library. I believe it changed my life and without it I would never have become a writer. The library belonged to the Moroneys. They were Protestants. Old Willie Moroney lived with his son, Andy, in their two-storied stone house, which was surrounded by a huge orchard and handsome stone outhouses. Willie must have been well into his eighties then, and Andy was about forty. Their natures were so stress-free that it is no wonder they were both to live into their nineties. Old Willie, the beekeeper, with his great beard and fondness for St. Ambrose and Plato, 'the Athenian bee, the good and the wise . . . because his words glowed with the sweetness of honey', is wonderfully brought to life in David Thomson's *Woodbrook*. Willie had not gone upstairs since his wife's death, nor had he washed, and he lived in royal untidiness in what had once been the dining room, directly across the stone hallway from the library, that dear hallway with its barometer and antlered coatrack, and the huge silent clock. The front door, with its small brass plate shaped into the stone for the doorbell, was never opened. All access to the house was by the back door, up steps from the farmyard, and through the littered kitchen to the hallway and stairs and front rooms.

David Thomson describes the Moroneys as landless, which is untrue, for they owned a hundred-and-seventy acres of the sweetest land on the lower plains of Boyle, itself some of the best limestone land in all of Ireland. The farm was beautifully enclosed by roads which ran from the high demesne wall of Rockingham to the broken walls of Oakport. The Moroneys should have been wealthy. They had to have money to build that stone house in the first place, to build and slate the stone houses that enclosed the farmyard, to acquire the hundreds of books that line the walls of the library: David Thomson, though, is right in spirit, for Willie and Andy had all the appearance of being landless. Most of Andy's time was taken up with the study of astronomy. Willie lived for his bees. He kept the hives at the foot of the great orchard. They both gathered apples, stored them on wooden shelves in the first of the stone houses of the farmyard, and they sold them by the bucketful, and seemed glad enough for the half-crowns they received. As a boy, I was sent to buy apples, somehow fell into conversation with Willie about books, and was given the run of the library. There was Scott, Dickens, Meredith and Shakespeare, books by Zane Grey and Jeffrey Farnol, and many, many books about the Rocky Mountains. I didn't differentiate, I read for nothing but pleasure, the way a boy nowadays might watch endless television dramas. Every week or fortnight, for years, I'd return with five or six books in my oilcloth shopping bag and take five or six away. Nobody gave me direction or advice. There was a tall slender ladder for getting to books on the high shelves. Often, in the incredibly cluttered kitchen, old Willie would ask me about the books over tea and bread. I think it was more out of the need for company than any real curiosity. I remember one such morning vividly. We were discussing a book I had returned and drinking tea with

bread and jam. All I remember about that particular book was that it was large and flat and contained coloured illustrations, of plants and flowers probably, and these would have interested Willie because of the bees. The morning was one of those still true mornings in summer before the heat comes, the door open onto the yard. Earlier that morning he must have gone through his hives – the long grey beard was stained with food and drink and covered his shirt front – and while he was taking some jam it fell into the beard and set off an immediate buzzing. Without interrupting the flow of his talk, he shambled to the door, extracted the two or three errant bees caught in the beard, and flung them into the air of the yard.

I continued coming to the house for books after the old beekeeper's death, but there was no longer any talk of books. Andy developed an interest in the land, but it proved to be as impractical as astronomy.

I have often wondered why no curb was put on my reading at home. I can only put it down to a prejudice in favour of the gentle, eccentric Moroneys, and Protestants in general. At the time, Protestants were pitied because they were bound for hell in the next world, and they were considered to be abstemious, honest, and morally more correct than the general run of our fellow Catholics. The prejudice may well have extended to their library. The books may have been thought to be as harmless as their gentle owners. For whatever reason, the books were rarely questioned, and as long as they didn't take from work or prayer I was allowed to read without hindrance.

There are no days more full in childhood than those days that, in a way, were not lived at all, the days lost in a favourite book. I remember waking out of one such book in the middle of the large living room in the barracks, to find myself surrounded. My sisters had unlaced and removed one of my shoes and placed a straw hat on my head. Only when they began to move the wooden chair on which I sat away from the window did I wake out of the book – to their great merriment. Nowadays, only when I am writing am I able to find again that complete absorption when all sense of time is lost, maybe once or twice in a year. It is a strange and complete kind of happiness, of looking up from the pages, thinking it is still nine or ten in the morning, to discover that it is past lunchtime; and there is no longer anyone who will test the quality of the absence by unlacing and removing a shoe.

Sometimes I wonder if it would have made any difference if my reading had been guided or structured, but there is still no telling such things in an only life. Pleasure is by no means an infallible, critical guide, W.H. Auden wrote, but it is the least fallible. That library and those two gentle men were, to me, a pure blessing.

A time comes when the way we read changes. This change is linked with our growing consciousness, consciousness that we will not live forever and that all human life is essentially in the same fix. We find that we are no longer reading books for the story and that all stories are more or less the same story; and we begin to come on certain books that act like mirrors. What they reflect is something dangerously close to our own life and the society in which we live. A new, painful excitement enters the way we read. We search out these books, and these books only, the books that act as mirrors. The quality of the writing becomes more important than the quality of the material out of which the pattern or story is shaped. We find that we can no longer read certain books that once we could not put down; other books that previously were tedious take on a completely new excitement and meaning; even the *Rocky Mountains* has to become an Everywhere, like *Mansfield Park*, if it is to retain our old affection.

This change happened to me in the Dublin of the 1950s. Again, I think I was lucky. There were many good second hand bookshops in which one could root about for hours. One book barrow in particular,

on a corner of Henry Street, was amazing. Most of the books found there would now be described as modern classics. How the extraordinary Mr. Kelly acquired them we never asked. There were times when books were discussed in dance halls as well as in bars. It was easy then to get a desk in the National Library. The staff were kind and would even bring rare books on request. There were inexpensive seats at the back of the Gate Theatre, and there were many pocket theatres, often in Georgian basements. Out in Dun Laoghaire there was the Gas Company Theatre where we had to walk through the silent showroom of gas cookers to see Pirandello or Chekhov or Lorca or Tennessee Williams. The city was full of cinemas. I remember seeing *Julius Caesar* with Gielgud and Brando, playing to full houses in the Metropole. And there was the tiny Astor Cinema on the quays where I first saw *Casque d'Or*, *Rules of the Game*, and *Children of Paradise*.

Much has been written about the collusion of church and state to bring about an Irish society that was insular, repressive, and sectarian. This is partly true, but because of the long emphasis on the local and the individual in a society that never found any true cohesion, it was only superficially successful.

I think that women fared worst of all within this paternalistic mishmash, but to men with intellectual interests it had at the time, I believe, some advantage. Granted, we were young and had very little to lose, but the system was so blantly foolish in so many of its manifestations that it could only provoke the defence of laughter, though never, then, in public. What developed was a freemasonry of the intellect, with a vigorous underground life of its own that paid scant regard to church or state. Even an obscene book, we would argue, could not be immoral if it was truly written. Most of the books that were banned, like most published, were not worth reading, and those that were worth reading could be easily found and quickly passed around. There is no taste so sharp as that of forbidden fruit. This climate also served to cut out a lot of the pious humbug that often afflicts the arts. Literature was not considered 'good'. There was no easy profit. People who need to read, who need to think and see, will always find a way around a foolish system, and difficulty will only make that instinct stronger, as it serves in another sphere to increase desire. In no way can this clownish system be recommended wholeheartedly, but it was the way it was and we were young and socially unambitious and we managed. The more we read of other literatures, and the more they were discussed, the more clearly it emerged that not only was Yeats a very great poet but that almost singlehandedly he had, amazingly, laid down a whole framework in which an indigenous literature could establish traditions and grow. His proud words, 'The knowledge of reality is a secret knowledge; it is a kind of death,' was for us, socially as well as metaphorically, true.

The two living writers who meant most to us were Samuel Beckett and Patrick Kavanagh. They belonged to no establishment, and some of their best work was appearing in the little magazines that could be found at the Eblana Bookshop on Grafton Street. Beckett was in Paris. The large-hatted figure of Kavanagh was an inescapable sight around Grafton Street, his hands often clasped behind his back, muttering hoarsely to himself as he passed. Both, through their work, were living, exciting presences in the city. I wish I could open a magazine now with the same excitement with which I once opened *Nimbus*: 'Ignore Power's schismatic sect,/lovers alone lovers protect.' (The same poet could also rhyme catharsis with arses, but even his wild swing was like no other.)

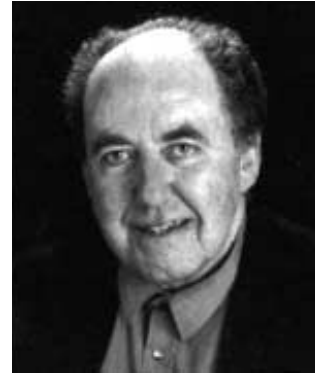
When I began to write, and it was in those Dublin years, it was without any thought of publication. In many ways, it was an extension of reading as well as a kind of play. Words had been physical presences for me for a long time before, each word with its own weight, colour, shape, relationship, extending out into a world without end. Change any word in a single sentence and immediately all the other words

demand to be rearranged. By writing and rewriting sentences, by moving their words endlessly around, I found that scenes or pictures and echoes and shapes began to emerge that obscurely reflected a world that had found its first expression and recognition through reading. I don't know how long that first excitement lasted, for a few years, I think, before it changed to work, though that first sense of play never quite goes away and, in all the most important ways, a writer remains a beginner throughout his working life. Now I find I will resort to almost any subterfuge to escape that blank page, but there seems to be always some scene or rhythm that lodges in the mind and will not go away until it is written down. Often when they are written down it turns out that there was nothing real behind the rhythm or scene, and they disappear in the writing; other times the scenes or rhythms start to grow, and you find yourself once again working every day, sometimes over a period of several years, to discover and bring to life a world through words as if it were the first and (this is ever a devout prayer) last time. It is true that there can be times of intense happiness throughout the work, when all the words seem, magically, to find their true place, and several hours turn into a single moment; but these occurrences are so rare that they are, I suspect, like mirages in desert fables, to encourage and torment the half-deluded traveller.

