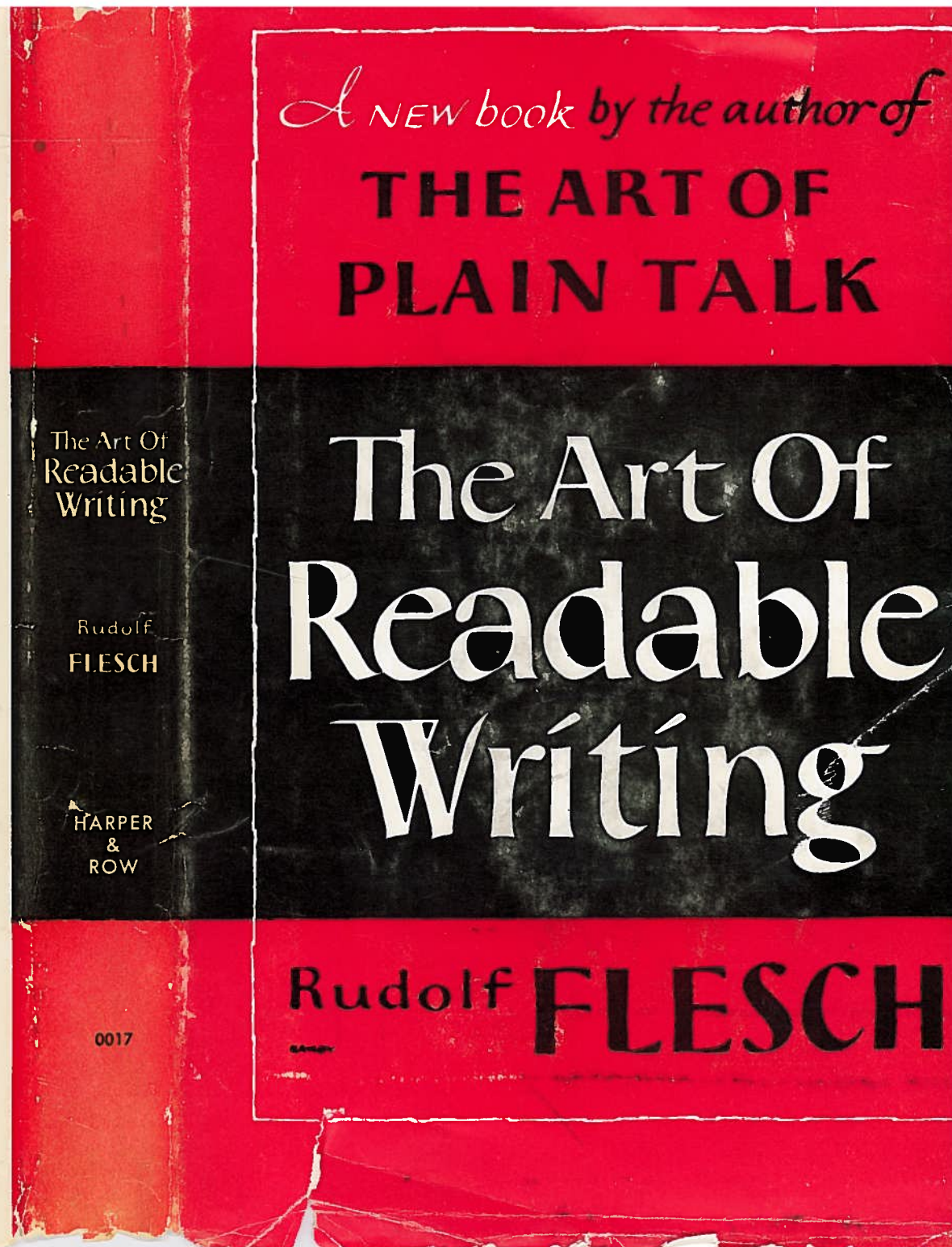


Photo by Annie M. Graf

WITH the publication of his first book in 1946, Rudolf Flesch put the science of readability on the map. *The Saturday Review of Literature* said of him: "His influence on the American press is already great. 'The Art of Plain Talk' will extend that influence to the school, the home, the office, the pulpit, the street, and, let's hope, the government." *Time Magazine* now calls him simply "Mr. Fix-It of writing."