Like gold in the ground or the alchemist's mind, it is probably wise not to speak about the pursuit at all. Technique can certainly be learned, and only a fool would try to do without it, but technique for its own sake grows heartless. Unless technique can take us to that clear mirror that is called style – the reflection of personality in language, everything having been removed from it that is not itself – the most perfect technique is as worthless as mere egotism. To reach that point we have to feel deeply and to think clearly in order to discover the right words. Once work reaches that clearness, the writer's task is ended. His or her words will not live again until and unless they find their true reader.

John Quinn

After working as a teacher and in educational publishing John Quinn joined RTÉ. His radio documentaries have won many awards. He now produces and presents the programme *The Open Mind*. He has written four novels for children. The best known of which is *The Summer of Lily and Esme*.



Why and How I Write

I am a jackdaw . . . I suspect most writers are jackdaws. Drawn inexorably towards those shiny glittering objects, I swoop, retrieve them and ultimately secrete them in my nest. The nest of ideas. And there I brood, until in due season the ideas are hatched into words, into story.

The bringing of new life into the world is ever a cause of satisfaction, a reason for rejoicing. The ‘birth’ of a story is, for me, no different. To see ideas after months of brooding (in all senses of that word) burst into life on the page, in a form and a sequence that are unique, that indeed is a source of great joy, of great satisfaction and of great pride. This is my story . . . these are my words . . . this is my creation. No one else could have fashioned those words into that story in that particular way. Such is the mystery of the creative process.

But the joy and the satisfaction do not end there. Somewhere in a quiet corner, a noisy classroom, a lumbering bus, someone will pick up those words and make contact with me. There will be a smile of recognition, a nod of assent that says ‘I know that feeling’, ‘I have been in that situation’, ‘That is ME!’. Such is the power of words, mysterious, magical. And all because I am a jackdaw.

But what, I hear you ask, are those shiny, glittering objects that attract writers? I can best illustrate this by referring to a book that rests on the table before me. Also on the table is a file of newspaper cuttings, photographs, letters, notes jotted on the backs of envelopes, a ‘thing of shreds and patches’ surely. That file is my jackdaw’s nest, gathered over a number of years. That file became this book.

A recurring twin-theme in a number of my books for young people is that of displacement and acceptance. What if someone moves home (for whatever reason) and has to settle in a strange environment? What if some people will not accept him, are suspicious of him? What if . . . ? That is the question I must keep asking myself in the process of writing.

In the case of this book set in 1974, the opening question is: What if a Catholic family, burned out of their home, decide to move to County Clare? What if it’s only half a family in reality? What if the father is a Provo bomber who has just been jailed for twenty years? What if they have already lost a young girl in a bomb blast (something which haunts the central character, her brother Rossa, who sent her down to the shop on that fateful day?)

Now comes the ‘jackdaw’ collection. A newspaper cutting about an eccentric ‘wild’ woman who lives in the wilds of Connemara with her sheep, her dogs and her cars . . .

The condition of autism intrigues me. I made a radio documentary on it some years ago and from the research on that project I kept 'A Portrait of Kiran' a very moving account of an autistic boy by his mother, Lorraine. Then by chance I see an article in *The Sunday Times* by another mother of an autistic child who spent most of his waking hours 'living' in a refuse bin. Snip! Snip! The jackdaw swoops again. Rossa will have an autistic brother who lives in a bin.

A couple of years ago I visited a school in County Limerick. On the way there I noticed protest signs all along the roadside for a mile or more. The children explained that the County Council wanted to open a new refuse dump in the locality. 'You never know', I told them. 'Someday I might feature that in a book'. Then a year ago while travelling from Galway to Dublin on a bus I heard a lively debate on the radio over a proposed dump near a sacred site in County Clare. Back of an envelope. Scribbled notes. Jackdaw time again.

Child abuse has, sadly, come to prominence in recent years. A family who had been abused by their father for years tell their story in a Sunday newspaper. Another cutting for the jackdaw . . . And so it continues. Listening to the music of Madame Butterfly give me another idea about the wild woman in the bog . . . What if . . . ? Here's where Rossa and his new-found friend Margie meet 'the wild woman':

'My name is Lissy. Not Lizzy as some call me. My father was an Italian gentleman who called me Bellissima – the beautiful one. My mother was descended from an Irish princess of the O'Malley clan. She called me Lissy.'

The record began to play. Lissy sang along with the opening bars.

Un bel di vedremo
Levarsi un fil fumo . . .

'My father was a great man for the opera. He went off one fine day and never came back. He left my mother with me and his gramophone and records. My mother would sing this song – Madame Butterfly's "One Fine Day"

She sang along with the record. Vedi? Egli e venuto

You see? He has come.

But he never came. So here I am with my records and my family.'

'Your family?' Rossa was puzzled.

'You met Pinkerton.' She gestured towards the sheepdog, now sprawled on all fours watching the visitors. 'Twas he that found the uainin. And there's Butterfly, the beautiful gentle one, Bellissima! She's out in the shed. And poor old Siegfried, the warrior. He's there under the table, he's blind and deaf, but he's been with me for a dozen years and more.'

They could discern a sleeping shape stretched under the table. 'And there's these two lassies.' She nodded towards the cats. 'Violetta – La

Traviata – the fallen woman. She’s the black one. And Carmen – the beautiful gypsy. Figaro is outside somewhere. Figaro – everybody’s friend.’

‘It’s quite a family,’ Rossa laughed.

‘Oh there’s more – the sheep and the hens – and Tosca.’

‘Who’s that?’ Maggie asked.

‘Look at her out in the Paddock. Tosca – la gelosa – the jealous one!’ As if she had heard Lissy, a goat called from the paddock beyond the yard.

And of course this scene gives me the title for the book. *One Fine Day*. One fine day Rossa will find acceptance. One fine day Margie’s unspoken pain will be revealed. One fine day . . .

It doesn’t happen easily or quickly. The ‘brooding’ season can be quite long. Long-distance travel on buses, long walks by the sea, help the process. Threads are slowly woven together into the skein of a story. It can be a slow and difficult process, but I persist. Why? Because I want to tell a story – a story that will reflect some aspects of the human condition – its fears, anxieties, weaknesses, strengths, joys, sorrows. A story that will bring the ultimate reward – making contact with a reader.

In October 1996 I received a letter from a twelve-year-old boy. In the course of that letter he wrote: ‘I have read your three books. They were very interesting and enjoyable. My home tuition teacher read them to me and I thought they were very visual and creative . . . Even though I have Spina Bifida and am blind I love books and your stories are the greatest . . .’

And you ask me why I write!

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne

After a distinguished academic career, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne now works in the National Library. She has published both in Irish and in English and has written plays, novels, short stories and books for children. She has won many awards for her work. Her latest publication is *The Dancers Dancing*.



Why I Write

The question ‘why I write?’ disturbs me. At the moment, it is a crucially significant question for me, because I am considering giving it up.

For some writers, and I mean literary rather than popular writers, writing is a profession. They earn their living by writing. Some may even become rich. Others eke out a meagre existence, by dint of small grants or bursaries, workshop fees, and royalties, advances or prizes. Still others pursue other occupations, and write in their spare time. I am considering becoming one of those.

It would be far from easy. The central task of my life would be consigned to the margins, carried out in the dark, when the vampires emerge from the shadowy crags of the imagination, or at weekends, when other workers play golf or go to parties. During the good, productive, daylight hours I would expend energy and creativity on other tasks, tasks which are worthy in themselves but which are not what I believe I should spend my life doing.

That is the society we have. People who make telephone calls, go to meetings, produce reams of bureaucratic paperwork which few will read and perhaps none benefit from, are paid for the work. People who publish books, sell books, even people who catalogue books, are considered deserving of a regular income. But those who write books are not so privileged. Except for a few, who are exceptionally talented and exceptionally lucky, writers of books are hardly paid enough to cover their material expenses. Writing books is, for such people, a luxury, and indulgence – or a sacrifice, a pain.

Why do they do it?

I know why I began. There is no mystery about that. From the word go, I liked writing. By the time I was eight years old, I thought I would like to be a writer, much as other girls I knew thought they would like to be an air hostess or a nun. (None of them, to my knowledge, became either of these things, so perhaps I have something to be proud of – stubbornness.) I was strongly encouraged by every single English teacher I ever had, both in primary school and secondary. (I should point out that I went to school between 1959 and 1971, possibly not a period renowned for its devotion to creativity or the arts on the school curriculum – there was no art, that I remember, in the primary school, in the sense of painting or potting or any of that and there were immensely dull subjects like sewing and knitting, and a devotion to skills which would make people good secretaries or perhaps book-keepers. But within the context of the English class there was even then room for the creative spirit to be nurtured. Teachers were often intelligent, sensitive, and imaginative – especially English teachers. Some of them have been formative influences on my life. By the time I was ten or so I considered myself a writer – my fondest

ambition was to be a writer 'when I grew up'. Nobody I met in school ever suggested that this was an unreasonable hope. I was taught to reach for the stars.

Teachers mattered, enormously, but here was another source for my passionate attachment to writing, namely reading. Reading and writing were intimately connected in my life. Like many little girls, I was a compulsive reader of fiction. Of course one can ask the question, why is one person rather than another attracted to reading in this way? That is perhaps where the secret ultimately lies, but I am not sure why some people love to read while others have other, perhaps more active, tastes. This may be the characteristic which is innate.

Writing is clearly an exercise in work, imagination, and creation: it is an artistic activity, an activity that demands complete concentration, a wildness of imagination and an adventurousness in exploring the world, of words and reality. In other words it seems to me a good, fulfilling task for anyone who is intellectually and emotionally alive and who would like to stay that way.

As well as writing, I like cooking, painting, house-decorating, gardening, teaching, scholarship. I think I would like to make furniture and to build houses, if I knew how. I don't, however, and perhaps there is a reason for this. Writing is like all real work, real art, in that it takes raw material (words, ideas, feelings) and builds something fresh and whole with them. But perhaps it is more like gardening than it is like house-building, in that it is more open-ended. The end product of a carpenter is a chair, which will of course have a life of its own and a biography and perhaps a long and interesting history before it finally disintegrates. Making a chair, though, cannot be a journey in the way that writing a book is a journey. Writing a book is a craft, like making a chair. But even if the writer has some idea, on page one, where the book is going, the writing is going to lead to all sorts of places she or she has not anticipated. Writing a book as well as being a craft is a trip. It's a trip to a place you have not been before.

Maybe this is why I like to write. I'd love to be an explorer, to spend my life travelling the world, meeting new people, seeing wonderful places. Actually in a way that makes more sense to me now, as an ambition, than writing. But for all kinds of reasons I will not be exploring the real world in the near future. Maybe writing is as close as I can get to that, while sitting at home by my fireside? Maybe that is the attraction?

There is little altruism in the kind of writing I like to do. It is seldom for other people, primarily. The work is an end in itself. Nevertheless, the desire to communicate becomes stronger as I get older. Maybe there is, after all, something I would like to tell other people about being human, something which might help them understand what that means? Maybe I would like to express something about the truth of that experience? Certainly when I have written for children I have been motivated to some extent by these considerations, and I think that as I go on that could become an important part of the motivation.

At this midway point in my life, and my writing life, I am asking myself what I will concentrate on for the foreseeable future. What is important to me? I feel that initially as a writer you feel your way in the dark – you write on the spur of inspiration, in the genre which seems appropriate or which is, perhaps, the most convenient, at the time – usually the poem or the short story. (For instance, I think it is the rare college student who decides to write a book for children, a television script, or even a novel – the first two because the genres would seem too impersonal, the third because a great deal of commitment and time are required.) Gradually, I have found, the possibilities as far as genre are concerned expand – by now I have written plays, a lot of short stories, novels, children's books and some television scripts. Versatility is not unusual, nor is there anything wrong with it. I suppose it would be unrealistic for me to say I will only write novels from now on, or whatever. But I would like to prioritise and focus on one genre or another, and feel that may be important if I am to continue writing.

If I am to continue writing! It is when I write a line like that, that I realise how absurd it is for me to imagine for one moment that I could give up writing and continue to live. I know I am a disappointed, perhaps a despairing, writer – I am not a great success. I have not made heaps of money. I have had moderate success, a favourable reception for most of my work, some small literary prizes – always sufficient encouragement from the literary establishment (publishers, reviewers, readers) to let me know I'm not wasting my time, and usually requests for more. Still, it is hard work for me to go on writing since I have to hold down another job as well.

In this I am not dissimilar from many writers. The question of motivation takes on a special significance for writers like that. Why not simply read, rather than write?

I'm not sure. I dream of giving up. Do other people do this? The only thing is, I know if I give up writing I will give up my life. So that is the answer. I write because for some reason which I'm not sure of I have to, to stay breathing.

Comment

Below is one page from a short story. It has been written in several drafts before I arrived at the two drafts used here, and if I had time I would write it a few more times. A problem with revisions nowadays is that all drafts do not survive – if you write on a word-processor, as I do, many changes are never recorded for posterity!

I have printed in italics the four changes I have made to the text on the presented page. None of the changes has anything to do with plot or character, but with atmosphere and language. I have substituted concrete, strong words and images for words which were imprecise and lacking in freshness. In addition, I am attempting to write in the voice of a girl from Donegal at around the turn of the century. While I decided for a variety of reasons not to attempt to replicate her dialect exactly, I must try to write in a language which convinces the reader that it could be her's. It is unlikely that this young uneducated girl would have used a word like 'inferior'. 'A cut below' seems more authentic. The animal and natural metaphors are, I feel, likewise appropriate.

I often find that my first drafts of a story are sloppily written, since of course the primary task at first is simply to get the story written. It is often in the revision that the best words and images will occur to me. I know I could easily rewrite this story many more times, and each time its texture and language would improve, although the storyline would not change. With this, as with all stories, I will stop revising when it goes to the printer and is out of my hands.

Fiction is fast to read but it can be very slow to write.

GWEEDORE GIRL

Draft One

My mother said, 'I don't know why young girls are so mad to get married.'

'You did,' I said. She married my father when she was eighteen. (He was thirty six then, but it was not a made match. I know that much.)

'You'll be much better off staying single and bettering yourself. You'll have a better life, away from this place.'

I thought she was telling me this because she knew, or suspected, that nobody would want to marry me. She thought I was not pretty enough. My mother is small, fat, with brown eyes like a cow. She is not pretty but once she

was. I know this because she has told me so herself. She did not use the word pretty, but a word that means 'elegant' or 'gallant'. It always sounds me as if you were made of shining wood, like the left of a table, and not of soft stuff, like a woman. 'I was the best looking girl in this parish once,' she said, sighing. She sighs a lot, because she is so tired. There are so many of us to look after.

We all look different – some of us like her, some of us like my father, some of us like both of them, some of us like neither. I am more like my father, big and black-haired, with blue eyes and big teeth. 'Your father looks like a bull,' my mother says sometimes. 'And you take after him.' She hasn't got a lot of time for my father or his side of the family, which is inferior to her own.

She said: 'Bridget Devanney had great go in her.' Bridget Devanney was her first cousin. 'She went to Derry and worked there for thirty years and they thought the world of her. When her missus died she left her the house and a thousand pounds.'

We own our own farm, ten acres, and we own a boat and twelve nets. Also twenty hen and ten ducks. Geese before Christmas. We sell the eggs to Hughie the shop or exchange then for tea and sugar. Only at Easter do we eat eggs ourselves, in the Easter house, and on Shrove Tuesday we use some for pancakes.

In the winter my mother sits by the fire and knits socks. The man from Falcarragh comes every Friday to collect them.

Tuppence a sock. I helped her knit before I came here but I didn't enjoy it that much – the hairy wool scratching my skin, the endless, dull stitching in the half dark kitchen.

Draft Two

My mother said, 'I don't know why young girls are so mad to get married.'

'You did,' I said. She married my father when she was eighteen. (He was thirty six then, but it was not a made match. I know that much.)

'You'll be much better off staying single and bettering yourself. You'll have a better life, away from this place.'

I thought she was telling me this because she knew, or suspected, that nobody would want to marry me – the reason being that I am not pretty enough. *My mother is small and stout, with a thick bolster of a bosom and brown bulging cow's eyes.* But once she was the best-looking girl in the parish. I know this because she has told me so herself – more than once. She does not use the word that means 'pretty' or 'nice' to describe her youthful good looks, but a word that sounds more like 'elegant' or 'gallant'. When she says that word I see her as a girl made of polished, golden wood, like the curved leg of a fine sideboard, *and not a woman made of soft, hot, smelly stuff.* 'I was the best looking girl in the parish,' she says, sighing, looking wearily at me. She is always weary. There are so many of us to look after.

We all look different – some of us like her, some of us like my father, some of us like both of them, some of us like neither. *I am more like my father, big-made and jet-haired. My eyes are blue and I've a mouthful of slab teeth, horse's teeth.* But – 'Your father looks like a bull,' my mother says sometimes. 'And you take after him.' She hasn't got a lot of time for my father or his side of the family, *which is a cut below her own.*

Patricia Donlon



Patricia Donlon up to recently was the Director of the National Library. Before that she had been Western Curator of the Chester Beatty Library. She has lectured, broadcast and published widely on many topics. She has a special interest in books for children. Perhaps the best known of her publications is *The Lucky Bag* (Ed.)

Why I Write

I write to communicate. I spend a large part of each day in written persuasion of one kind or another. This can take the form of a letter to the Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, a policy document to the Council of Trustees, a submission to a civil servant, a memorandum to staff, a lecture to the public or an article to a scholarly journal on aspects of librarianship. Regardless of the recipient each piece has to inform, engage and communicate its message if ultimately it is to persuade.

To write well you need to:

- be clear about your message
- have gathered together all the relevant information
- have organised your ideas
- be conscious of the intended audience.

The message is the skeleton on which to hang the flesh of language, grammar and style. Without the skeleton there would be a shapeless mass.

The single most important rule in any writing is: Keep it simple. People are often confused with this notion, mistaking simple for easy. Many things which are simple are very difficult.

How can you tell if a piece of writing has worked? Everyone has his or her own way of assessing what they have written, of checking to see if the message is clear or if the writing could be improved. In my opinion the ultimate test of all writing is a basic one, How does it sound when read aloud? Is the sense immediately apparent? Do the sentences flow easily or does it sound jagged? Any parent of young children will readily appreciate the importance of this read-aloud factor. A children's book which is read over and over again, night after night has to be very well written or it would not survive either the adult reader or child audience.