The impact of this new concept of style was the more startling in view of the fact that Dr. Flesch first arrived in this country from his native Austria in 1938. He took his doctorate of Philosophy at Columbia, and has taught also at New York University. He has served as consultant on readability to the Associated Press, and to a growing list of publishers, government agencies, educational organizations and corporations.



A NEW book by the author of
**THE ART OF
PLAIN TALK**

The Art Of
**Readable
Writing**

The Art Of
Readable
Writing

Rudolf
FLESCH

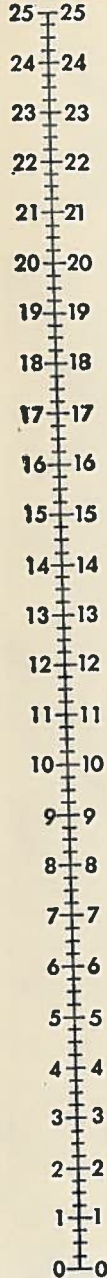
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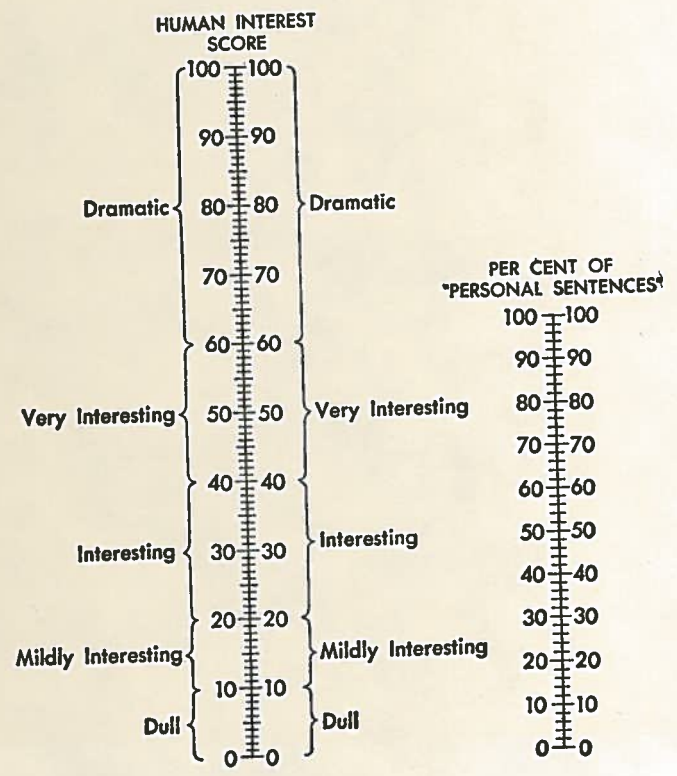
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How Interesting?

PER CENT OF
"PERSONAL WORDS"



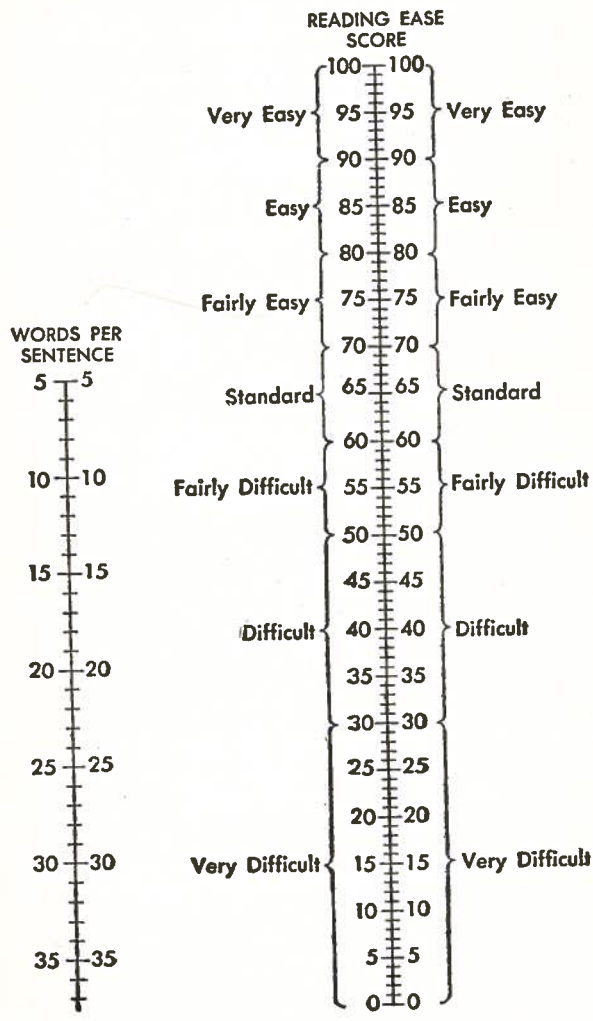
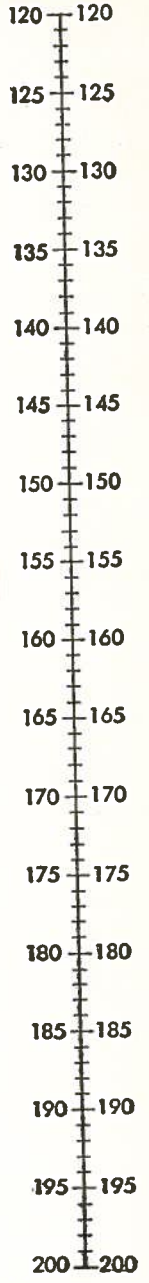
HOW TO USE THIS CHART
Take a pencil or ruler and connect your "Personal Words" figure (left) with your "Personal Sentences" figure (right). The intersection of the pencil or ruler with the center line shows your "Human Interest" score.



How Easy?

HOW TO USE THIS CHART
Take a pencil or ruler and connect your "Words per Sentence" figure (left) with your "Syllables per 100 Words" figure (right). The intersection of the pencil or ruler with the center line shows your "Reading Ease" score.

SYLLABLES PER
100 WORDS



The Art of
Readable Writing

by

RUDOLF FLESCH, Ph.D.

Author of *The Art of Plain Talk*

FOREWORD BY
ALAN J. GOULD
Executive Editor
The Associated Press



HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS

New York and Evanston

THE ART OF READABLE WRITING

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To Anne and Hugo

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FOREWORD

BY ALAN J. GOULD

Executive Editor, The Associated Press

I think it is fair to say Rudolf Flesch's ideas have played a major part in lifting writing habits out of some of their oldest ruts.

This is important, among other reasons, because it coincides with an era of great crisis in human history. These are times in which it is supremely vital to convey ideas and report the news so that basic truths may be *better* understood by *more* people.

It is not sufficient to report news facts alone, or simply to tell what men say or nations do. The *meanings* must be set forth and events must be set in perspective. This must be done fairly, expertly, and thoroughly. It puts a premium on the techniques of Readability—that is, the writing methods that make a news report (a) as easy to read as it is interesting, (b) as well organized as it is expertly done, and (c) as clear to the average reader or listener as it is fair and balanced.

That's where Doctor Flesch comes in. His *Art of Readable Writing* is a notable and practical follow-up to his stimulating book on *The Art of Plain Talk*. He has put the spotlight on ways and means by which—in a confused world—we have a better chance of reducing the total content of confusion.

It is no exaggeration to say that the impact of Doctor Flesch's ideas on simpler, clearer ways of writing represents one of the most significant developments of our journalistic times. The effect has been to make more readable—and, therefore, more understandable—the combined output of the three great media of free expression in the United States: the newspapers, the magazines, and the radio.

FOREWORD

This estimate, I should explain, is not a matter of detached observation or hearsay. I have worked closely with him during the past two years, as have others on the news staff of The Associated Press. As our consulting expert on Readability, he has undertaken a series of critical studies of the world-wide news services of The Associated Press. His techniques form the basis of a concerted effort by the Associated Press staff to produce a day-by-day coverage of world news that's easier to read and easier for the average reader to understand.