One of the biggest challenges in any piece of writing is the act of getting started. The fear and dread of the blank sheet of paper or as it is these days the blank computer screen, is common to many writers. Getting that first sentence down can be the biggest hurdle of all. So take your courage in your hands and start. Re-read it later and edit and you will have started well.

Writing is like exercising, the more often you do it the better you become. Read everything and anything, with notebook to hand so that something which appeals can be captured and re-examined later. It may be a funny turn of phrase, a particularly good description of something familiar . . . whatever it is, copying it down will reinforce the structure, the words, the style.

Other people before me have laid down ground rules which still stand today. For example George Orwell set down some simple rules for good writing in a work called *Politics and the English Language* which was first published in 1946. They are still valid all these years later. My favourite ones which I will share with you are:

- Never use a long word where a short word will do.
- If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Above all write to say something – not just words for the sake of words.
- Write because something excites you or agitates you – write with passion and feeling.

And a final rule from me, be honest. Do not pretend to know something that you do not know.

REMEMBERING EILIS DILLON

My definition of a friend is someone who accepts me absolutely for what I am and who does not crowd me with too much togetherness, seeking to be what my grandmother graphically called 'a pocket to my hip'. Eilis was a friend who never grumbled when you had not phoned or made contact for weeks or even months and who took up with you as if it was only yesterday that you had talked. I admired her strength, her ability to bow under the many seemingly endless personal blows in her life and in the lives of those she loved and not be beaten or bitter. She would sigh a quiet sigh, shrug her shoulders and get on with life. I loved her ability to party long into the night, to entertain disparate and odd groups of people and to weave us all into her personal fabric of friendship . . .

If I were an artist and could paint, I would want to show Eilis as an Indian Chief, wrapped in shawl, sitting centre with her pipe of peace and passing on her stories to the tribe, in communion with the spirits, leaving her gifts. Her last gift to me was the most precious. She showed me how to say 'goodbye'.

She was facing death and knew it and knew how its manifestations would be. She chose to do it her way. She called together friends and family and we celebrated her life with a Mass, the celebrant being the gentle Enda McDonagh. It was the last time I saw her. I was in Galway when the news of her death came and watching the birds wheeling above the Corrib I could not help thinking how she had challenged in her life something the Chinese understand: how she could not stop the birds of sorrow from flying overhead but she never, ever let them nest in her hair.

Comment

The piece of writing I have chosen as an exemplar is not from the everyday run of reports, articles and letters which I write for my daily bread. It is a short piece which I wrote to commemorate the Irish writer, Eilis Dillon. Other people were discussing her legacy as a writer and I wanted more than anything else to remember Eilis Dillon the woman. I believe I did so in this piece.

I hope I have followed my own rules in that excerpt. The writing is simple and written from the heart. People like stories and images and I think that there is colour in this piece through the use of personal recollection and anecdote. Finally I like the fact that it paints pictures. It also passed the read-aloud test as it was read on radio.

Tim Robinson

Tim Robinson studied mathematics at Cambridge, and after teaching in Istanbul followed a career as a visual artist, working and exhibiting in Vienna and London. In 1972 he moved to the Aran Islands to concentrate on writing. His publications include *Stones of Aran*, *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara*, and maps of the Aran Islands, Connemara and The Burren.



STONES OF ARAN¹

Part II: Labyrinth² 'Sworn to the Tower'³

Unquestionable answer to unanswerable question, this volume must close what the first opened, so that I can store them away safely, like two mirrors face to face.⁴ Therefore I must begin now at the place where my circuit of the coast of Arainn ended, and from which I am to broach the interior. That place, determined long ago by the structure of the whole book, is at the eastern tip of the island, where a hillside of rock and weather-beaten grass rises from the arc of sand and shingle about a little bay to a small ruined tower. At what era Túr Mhairtín watched over the safety or the subservience of Aran is unknown: but for some years now, in my mind, its function has been to keep my place in the book,⁵ marking a promise to return from long wanderings in Connemara and see my way through this island. Old maps call the tower St. Gregory's Monument. The saint of the golden mouth, even after years of prayer and fasting, felt himself unworthy of a grave in Aran of the Saints, and on the approach of death commanded that his body be consigned to the sea in a barrel. Port Daibhche, the port of the barrel, is where the corpse was brought ashore by a miraculous current, in sign of his worthiness of the holy ground. I have now to write myself back onto that ground, and without benefit of miracle.

But finding the entrance to the labyrinth is not the simplest of steps, for I find myself separated from it by another labyrinth. I no longer live in Aran: I cannot jump on my bicycle and go and have another look at that harsh grey hillside, my sight-lines and thought-lines to it interrupted by the thick boggy hills and dazzling waters of Connemara. I am too far for touch, too near for Proustian telescoping.⁶ There is also a dense forest of signposts⁷ in the way, the huge amount of material I have assembled to help me. Here to my hand are a shelf of books, thirteen piled volumes of diary, boxes bursting with record cards, a filing-cabinet of notes, letters, offprints from specialist journals, maps and newspaper cuttings. Also, three ring-binders of writing accumulated over a dozen years towards this work, some of it outdated, misinformed, unintelligibly sketchy, some so highly polished it will have to be cracked open again in order to fuse with what is still to be written. What tense must I use to comprehend memories, memories of memories of what is forgotten, words that once held memories but are now just words? What period am I to set myself in, acknowledging the changes in the island noted in my brief revisitations over the years, the births and deaths I hear of in telephone calls? In what voice am I to embody the person who wrote that first volume with little thought of publisher or readership during a cryptic, enisled⁸ time, I who live nearer the main⁹ and have had public definitions attached to me, including some I would like to shake off – environmentalist, cartographer – and whose readers will open this volume looking for more of the same and will be disappointed if they get it? How am I to lose myself once again among the stones of Aran?

Looking around for inspiration in this quandary I remember that from the saint's monument one can just make out a mark, a greyish dot, on the brink of the highest cliff of Inis Meain, a mile away across the sound. This is the Cathaoir Synge, Synge's Seat, a low structure of massive stones like a roofless hut open to the west, of unknown date and purpose. Here the writer used to sit and brood upon the abyss:

The back edge of the north island is in front of me, Galway Bay, too blue almost to look at, on my right, the Atlantic on my left, a perpendicular cliff under my ankles, and over me innumerable gulls that chase each other in a white cirrus of wings . . . As I lie here hour after hour, I seem to enter into the wild pastimes of the cliff, and to become a companion of the cormorants and crows.

I would like to use Synge's vision of it to situate myself on that black edge, the beginning of my work, but at this crucial moment he is alienated from me. In an essay on his book, *The Aran Islands*, that grew out of his intense meditations on the cliff-top, I wrote that Synge was mistaken in thinking that the Irish name for the maidenhair fern is *duchosach* (black-footed), and that as he knew so little about it he was wise not to treat of the Aran flora. Since then I have heard Aran people call that fern the *duchosach*; my earlier source was wrong, and I am caught out in a petty rivalrousness. As if Synge, with his deep intuitive eyes, cares whether or not I have more facts on Aran than he! The sage turns from me, listening to those clamorous gulls, whose language, he says, 'is easier than Gaelic'. I shrink back to my filing cabinet.¹⁰

My efficient record cards remind me, however, that the hillside I would like to refind myself on is called An Teannaire, the pump, from a recess in the cliffs below it where waves rush in and compress themselves into waterspouts, and that it has already been appropriated, if not by literature, then by the oral tradition.

Thug sé an Teannaire mar spré dhó He gave him the Pump as dowry . . .

This is from Amhrán an 'Chéipir', the song of the 'Caper', composed in his head by Taimí Ó Briain, of the poetical O'Brians of Cill Éinne, near the beginning of this century. The 'Caper' was a young fisherman from Cape Clear in Cork, who came with a boat called the *Lucky Star* to work out of Cill Rónáin, and married a girl from Iaráirne, the easternmost village of the island. My translation is a rough piece of work – but so is Taimín's original:

Molaimid thú a Chéipir	Oh Caper, we praise you
Ar thús na bhfear in Éirinn,	Above all men in Ireland,
Mar is tú a fuair an bhean ba géimiúla	For it's you that won the liveliest girl
Dár rudagh riamh san áit	That ever was born in this place.
San oíche a dtáinig tú dá hiarradh	The night you came to ask for her
Bhí an baile trína chéile,	The village was upsidedown,
Is gurbh fhearr leat bheith I gCill Éinne	And you'd rather be in Cille Éinne
Ní I do chléireach sa chaisleán.	Than be a clerk in Dublin Castle.

But although she was fine-looking girl (and I am told the Caper 'wiped the eye of the local lads'), her family were desperately poor, and all her father could provide as a dowry was this salt-blasted hillside and the dunes just north of it, plus the gear for scratching a living off the shore:

Thug sé an Teannaire mar spré dhó	He gave him the Pump as dowry
Poll an Ghamhna agus Port Daibhche dhó,	The Pool of the Calf and Barreldport too,
Sin agus beart cléibhe,	Sally-rods to make a basket
Agus máilín ma mbaoití,	And the little bag for bait,
An gliomach a bheadh faoin áfact,	The lobster down in its hole,
An portán rua agus an cráufisc,	The red crab and the crayfish,
Agus na duáin a bhí fágtha	And the fishing-hooks left over
A bhead aige lena shaol.	Would last him all his life.

Can I imagine myself taking the island into my possession like this, in her penniless beauty? The welcome was generous enough:

Bhí arán is jam is feoil ann,	Bread and jam and meat was there,
Is bhí ceathrar ag seinm ceoil ann,	And four musicians playing,
Bhí fuisce is lemonade,	There was lemonade and whiskey
Fíon is punch dá réir ann . . .	And wine and punch as needed . . .