The rapidity with which Doctor Flesch has achieved results on the American writing scene is due, I suggest, to two main factors: (a) his own skill in presenting a novel formula for measuring Readability, and (b) the extent to which it has been applied effectively to news writing. A Flesch axiom—"Write as you talk"—is now widely accepted by newspapermen who scoffed at the doctor's ideas when they began emerging from collegiate classrooms.

Doctor Flesch could write another book—and I hope he will—on his Readability debates with professional newsmen. Questions most often fired at him by the journalistic scoffers were like these: Why attempt to put news writing in a straitjacket, with a premium on short words and sentences? Why try to "write down" to the lower levels of reading intelligence? How can readers absorb the main facts of the news if the "Who-what-where-why-when-and-how" method of telling the news is subordinated to human interest treatment?

The answers are simple enough, as the doctor has demonstrated and our own Associated Press news staff has proved. The basic answer is this: newspaper readers or radio listeners have a *better* chance of grasping the news, or what it means, if it is told to them simply and clearly. This involves neither novelty nor a straitjacket. As one managing editor put it, in concluding a seminar of A.P. editors from all parts of the country: "The *New York News* used to say: 'Tell it to Sweeney and the Stuyvesants will understand. But tell it to the Stuyvesants and the Sweeneys may *not* understand.'"

[x]

P R E F A C E

Three years ago I wrote a book called *The Art of Plain Talk*, in which I tried to popularize the concept of readability. The idea apparently struck a responsive chord and the book was a success.

Even before I wrote *The Art of Plain Talk* I realized that the plan of the book covered only a narrow field and that there was a place for a more general work on what might be called scientific rhetoric. (Later a friend remarked that *The Art of Plain Talk* actually was not about writing but about rewriting.) I confess that originally I had the ambition of seeing my name on the title page of a comprehensive scholarly work; but somehow the subject resisted such a treatment and what I came up with was another book for laymen with some bibliographical notes. *The Art of Readable Writing*, then, is neither a rehash of *The Art of Plain Talk* nor a sequel to it; rather, the two books complement each other. Those who have read the earlier book will find that there is hardly any overlapping; and those who haven't won't feel, I hope, that they have missed the first half of the show.

The new readability formula wasn't part of the original plan either. After a few years of experience with the formula that appeared in *The Art of Plain Talk*, a revision seemed worth while; and once I had worked out a new formula, I naturally decided to put it in my new book. Users of the old formula will want to know the whys and wherefores of the changes; these are explained in the notes to Chapter XIV. Otherwise, I can only repeat what I said in the preface to *The Art of Plain Talk*: "Some readers, I am afraid, will expect a magic formula for good writing and will be disappointed with my simple yardstick. Others, with a passion for accuracy, will wallow in the little rules and compu-

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PREFACE

tations but lose sight of the principles of plain English. What I hope for are readers who won't take the formula too seriously and won't expect from it more than a rough estimate."

Scholarly-minded readers will probably find the bibliographical references sketchy and feel that the book isn't well enough documented. I can only plead that the subject of scientific rhetoric is in its infancy and that experimental evidence is scattered and ill-assorted. (Until 1948 *Psychological Abstracts* didn't even have a special section on language and communication.) Doubtless there are many pertinent studies that I have missed; and many more are going to appear.

Readers of *The Art of Plain Talk* have been extraordinarily generous. They—as well as my students and friends—have helped me tremendously with references, suggestions, and comments. Many thanks to all of them.

R. F.

Dobbs Ferry, N. Y.
July 1948

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Most of the material in this book, including my own readability formula, is based on accumulated research findings in many different fields of science. Directly or indirectly, I am therefore indebted to the work of hundreds of researchers; some of them are mentioned in the bibliography, but most of them are not. My own work goes back to the experience I gained in the now defunct Readability Laboratory of the American Association of Adult Education at Columbia University. I owe a large debt of gratitude to its director, Dr. Lyman Bryson.

I also owe thanks to the following persons and organizations for their gracious permission to quote copyrighted material:

Mr. Don Herold for the excerpt from the folder he prepared for the Chase National Bank; Mr. Hal Boyle for his column on the freckle; *The Saturday Review of Literature* for the excerpt from "Duet on a Bus" by Douglas Moore; *The New Yorker* for the excerpts from the Profile of Beardsley Ruml by Alva Johnston, the Profile of Dr. Emery A. Rovenstine by Mark Murphy, and the article "Soapland" by James Thurber; *The Saturday Evening Post* for the excerpts from "The Two-Fisted Wisdom of Ching" by Beverly Smith and "You're Not as Smart as You Could Be" by David G. Wittels; *The New York Post* for the article "Fate and Vivian" by Jay Nelson Tuck and part of Jimmy Cannon's column of September 19, 1947; *Time* for the story "A House With a Yard" (May 17, 1948); Mr. James Marlow for part of his column on reciprocal trade agreements; The Viking Press, Inc., for the excerpt from Irwin Edman's *Philosopher's Quest*; Prentice-Hall, Inc., for the excerpt from the Christmas letter quoted in *Smooth Sailing Letters* by L. E. Frailey; Dr. Harry Dingman for the quotation from his book *Risk Appraisal* and the letter he wrote me; Mr. Fred Reinfeld for the quotations from his two chess

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

books; *The New York Herald Tribune* for the editorial "No, No, No, No, No, No" (March 3, 1948); *Life* for the article "Pain Control Clinic" (October 27, 1947); Mr. Howard Whitman and *The Reader's Digest* for the article "Let's Help Them Marry Young"; Mr. Albert Deutsch and *The Reader's Digest* for the excerpt from the article "Unnecessary Operations"; Mr. Ray Bethers and *This Week* for the column "What's Happening to Where you Live"; and Oxford University Press for the extracts from the original and abridged versions of Arnold J. Toynbee's *Study of History*.

R. F.

The Art of Readable Writing

C H A P T E R I

YOU AND ARISTOTLE

*Simple English is no one's mother
tongue. It has to be worked for.*

JACQUES BARZUN

TO COME right out with it, this is a book on rhetoric. Its purpose is to help you in your writing.

Chances are, you learned how to write—indirectly—from Aristotle. Look up the history of English grammar, composition, and rhetoric teaching; you'll find that it all started a couple of centuries ago when people first hit upon the idea of teaching English-speaking boys and girls not only Greek and Latin, but English too. Courses and textbooks came into being; naturally, what was taught was simply Greek and Latin grammar and rhetoric, applied to English. Now since all Greek and Latin grammar and rhetoric go straight back to Aristotle (as any encyclopedia will tell you) and since the principles of English teaching are still much the same as they were two hundred years ago, what you were taught in school really comes down from Aristotle.

Take two rather striking examples, one from composition and one from grammar. In composition, probably the most important rule you were taught is the rule of unity. It is pure Aristotle—based on his famous principle that everything must have “a beginning, a middle, and an end.” And in grammar the first thing you were taught was the parts of speech. Who first thought of parts of speech? Aristotle, again. So, whether you like it or not, you are an umptieth-generation Aristotelian.

There are several things wrong with using Aristotle as an English teacher today.

In the first place, Aristotle was using ancient Greek; we are using modern English. And though these two languages are distant cousins, they are as different as can be. Besides, Aristotle was living two and a half thousand years ago. Quite a few things have happened since. As to speaking and writing, things have changed considerably—what with paper and printing, books, newspapers, the telegraph and telephone, the movies, radio and television, compulsory education, advertising, and the funnies.

Nowadays, you—like everybody else—need writing skill for business letters, luncheon speeches, advertising copy, promotional literature, press releases, and a thousand other practical purposes. In Aristotle's time, according to his *Rhetoric*, all non-fiction consisted of three kinds of speeches—"deliberative, forensic, and epideictic." In other words, his rules were meant for political speeches, pleadings in court, and funeral orations. You'll have rather few occasions for these three types of writing but plenty for all sorts of other writing chores that come up every day.