But while the girl's father sat with his back to a creel of turf politely ignoring the goings-on and her mother started keening, the whiskey somehow disappeared into the night, the guests, 'ag deanamh "joy" den oíche', making 'joy' of the evening, broke up the bridal bed, and nobody got a wink of sleep. Fortunately the weather was too bad for the steamer to bring out the fifty policemen who were to search the place or the Justice and Crown Attorney to try the cases arising from that night.

Nothing suits me in this precedent. The island is no longer the village maiden of ninety years ago. The identification of a territory with a woman, a trope of great significance in Celtic mythology and one which tempted Synge too, is nowadays fraught with tensions. And, although I trust prayer no more than whiskey, I would rather drift ashore in a barrel than accede to a holding of this island through such ructions.

However, through all this frowning over my scrawled difficulties and disorderly data, I find that I have now arrived, un beholden to saint or sage or father-in-law, and by my preferred literary transition, a slinking behind my own back.¹² Nothing could be better adapted to this broken ground, riven by quantum jumps and contradictions. Now, all those problems of tense and person can be left to piecemeal solution. In the glow and hum of my word processor I am already mooching about below the half-abolished tower, as tenebrous¹³ as ever, trying to understand what it is I am to understand, peering into the crevices of the crag like the wise old women of Aran, in search of a simple for a complex.¹⁴

NOTES

1 The book engages with an unfulfillable ideal, the complete description of a place. The title asserts that the rough terrain and rural culture of Aran are as important, or can be made so by close attention, as the glories of Venice. However, Ruskin's title is the *Stones of Venice*; that is, all of them that matter, whereas mine hints that there are innumerable other stones of Aran equally worth describing which I have not been able to work into this book.

2 The first part of the book, *Pilgrimage*, is in the form of a walk around the coast of the biggest of the three Aran Islands, Árainn itself, and the second, *Labyrinth*, deals with its interior. Several years elapsed between the completion of the first and the final and major reworking of the second part, and the first chapter of *Labyrinth*, 'Sworn to the Tower', describes and enacts the process of getting started again.

3 The title is from the Goethe's *Faust*, Part II, the song of Faust's watchman Lynceus, the lynx-eyed Argonaut: 'Zum Sehen geboren, / Zum Schauen bestellt, / Dem Turme geschworen /Gefallt mir die Welt.' ('Born to see, /Set to watch, / Sworn to the tower, /I love the world.') This does not mean that I am writing only for those likely to recognise such quotes, which indeed I have only picked up half-understood and at random; the phrase itself has enough resonances – of dedication to a high cause, of fate and the quest – to do its work here. But these three words have long been important to me, and emerged from my memory to energise this beginning. Artistry in the sort of writing I care for consists in tuning and amplifying the resonances of each phrase by adjustment of its context. One could imagine writing a whole book just to give three words their adequate setting.

4 The image of the two mirrors had been shifting around in my mind for a long time before I decided to use it here, in a dangerously exposed position as the opening sentence of this volume – dangerous because even at this state the reader knows that *Labyrinth* is much fatter than *Pilgrimage* and might wonder if the former, seen in the mirror of the latter, will turn out to be a 'loose, baggy, monster'. However, I hope that the symmetries relating the two volumes operate at a deeper level than word-count. Also, I am even here beginning the end of the whole book; as I say on its last page, 'Only the careful dispersal of its end throughout the whole book will render unnecessary a miracle of closure in the final sentence.'

5 The book and the island are constantly used as metaphors for each other; see the end of *Pilgrimage*. 'But for a book to stand like an island out of the sea of the unwritten, it must acknowledge its own bounds . . .'

6 Through 'automatic memory' – memory not consciously conserved but spontaneously evoked by a taste or other sensation, the narrator of Proust's *A la Recherche . . .* recaptured tracts of his distant past with the vivacity of immediate experience; references to this idea are frequent in my book. Venice is the common ground of Proust and Ruskin, whose intensity of vision he admired. In 'A Fool and his Gold' (*Labyrinth*, p. 2¹¹), when I wonder if all the stones of Aran are worth one uneven paving stone in San Marco, I am thinking of the uneven pavingstone Proust's narrator felt underfoot in a Paris courtyard, that reminded him of one in San Marco and so restored to him a lost chapter of his life; thus even in that moment of dejection it is no small matter I am pitting Aran against, but a crucial nexus of European culture.

7 Signposts occur here and there in the book, sometimes inward-pointing, sometimes fingerless.

8 I could have used 'isolated', but the word is too familiar for its very apt etymology to catch the reader's attention. Checking now that 'enised' is the OED, I find that Matthew Arnold wrote 'In the seas of life enised . . . we mortal millions live alone,' so perhaps I had half remembered this. In a slightly different sense of the word, the period of time referred to was itself enised, cut off from the rest of my life.

9 Donne's 'No man is an island . . . every man is . . . a part of the main,' no doubt.

10 I haven't read Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, but I know well what he means! However, in a labyrinth progress can only be by trial and error, and my anxiety before the precedent of Synge's elegant slim work stimulates a forward movement: having misguidedly introduced the maidenhair fern, I take it as my guide into the substance of my book in the next section, 'Maidenhair'.

11 I am thinking of feminist critiques of patriarchal attitudes to landscape. This theme – the king's sexual union with the land – is alluded to, enacted, rejected and parodied here and there throughout the book.

12 Although at this point I have not yet begun, a lot of information about the starting-point has already been covertly conveyed. A favourite mode of modern or perhaps postmodern writing is self-referential – the discussion or explication of what the writer is doing or trying to do. Of course behind this screen of apparent frankness one can be doing something else entirely. In an earlier draft instead of 'a slinking behind my own back' I had written 'a quantum slink'. What we all vaguely know from science about quantum jumps is that they are sudden, unpredictable miracle-like transitions with no intermediate stages; slinking on the other hand is a smooth operation usually with duplicitous forethought. So the quantum slink might have been an arresting oxymoron for the literary trickery I am owning up to here, but finally I decided it was a little too obtrusive and jokey in tone. However, 'quantum jumps' hung around in my mind and eventually found their place in the next sentence, indicating what tricky material I have undertaken to treat.

13 De Nerval: 'Je suis le ténébreux, le veuf, l'inconsolé / Le prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie . . .' Again, even if the quote isn't identified, the strangeness of 'abolished' and 'tenebrous' are enough to place the enterprise under the sign of the most impractical romanticism, and perhaps of 'le Soleil noir de al Mélancholie'. On the other hand, my tower is only half

abolished, and I'm just 'mooching about'.

14 'Simple' is an old word for a herb, a cure for a complex, perhaps, such as a love-hate relationship with an island. But what I am hoping to find is a book, and near the end, in 'Running Out of Time', I exclaim 'But see, my darling, the book I've found you among these stones'. (Grammatically slightly ambiguous, this could be taken as implying that the woman/island has turned out to have the richness or the legibility of a book. In any case a book would indeed be a simple thing to stand for something so complex as an island.)



4. *The Aesthetic Use of Language*

Let it Flow

Hugh Leonard

Slitting the Songbird's Throat

Paula Meehan

Letting See

Tom McCarthy

Waiting and Watching

Eavan Boland

Memory Speaks

Brendan Kennelly

Hugh Leonard

Playwright, novelist, newspaper and magazine columnist, scriptwriter for TV and film who has won numerous awards for his works. Perhaps his best known works are his memoirs, *Home Before Night* and *Out After Dark* and his play *Da*.



Why I Write

Because I am vain and a show-off. Because I have an urge to be known. Because I have a creative urge and a flair that goes with it. Because I am good for nothing else. Because it is a way of being one's own master. Because writing is an illness, a virus that no science can isolate and cure. Probably the last of these is the true reason, but there is no certainty. One might as well ask why one lives. How I work is another matter.

There are as many ways of writing as there are writers. For me, a play is cause and effect. I start with people and a concept. In my play *Summer*, I began with the idea of two picnics six years apart. I wanted to see what time had done to my people. At the beginning, a metaphor was in the back of my head, and it was that at a certain point in our lives we move from a bus to a tramcar which travels along an ordained route, unable to change its course. We, the passengers move around inside it, giving ourselves the delusion of freedom of choice and destination.

That was more than enough to begin with: eight characters, six middle-aged and two teenagers (at least to begin with), and, as a setting, an unspoiled hillside in the first act, and the suggestion of an impending building development in the second. And I had a couple of rules, or rather one rule and an acid test. The German dramaturgist Lessing said that in a good play every character is in the right. So much for the rule, and it is unyielding; there are no villains.

And Schopenhauer divided humanity into two types. There is the optimist who believes that if he obtains that money, that job, that girl, that dream, he will achieve happiness; he goes through life like a donkey in pursuit of an eternal carrot. And there is the 'realist' who knows that the heart's desire is a delusion and that all turns to ashes. The former might be Blanche de Bois or Willy Loman, the latter could be Stanley Kowalski or Loman's son, Biff. The collision of the two is drama.

Most playwrights work their way through a first draft, then a second and as many as it takes. I go by a thornier route, not as a matter of choice but by nature. If I were to work out a scenario in advance, it might rob my people of choice, propelling them forward along certain paths, bending and warping them to a theme. Besides, the thought of writing drafts, of making the same journey repeatedly, fills me with ennui. I write to find out about me. I am at one with Graham Wallas, who said, 'How do I know what I think until I see what I say?'

I work very slowly, cutting and compressing as I go; my plays are inclined to err on the side of shortness. In the case of my play *Da*, the first step was into the dark; I had no idea as to what settings I would need

or how many people would be necessary to make the journey. One takes a deep breath and makes a leap.