These are a few of the reasons why it's time to free yourself from Aristotle.

Another reason is not so obvious. Let me explain with something I read recently in an educational journal. It was a paper written by some young speech teacher somewhere in the Middle West, about the arrangement of arguments in a speech. Aristotle had taught that you should build up your arguments and wind up with the most impressive one as climax. But the young American instructor started his paper by saying that Aristotle—and a host of other famous rhetoric teachers—were wrong in this. He maintained that you should start with your best argument and let the lesser ones trail behind.

How can some English teacher have the effrontery to dispute the teachings of Aristotle? you will ask. Here is the answer: He took a speech that was arranged in conventional Aristotelian fashion and put it on phonograph records. Then he rearranged

the same speech in anticlimax order and put *that* on phonograph records. Whereupon he assembled two groups of carefully matched students and had them listen to the records. When they were through, he asked each of them what he remembered and whether the speech had changed his mind on the subject. Then, after some time had passed, he bombarded them with another set of questions about the speech. Finally he settled down and started working with statistics. And after he had collected a bagful of standard deviations and correlation coefficients, he announced to the world that Aristotle was wrong.

In other words, our young American arrived at his conclusion by using scientific methods. I don't mean to say that Aristotle did *not* approach his subject scientifically—he did—but he did not carry on any experiments; and if he had, they would prove something about ancient Greek audiences rather than modern American readers and listeners. And that's the most important reason why you can't go by Aristotle any more in doing a writing job today.

The fact is, we have an enormous amount of scientific information about English grammar, usage, and composition. But it's hardly ever used for English teaching in schools. To be sure, there is a movement toward modern, scientific instruction among English teachers, but it's making headway only very slowly. Let me illustrate the present state of affairs with a story I heard some time ago: Professor C. C. Fries, one of our leading "liberal" English teachers, once told his students that there was no such rule as "Never use a preposition at the end of a sentence." (Actually, it is an old superstition based on the Latin derivation of the word *preposition*.) "Do you mean to say that the rule has been changed?" a student spoke up. "Changed? No," Professor Fries answered. "Who would have the authority to make or change such a rule?" "Why," the student stammered, "whoever deals with these things . . . the authorities . . . the experts . . . the English Teachers Association . . ." "That would be the National Council of Teachers of English," said Professor Fries.

"Well, if they issued any rules lately, I ought to know about it. I am president."

Teachers like Fries are still rare, and students and laymen who believe in "rules" are to be found everywhere. Unless you are different from most people, your knowledge of rhetoric probably consists of a handful of half-forgotten rules, overlaid by the vague notion that they apply to the writing of themes but hardly to anything a grownup person does between nine and five on a weekday.

If you look at some random samples of current writing, you will find precious little of Aristotle in them. Some of them are written as if the writer had made a special effort to forget every single rule that was drummed into him in school.

Here, for instance, is part of a Gimbels ad:

When a teen ager asks "How's the apple pie?" and she's told it's gone—does she order peach? No! She shrieks, "Give me a double hunk of that gone apple pie." "Gone" to her means good—tops—out of this world. "Real gone" means absolute tops. That's how Gimbels feels about Russel Wright dinnerware, Winter pianos, Bigelow broadlooms, antique paperweights. They're tops, the best—they're real gone.

Now this, of course, contains the slang word *gone*. But I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the tone of the whole thing, which is slangy and against all the rules of how you should write for publication; I'm talking about the word Gimbels uses to *translate* the slang word *gone*—*tops*, another slang word that hasn't even made the dictionary yet.

But, you will say, this is department store advertising and really something special. That sort of language isn't used for more serious purposes, say for advertising by banks; they write sober, conventional English, following all the standard rules. (Which is probably why Miss FitzGibbon, Gimbels advertising director, recently called it "a lot of malarky.") But nowadays you can't

even tell with banks. Consider this (by the master copy writer Don Herold):

Most men think they have done swell by their families when they get their lives insured for a *round sum*.

"It will be nice for Mary and the children to get \$50,000," they say. (Or some other round sum.)

The trouble with leaving a round sum is that the optimists immediately gather round. Mary's brother from Detroit appears with a grand scheme to double it. Friends come in with bright suggestions, and stock salesmen gallop up with glib tongues.

Even you and I, smart as we are, have found it difficult, maybe, to keep round sums round in recent years. What can we expect of them, then, in the hands of a bewildered widow and inexperienced youngsters?

No, a round sum of life insurance can never take the place of *you*.

What you should do (I am just suggesting) is to make your life insurance act as nearly as possible as a *substitute for you* when you are gone.

You wouldn't dump \$50,000 or more into your family's lap in one chunk if you were alive—especially not these days; what would they do with it?

No, you'd probably invest the lump sum safely and give them the income from it, with maybe little nicks off of the principal in certain emergencies.

Well, a *Life Insurance Trust* can handle your life insurance in exactly that way.

Have your policy proceeds made payable to a bank in trust for your family—perhaps the Chase National Bank. Let the Chase be *you* when you're gone.

To get the Chase National Bank more customers, this is doubtless superb. But give this piece of prose to some run-of-the-mill English teacher, and he (or she) won't like it a bit. In fact, he will

immediately proceed to take it apart. He will start with marking the third sentence as a "sentence fragment"—to be touched only with a ten-foot pole—and will go down the page until he comes to *off of*, whereupon he will mark the whole thing F and give Mr. Herold a stern warning never to do that sort of thing again.

Want an example that is *not* advertising copy? How about some political reporting? Here is John Dos Passos, writing from England in *Life* magazine:

. . . By the time we had finished tea the rain had stopped. We stepped out into the freshwashed afternoon and looked down the line of low stone farm buildings that shone brown as chocolate against the emerald hedges and the misty blue-green fields of oats that rolled down towards the ferny headland beyond the road where cropping sheep moved slowly against the leaden stretch of the North Sea. Our host was a grizzled blueeyed man with a fresh tanned skin. He had broad shoulders and a light footfall and he laughed a great deal. No, he said merrily, talking back over his shoulder, the controls didn't bother him too much. Of course he had trouble getting parts for his machinery. And nails. My word what a lot of forms you had to fill out to get nails . . .

Freshwashed and *blueeyed* and no commas after *of course* and *my word* would surely enrage most English teachers. But, after all, this is Dos Passos, the novelist, who may be expected to take some liberties even when he does straight reporting. How about some example from ordinary, day-by-day newspaper writing? Here is Hal Boyle, AP feature writer, doing a particularly charming column for his millions of readers:

Where can you buy a freckle?

I need one bad. I'm in a jam.

If I don't find one soon a little girl is going to be mad at me. She said I took it and haven't brought it back.

Other people's kids—they get me in more odd predicaments. But I don't have any children of my own, so I have to play with those that belong to other people.

Children do for me what music, books, movies, golf or gambling does for many grownups—that is, they lift me out of the world of worry and the high cost of living.

Critics who complain the modern world has lost the art of conversation must never talk to children. If you try to talk down to them, they quickly find you out and shut up. But if you can take the anchor off your adult imagination—what a wonderful realm you enter with them. Commonsense is nonsense, and nonsense is commonsense, and every sentence holds a surprise.

Someday it will be a penitentiary offense to put a rein on the fancies of children, who are born poets and die—well, something less than poets.

My games with children, however, usually put me in Dutch with their parents, who complain later:

"It took us two hours after you left to quiet Junior and get him to go to bed. You get him over-excited."

I am in bad standing now at one household which has a small boy who wants to become another Thomas Edison. This young mechanical genius asked me about heaven, and I did my best to explain to him all about this place where I hope some day to get my mail. I answered all his questions with the latest information I have.

But the other day his father reproached me bitterly:

"What ideas are you putting in my son's head anyway? He has informed his mother he never wants to go to heaven because it doesn't have an escalator. He says he would rather go to a department store."

The only deal with the younger generation I have come out ahead in recently concerns the purchase of a dog by two children of some friends in Indianapolis. The kids earned the money themselves. But I made a small contribution to the fund, and another friend later put in some, too.