Working at the rate of a page a day, one gives the subconscious mind time to evolve a character, to decide what happens on the next page. And one day the end of Act One comes in sight. As to where the play is going, I have only the faintest sense of destination. Like a man travelling in an unknown part of the country, one tastes salt on the wind and sees the trees bent by inshore gales, and I know that the sea is not far off, but I still am unsure where it is or how to get to it.

You do, if you are lucky, arrive. Sort of. There are writers who regard their 'final' word as writ in stone and not to be altered. More and more, I come to the belief that a play is not finished until after the last preview. Writing is a lonely business, and I enjoy the rare opportunity of working with actors and a demanding director – with an adaptation, one is naturally more inclined to meddle and experiment with the text; one treats one's own creations with less abandon and more reverence!

Each play goes its own way in the writing. *Summer* evolved and was almost independent of its author. *Da* was about my father, and the theme of a life remembered gave the play a shape, an almost cinematic movement through time. In *A Life*, I posed a question: who is the better man; one who never dissembled, lied, loafed or betrayed a trust, but was without a shred of affection for his fellow humans, or one of life's drones, who probably never read a book in his life and yet oozed good nature? The need for an answer shaped the play.

From *A Life*

MARY: You haven't noticed my room.

DRUMM: Haven't I? [*Looking about him*] Oh, yes.

MARY: We did it up with the compensation.

DRUMM: It has taste.

MARY: And got the few new bits of furniture.

DRUMM: I approve.

MARY: High time, says you.

DRUMM: I don't say. I felt always at home here.

MARY: It was too dark. The old people, them that's dead and gone, they went in for that: no sunlight, everything morose and dusty. I thought we'd get into the fashion.

DRUMM: You did.

MARY: We never set foot in here except for Christmas and funerals. That was the style in them days: one room for living in and another that was a museum for cracked cups. The Room, we called it: 'Who's that at the door?' 'Father Creedon.' 'Bring him into the Room.'

DRUMM [*smiling*]: Yes.

MARY: I made a clearance. It's queer. The furniture was easy got rid of out the door and that was that. But the smell of beeswax and the lavender bags my mother filled the house with: nothing'll budge that, it'll bury all of us. Still, we use the room now, by me song we do. And I had the kitchen done up as well. Do you remember how it was?

DRUMM: I know how it was.

MARY: See if you recognise it. Come on.

[They start out of the room]

Do you remember the old range and the dresser and the one top over the sink?

DRUMM: *[humouring her]*: Not all gone?

MARY *[pleased with herself]*: You'll see. In you go.

[During this, they crossed into the area at the left, passing the foot of the steps as if walking across a hallway. As they enter this area lights come up. We are looking at the kitchen of forty years ago, with the dresser, the range and the cold-water earthenware sink as mentioned by Mary. At the kitchen table are MIBS and DESMOND, who watches as she reads silently from a book, her lips moving. There are exercise books and pen and ink. DRUMM looks at the young MIBS as MARY talks artlessly about the room as it is now.]

What do you think of it? Mr. Comerford put in the kitchen unit and the shelves, but they had a fierce job with the new sink and the hot-and-cold, and as for the washing machine, don't talk to me. Anyhow, with that done I thought I might as well be the devil for style and break the bank altogether, so I got the new table and chairs.

DRUMM *[only half paying attention, looking at MIBS]*: You've done wonders.

MARY: At our age, what harm is a bit of comfort?

DRUMM: None.

MARY: If we don't spoil ourselves, no one else will. *[Prompting him]* So what do you think?

[DRUMM, standing behind MIBS, touches her hair.]

MIBS: Stop that.

DESMOND: Sorry.

MARY: Do you like it?

DRUMM: I'm sorry. It shines. What's that odious new word, that jargon they're so fond of? Functional. It functions.

MARY *[flatly]*: I see.

DRUMM: I meant that the word was odious, not the room.

MARY *[coldly]*: Yes I know.

DRUMM: Once it was for living in, now you cook in it and wash clothes. It suits its purpose. Formica surfaces, a refrigerator, yellow cupboards –

MARY *[almost snapping]*: They're primrose.

DRUMM: Are they? *[With false enthusiasm]* So they are.

MARY: I'm sure you're interested.

DRUMM: Mary, you must never ask a man to give you an opinion of a kitchen. Dolly now would be over the moon about it.

MARY: Dolly has taste. You left your drink. *[Still mildly affronted, she leads the way back to the living room.]*

Comment

In my play *A Life*, the character Desmond Drumm, aged 65, calls upon his old friend Mary, whom he loved and lost more than 40 years previously. She proudly tells him that she has had her kitchen redecorated and modernised. They cross the hall, but the kitchen we see and Drumm sees is the shabby room of the distant past. Seated at the table are Drumm as a youth and Mary as a girl. He reaches out

and touches her hair, whereupon she snaps, not at him but at the young Desmond: ‘Stop that!’

The critic Harold Hobson called the moment ‘electrifying’. For me, it works on a number of levels. First of all, I believe that the past exists side by side with the present, and this is the underlying theme of both *Da* and *A Life*. Drumm is not remembering the past, he is reliving it. Secondly, I think it is a mistake on the part of playwrights to see their work wholly in terms of dialogue. We go to the theatre to look at a play as well as to hear it; the eyes have their needs as well as the ears. Audiences love whatever is visual, and it is so rare in the theatre as to be a bonus.

Finally, a good play should consist of ‘moments’. A lady wrote to me about my adaptation of *Great Expectations*, and she most vividly recalled the young Pip facing Magwitch in the graveyard, Miss Havisham’s first, almost ghostly, appearance carrying a candelabra, Mrs. Joe turning into Biddy – the same actress played both parts – and the assembling on stage of model houses, domes and churches, representing London. These are ‘moments’ and all are visual.

Paula Meehan



Paula Meehan is from Dublin and studied at Trinity College where she was recently Writer Fellow in the English Dept. She is a poet who has published several books of poetry. Her most recent publication is entitled *Pillow Talk*.

Slitting the Songbird's Throat to See What Makes It Sing

A poetry workshop: a participant's partner has recently died of an AIDS related illness. He has distributed a worksheet with an elegy dedicated to his lost love. It is one of eight poems we will look at in a two hour session. I am the teacher. Or the facilitator. Or the moderator. The title changes; the work is the same. I am deeply moved by his grief. And anxious about how we will collectively handle the situation. The poem is all over the place, it sentimentalises the death and reads not much better than the average *in memoriam* verses you find in the newspapers. The young man has turned in good work in the past and may very well make his life in poetry. To respect the poet in him I must be critical. Yet this is to be in some sense inhuman.

The dilemma is usually not so starkly delineated. But the dilemma is at the heart of teaching poetry. If it can indeed be taught. It is a fact of life that apart from those who love us, nobody much cares what we feel. A deeply felt poem can achieve extraordinary formal power under the very pressure of utterance, the way when you have to get to the other side of the river, when your very life depends on it, a raft slung together of driftwood and tyres will be as beautiful and fit for the journey as a vessel carefully crafted by a master boat builder. And I value the felt poems that have an urgency and energy and a sense of saving the maker's life more than I would a craft piece that is all dazzling technique and no heart. But you don't get very far as either a reader or a maker of poems without facing the reality that a poem is not just what is expressed but how the what is expressed.

As a maker of a poem I can be dealing with material that is dark, grief-laden, from the hurt self, but a part of me will be experiencing a cold delight, a kind of lucid exhilaration at getting the right word in the right place, at manipulating the rhythm, at swinging the sentence around the lines, at pushing my own breath into patterns that enact the emotional state I'm expressing. The craftwork is learned over time to free the expression, to become a kind of medium for what's coming through. The American poet Adrienne Rich writes of her early formal craft training as equipping her with asbestos gloves to handle the white hot material that would come through later.

Visiting my father this summer I watched a gang of kids playing a game on the street, a game I played myself as a child. *The farmer wants a wife*. It's a complicated game that involves mastery of chant, movement, narrative. I was watching a child joining in the game for the first time. Nobody took her aside and explained what she had to do, or tried to teach her the words. She just joined in the circle. Learning by doing is the most powerful learning there is. What you do when you write your first poem. All the theory in the world won't write it for you. I'm thinking this because in my entire secondary

education there was never a moment when we were asked to make a poem. We learned the structure of a sonnet. It was meaningless to me until I wrote a sonnet myself and realised how damn difficult it was. I never read one the same way after. Even if I was never to write another poem, I was transformed as a reader.

The transmission of poetry across generations remains, I believe, an oral transmission. When I was a child I had to learn off by heart a verse of poetry in English and Irish every school day. Mostly I had no idea what the words meant but it did give me a source of power later when I came to make poems myself, a store of line lengths and rhythmical patterns I have drawn on ever since. The hearing of poetry is a crucial part of the oral transmission, and a great source of comfort. I remember my body rocking to the stress patterns in a poem and reconnecting to a very old pulse (my mother's heartbeat?) though I, as I say, had little understanding of what the poet 'meant'. We are in danger of elevating meaning to a fetishistic level at the expense of the real experience of poetry, a very physical experience. Poetry is an art older than literature and it may be that books are a stage in the technology that we're beginning to see the death of.

The technology for recording poetry will change but the job of the poet, or the poet's role in the culture, changes little. And may be the very same as when we sat around in caves and one person began 'I had a dream last night.' I remember in vivid and frightening detail my grandmother's dreams told to my mother at the breakfast table. I may have been five or six and I definitely wasn't meant to hear them. I overheard them. But when I came across poems in school I knew the terrain immediately. This was the language of my granny's dreams. Where one thing was described in terms of another, where the language shapeshifted and no one explanation could suffice, where one picture could mean two things, or three things, or something entirely different. Where an exotic bird beating at the window trying to get in was an emigrant daughter in trouble.

Which is why when the young man in my poetry workshop whose partner had died comes in the next week with a beautiful poem about trying to fix up a motorbike, and we are all weeping by the end of it, and he is protected, strong and calm, then I am both humbled and delighted at what the real stuff does.

Thomas McCarthy

Thomas McCarthy was born in Waterford but has lived in Cork for many years now where he works as a librarian. He has published several books of poetry, a novel and personal memoirs.



Why I Write

When I was young I lived with my grandmother. Many nights I was the only child in the house with this blind woman. She wasn't great company for a child of eight or nine. But she allowed me to play endlessly with her old Pye radio. It is a miracle that I wasn't electrocuted, because in those days very few appliances were earthed. Anyway, I listened to all the stations, Radio Éireann, BBC One and Radio Two Longwave, Radio Moscow and Radio Luxembourg. My grandmother didn't seem to mind all the squeaking and squelching of signals. The world coming to me through the radio seemed crowded and cheerful and welcoming.

I think of books as radios or televisions that have been flattened for storage or convenience. When the cover of a book is lifted it's like switching on a radio or television. Imagine, when you open a book, that the cover is a kind of a power-pack or solar-panel that makes the book receive signals from far away. When I go into a library or a bookshop now I think of all those books as radio programmes, full of voices and opinions. You know, literature was really the first successful multichannel company, the first broadcasting corporation. The voices in books are honest, funny sometimes, rich and brilliant.

I am not sure why I first began to write poems. It had something to do with the rich boredom and loneliness of my childhood. Yes, that boredom was rich. With boredom in my pockets, I travelled to many places, made many friends in my imagination. Poets are born, not made. But I think that there are many more poets born than ever live to see their talent exposed and matured by practice. Most people will have the poetry knocked out of them, mainly by being kept physically busy. For poetry is born in that oasis of lethargy and dreaming. I'm sure that things do happen in a poet's life to awaken the dormant poetic instincts. One thing that I can say for certain is that I love reading poetry by others. Perhaps it is only through this love that one can understand why a poet writes. The sort of joy I feel in discovering a really good poem by Yeats, Heaney or Paul Durcan is the same as the joy I feel when I myself have made a really good poem. Nearly all writers begin as readers, just as great sportswomen and men begin as spectators. Others inspire us; we want to do something wonderful like them.

I wrote my first poem for a school magazine. Sister Carmel and Brigid Coughlan, our two English teachers, organised a magazine publishing project with the two third year classes at the Convent of Mercy Co-Ed in Cappoquin. I was the editor. As we were short of poems for the Christmas issue I wrote a poem about Vietnam. A girl I had a crush on in the classroom next to mine said that she loved my poem. I was thrilled. Suddenly poetry had power, personal power. Then I began to write love-poems for her. I haven't stopped writing poetry since. In school I wrote poems instead of learning Latin or Irish. This was an educational tragedy for me. I had been preparing materials for an electro-statics project for the Young Scientists' Exhibition. Science was abandoned and my Science Teacher was disappointed. My family became worried about me. Was I going to go to the dogs? I almost did. But seven years later my

first collection *The First Convention* (Dolmen Press, 1978) won the Patrick Kavanagh Award. A year later I went to the International Writing Programme at the University of Iowa where I met poets from Asia and Africa. I felt completely at home in their company.

Why do I write? If I could answer that question perhaps I wouldn't have to write anymore. Poetry is a vocation and a perception of value. A good reader of poetry will see the value of the experience. It is a spiritual and personal value in a materialistic world. A poet begins with a private feeling and a private set of words that seem to fit the feeling perfectly. A good poet will eventually create a whole new set of values, a new way of speaking to us. Poetry is the true voice of feelings that comes into our lives like voices on a CD-player. Poetry is as simple as falling in love, and as complex. But one can be confident about reading a poem, one can hear the feeling as completely as you hear the voice of a beloved. I don't write poems to confuse or complicate others. We all live at a slightly different wavelength from one another. I am sure that poetry is one of the filters by which we can hear clearly the noises broadcast from other lives. In many ways I am still the child turning knobs of the tuner, my pen is an aerial and the printed page is its speaker.

HER BLINDNESS

In her blindness
the house became
a tapestry of touch

The jagged end of a dresser
became a signpost
to the back-door,

bread crumbs crunching
under her feet told
her when to sweep
the kitchen floor;

the powdery touch
of dry leaves in
the flower-trough
said that geraniums
needed water.

I remember her beside
the huge December fire,
holding a heavy mug,
changing its position
on her lap; filling

the dark space
between her fingers
with the light
of bright memory.

Comment

This is one of the earliest of my poems to be published. It was written when I was a student at University College Cork and was published in a College magazine, then in *The Irish Times* and subsequently in my first collection, *The First Convention*, 1978.

Originally, it was called 'Dark Spaces', then I called it 'Grandmother.' Now I am happy with its published title because it focuses on the one truly important aspect of my grandmother, her blindness. She had been blinded in an accident on her father's small farm near Mount Melleray Abbey in Co. Waterford. She became a very dominant person, controlling her entire family from the wing-backed chair by her fireside. Nothing was ever done, no door was painted, no pig sold, no hurling-match attended, until it was 'cleared' with 'Nan-Nan' as we called her. She had become blind at the age of twenty so she knew the world as a sighted person. Whenever I brought her tea she clasped the warm mug in her hands and turned it round and round. I used to stand beside her for a few minutes in case she spilt the hot liquid onto her lap. She was always aware of my standing beside her, and sometimes reached out to squeeze my hand as if I was one of her huge collection of geraniums.

Eavan Boland



Eavan Boland was born in Dublin in 1944. She has published many books of poems and her personal memoir, *Object Lessons*, which reflects on her development as a poet in Ireland.

Why I am a Poet

I have never found it easy to explain why I am a poet. I have sometimes thought the reason for this might be that a poet is what I am, rather than just what I do. Then again, no explanation from my background seems complete. I came from a bookish house; my mother loved poetry and encouraged me. Those are two reasons, I suppose. But they apply just as well to my three sisters and one brother. But they didn't become poets, and I did.

The single reason, or explanation, which seems accurate comes not from my background or my childhood, but from my observations of how I feel – how I have always felt – when I write a poem. A poem, that is, which seems true to the experience it came from. And that, in the end, is the only measure of judgement I have for a good poem. As Robert Frost once said: 'No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader'.

This explanation is also hard to articulate. It has to do with the way an experience happens and the way it is felt and remembered. The fact is, I have never turned to poetry as a method of expression. To be honest, as a method of expression it has certain flaws. It is, for instance, a very demanding art form. There are rules and regulations and customs and conventions to observe in it. It is not as direct or spontaneous a method of expression as writing a letter for instance.

So if I don't write poetry to express an experience, then why do I write it? I write it, not to express the experience but to experience it further. Poetry may have drawbacks as a method of expression, but it is a superb and powerful and effective way to experience an experience. I know of nothing to rival it. You may feel that you really know and remember that winter dawn when the poplar trees were harsh, dark spikes; when the moon was falling out of the sky; when you could taste the frost. You may think you remember the experience perfectly. But there is a difference between remembering an experience and living it again. And when you begin to write a poem about that dawn, when you reach for the language, the musical clusters of sounds – all those things poetry is so rich in – you realise how well suited a poem is to make that winter dawn not just happen again, but go on happening.

There actually was such a dawn and I tried to write about it in a poem called *Night Feed*. My first daughter was born in winter and I would go into her room when she was a very small baby to feed her. She would be crying hungrily, wide awake in her zipped sleeper. Outside the window, the world was a beautiful and strange place. The branches of the poplars were black, not brown. The garden was full of shadows. The sky was an odd mixture of dark and light, with the moon and stars falling between the cracks. Inside her room, there was this small life: a living embodiment of the dawn.

It was a powerful moment. When it was over, I wrote *Night Feed*. I assembled it from fragments of language, parts of rhythm and real details. I recorded 'the rosy zipped sleeper' my daughter wore, as well as the poplars and the fading moon. But what I really wanted to record was the power of the experience which once happened but as one which kept on happening. I wanted to write about it so that the moon was always falling downwards out of a cold sky, and the baby was always just opening her 'birth-coloured' eyes; so that the magic kept on assembling itself out of shadows, and electric light and cold air. Maybe it was an impossible task and an unrealistic hope. But that power within poetry to offer its resources of language and music so that the experience can still be experienced, so that the feeling is still as fresh as the first moment it was felt – and the chance that I might avail of it – makes me grateful every day to be a poet.

THE BLACK LACE FAN MY MOTHER GAVE ME

It was the first gift he ever gave her,
buying it for five francs in the Galeries
in prewar Paris. It was stifling.
A starless drought made the nights stormy.

They stayed in the city for the summer.
They met in cafés. She was always early.
He was late. That evening he was later.
They wrapped the fan. He looked at his watch.

She looked down the Boulevard des Capucines.
She ordered more coffee. She stood up.
The streets were emptying. The heat was killing.
She thought the distance smelled of rain and lightning.

These are wild roses, applliques on silk by hand,
darkly picked, stitched boldly, quickly.
The rest is tortoiseshell and has the reticent,
clear patience of its element. It is

a worn-out underwater bullion and it keeps,
even now, an inference of its violation.
The lace is overcast as if the weather
it opened for and offset had entered it.

The past is an empty café terrace.
An airless dusk before thunder. A man running.
And no way now to know what happened then –
none at all – unless, of course, you improvise.

the blackbird on this first sultry morning
in summer, finding buds, worms, fruit,
feels the heat. Suddenly she puts out her wing –
the whole, full, flirtatious span of it.

Comment

This poem is about a black lace fan. The fan actually exists. As I write this, I know it is downstairs in a glass-fronted cupboard, all folded in, a bit crumpled and definitely faded. But in its first existence, as I imagine it here, it was fully spread out. The lace was crisp and scratchy. The tortoiseshell at the base of it had a yellow sheen. The women and tasselled cord looked silky and ungrimy.

This fan was the first gift my father gave my mother. They were in a heat wave in Paris in the 'thirties and, as she once told me, he went to the Galeries Lafayette, a big cluster of shops – and bought the fan just before he went on to keep his appointment with her.

Eventually my mother gave me the fan and told me its story. But the poem began in an image and not a story. The image was of an object which was entirely silent. I could hold it and feel its mixture of smoothness and friction. But it would never be able to tell me whether my father rushed down the Boulevard des Capucines to be there on time. Did he rush? It would never be able to tell me what they said, or when the storm broke. What did they say? What did the storm look like?

Just asking these questions made me want to re-create the event: the storm, the man and the woman, the drama and poignance of the first steps in a courtship. But first I had to make the fan vivid again: not the crumpled object I owned but the beautiful, surprising gift it had once been. To do that, I had to make some choices: practical technical choices. These can be hard to describe in hindsight, but here are two examples of those choices.

Firstly, I decided to make the opening stanza of the poem slip and slide a bit: to make the pronouns shimmer and disappear. To make the reader feel the ground of grammar shift and tip in a disconcerting way. So I used the word *it* twice. The first *it* of course, is the fan. It was the first gift he ever gave her. The second *it* is evidently about the weather. It was stifling. But it looks back a little bit, like something disappearing in a car mirror, to the other *it*. And so the fan, the weather, the heat, the mystery are deliberately confused and merged by those pronouns.

In the second stanza I change the caesuras around. Perhaps the word is hardly used any more. And yet there hasn't been a replacement for it, so I will use it here. No one should be afraid of it. All a caesura means is where you break the line as you are writing it: after two beats, or three, or even one. Or not at all. Where you pause, or don't pause, in other words. The name may be rather artificial and off-putting. But the actual practice of breaking the line can yield very useful results for a poet and be instantly picked up as a slight but important shift in speed by the readers, even if they don't use that name for it. It's a little like the controls on a video; slowing down or speeding up the tape. Here I write four lines where I move the action along a little: to show they stayed in the city, were meeting in the cafés, were sometimes late for one another, and this time he was delayed by buying the fan. I use no caesura in the first or last line. Then in the following three lines I put the caesura or internal line-break after the second stress. That way I get a jerky, grainy feel to the stanza: a little like the frames of an old film. And that's what I wanted.

They stayed in the city for the summer.
They met in cafés. She was always early.
He was late. That evening he was later.
They wrapped the fan. He looked at this watch.

The fan, the story, the history of the object all had and have great meaning for me. But sometimes a poem's existence is decided in a split second. And that happened here. I had the fan; I knew the story. And still I hadn't the poem although I had thought about it. Then one late spring morning I was looking

out my back window into the garden. A female blackbird was just in front of our apple tree, moving around, looking for worms. It was sunny and clear and the light was moving directly to that part of the grass. Suddenly, as I watched, she put out one brown wing: a wonderfully constructed fan-like movement, Now open, now shut. There and then the existence of the poem was guaranteed. I had wanted to write about the fan, the past, the lost moment. I lacked the meaning. Now here, in this evocation in nature, of the man-made object of courtship I found the meaning I needed and the final image for the poem.

the blackbird on his first sultry morning
in summer, finding buds, worms, fruit,
feels the heat. Suddenly she puts out her wing –
the whole, full, flirtatious span of it.

Brendan Kennelly



Originally from Kerry, Brendan Kennelly is a professor in Trinity College, Dublin. He has published many books of poetry and a number of plays and adaptations.

What Poetry Does

Poetry discovers, protects and celebrates the deepest values of the heart; it gives a voice to the voiceless, brings home the outcast and makes articulate the sand, the shell and the stone. It expresses not only actual reality but also possible reality. After more than forty years of writing, poetry remains for me a bewildering and enlightening adventure in language. 'Adventure' is a key word. Writing poetry is indeed an adventure in words and rhythms, in images and dreams, in music and silence, in one's experience of love and hate, light and dark, good and evil, hope and despair. Poetry makes a kind of singing sense out of confusing experience. Through words, it is possible to shape and articulate our most joyous and troubling moments. When we write of loneliness, even of what may feel like despair, even of what indeed may be despair, we discover that there is in language itself a kind of resilience, a surging, hopeful energy that is redemptive and reassuring.

Words are wonderful; they are, literally, full of wonder. Words have a life of their own, an inner sparkle, a profound vitality which is never completely lost but may be dulled or dimmed by endless use, by thoughtless repetition and mindless babble. Poetry is an attempt to cut through the effects of deadening familiarity and repeated, mechanical usage in order to unleash that profound vitality, to reveal that inner sparkle. In the beginning was the Word. In the end will be the Word. That is the faith that makes a poet trust language, this language that is bruised and battered every day and night of its life.

Language is a human miracle always in danger of drowning in a sea of familiarity. One of the permanent functions of poetry is to restore and reveal the miraculous character of language. Reading and re-reading poetry aloud is usually a sure way to reach into and to touch the primal linguistic freshness. This is the very opposite of boredom because it is a kind of spiritual excitement that stimulates and intensifies the sense of wonder in the reader, but especially in the re-reader. Boredom crawls out the back door when a poem spreads its wings and invites us to share its flight.

In its quest to protect and celebrate the heart's deepest values, poetry is likely to travel strange roads, explore unusual mental and emotional territory. In my own case, I have tried to give expression to all kinds of voices, voices out of my own experience, but also voices out of history and mythology, voices out of my dreams, nightmares, memories and imaginings. Voices are fascinating to listen to. Deep attentive listening to all kinds of voices both outside us and within us is a most revealing experience. If we listen patiently and with real concentration to others we find that they become part of ourselves, of our lives. Listening to voices deepens and extends the self; it makes life rich and challenging; and it means that a poet's work is not limited by his or her mere egotism. When I was asked to compile a

selection of my poems ranging from 1960 to 1990 I gave the finished book the title, *A Time for Voices*, because I wanted to show the ways in which so many different voices had entered my heart and mind over the years and had become the valid voice of poetry.

May I give one example. One night, my three old daughter was noisily refusing to sleep, screaming her little head off, in fact. I brought her downstairs to the living -room and tried to have a chat with her. A vase of flowers stood on the table. Petals were falling from the flowers. She said, 'What are these?' 'Petals,' I replied. 'Why are they falling?' she asked. 'Because the flowers are dying,' I answered. She was quiet for a while and then the questions began to pour out of her. Needless to say, I wasn't in much of a mood to listen to a child's torrent of questions; but suddenly I was interested. Why? Because of the child's persistent, intense inquiry, her desire to know. Also, I was struck that in the middle of the torrential questioning, she said, time and time again, 'I want to play.' I tried to answer her as well as any sluggish-minded adult could hope to do so at that late hour and, I recall, she went back to sleep soon afterwards. So did I. Next day, her questions and her, 'I want to play' kept coming into my head so I sat down and wrote *Poem from a Three-Year-Old*. I could hear her voice clearly. I still can.

POEM FROM A THREE-YEAR-OLD

And will the flowers die?

And will the people die?

And every day do you grow old, do I
Grow old, no I'm not old, do
Flowers grow old?

Old things – do you throw them out?

Do you throw old people out?

And how you know a flower that's old?

The petals fall, the petals fall from flowers,
And do the petals fall from people too?
Every day more petals fall until the
Floor where I would like to play I
Want to play is covered with old
Flowers and people all the same
Together lying there with the petals fallen
On the dirty floor I want to play
The floor you come and sweep
With the huge broom.

The dirt you sweep, what happens that,
What happens all the dirt you sweep
From flowers and people, what
Happens all the dirt? Is all the
Dirt what's left of flowers and



People, all the dirt there in a
Heap under the huge broom that
Sweeps everything away?

Why you work so hard, why brush
And sweep to make a heap of dirt?
And who will bring new flowers?
And who will bring new people? Who will
Bring new petals to put in the water
Where no petals fall on to the
Floor where I would like to
Play? Who will bring new flowers
That will not hang their heads
The tired old people wanting sleep?
Who will bring new flowers that
Do not split and shrivel every
Day? And if we have new flowers,
Will we have new people too to
Keep the flowers alive and give
Them water?

And will the new young flowers die?

And will the new young people die?

And why?

Comment

The heart of the poem is the act of wonder-filled questioning shot through with the recurring expression of the wish to play. Questions and play. The spirit of inquiry is eternally energised and renewed by the need to have a bit of fun. This, to me, is the real meaning of education: asking questions in a spirit of intellectual seriousness and genuine wonder and then putting the heart into enjoying the myriad playful possibilities of life. Seriousness needs to play; playfulness, in order to get the best out of itself, needs the discipline of serious attention to those questions that press the mind for answers. Maybe the answers are there; and maybe they're not. But the questions are asked. That's the important thing.

The rhythm of this poem is the rhythm of the child's voice, or as near to it as I could get. Rhythm is a magical thing. It is, if you wish, the unique sound of the music of the soul of the poem. It is most likely to be discovered and relished if the poem is read aloud. Reading aloud calls for an experimental approach, for a serious-play approach, in fact. Use your own voice in whatever way your intelligence and instincts prompt you to do. The poem wants to share its meaning and its magic with you. Now read it again, but aloud.

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