The kids bought a dachshund. It was so long they decided it needed two names. So they named the front end "Hal"

for me—and generously named the back half “Charley” in honor of the last contributor.

Now, about that freckle. I playfully pretended to pluck it off the nose of this five-year-old girl after a visit a month ago.

Last week I called again, and she crept up behind me and whispered in my ear:

“Please, I want my freckle back. I think it is lonesome for me.”

“I am taking awfully good care of it,” I replied.

“Do you take it out for a walk every day on a leash?” she asked.

Somewhat flabbergasted at the mental picture of a freckle out for a stroll, I hemmed and hawed and she said very solemnly:

“I really do want my freckle back. Please mail it to me this week, and don’t forget.”

What happens now? The only thing I can think of is to tell her the freckle changed into a chocolate bar and mail her one.

But this could start a game that would put me in the poorhouse. She has about 1,265,347 freckles now—and growing more every day the sun shines.

You like this? I do too. I think it’s splendid writing. But where are the rules? You couldn’t possibly detect the good old standbys “unity, coherence, and emphasis” in this piece. You can’t even pin Hal Boyle down as to parts of speech. Right in his second sentence he uses *bad* instead of *badly*.

So what can you do to improve your writing and come a little closer to the skill of advertising wizards like Miss FitzGibbon or Don Herold, famous authors like Dos Passos, or Pulitzer-prize newspapermen like Hal Boyle? Obviously, just learning the rules won’t do. In fact, if you remember too many of the rules from your school days, they will get in your way. What you really need

is a good working knowledge of informal, everyday, *practical* English.

I am sure you realize by now that this book is not dealing with what usually goes by the names of grammar, usage, composition, or rhetoric. On the contrary. If you want to learn how to write, you need exact information about what kind of language will fit what kind of audience. And scientific data about the psychological effects of different styles. And handy, usable facts and figures about common types of words, sentences, and paragraphs. And knowledge of the results achieved by various writing techniques. In short, you need a modern scientific rhetoric that you can apply to your own writing.

That’s what I tried to put into this book.

OTHER PEOPLE'S MINDS

Social study should begin with careful observation of the capacity of groups to communicate effectively and intimately with each other.

ELTON MAYO

ON FEBRUARY 21, 1945, the Allies for the first time bombed Berchtesgaden. The news was such a sensation that correspondents asked the successful fliers for an interview. They were in for a surprise. "Neither Major John L. Beck, the flight leader," the *New York Times* correspondent wrote, "nor presumably the pilots with him knew that Berchtesgaden was where Adolf Hitler had his principal home . . . Berchtesgaden was just another name to Major Beck. Neither at the University of Idaho, nor at the aircraft factory where he worked before he entered the Air Force, nor in the Army itself had it ever come to his attention that Hitler had built a fortress palace outside Berchtesgaden called the Berghof and from there had directed most of his nefarious international affairs for years."

The *New York Times* was so shocked by this that it ran an editorial about Major Beck's astonishing ignorance. But it needn't have been shocked. Major Beck, who "didn't know from nothing," was a typical American; his countrymen, polled around the same time on various items of general information, answered like this:

Thirty-one percent thought that England was mainly an agricultural country; 60 percent thought that in Russia everybody gets the same pay, no matter what his job; 86 percent didn't know what side Russia was on at the time of Munich.

Nor did four years of global war teach Americans much. After weeks and months of front-page news about the Bikini bomb tests, 20 percent of the people had never heard of them. After half a year of public debate, 52 percent of American farmers had never heard of the Marshall plan. And two-and-a-half years after the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 30 percent of the citizens of Cincinnati had never heard of the United Nations.

One reason for this may be that the average American's picture of the world is somewhat hazy: for instance, he can't properly locate more than half of the countries in Europe, or more than a third of those in Latin America.

Does this mean that the ordinary person knows more when it comes to domestic rather than foreign affairs? It does not. In 1946, only three out of five Americans had ever heard of the widely publicized Wagner-Murray-Dingell health bill; in 1944 only one in seven knew anything about the Little Steel Formula, which had been in the headlines for months.

There's a simple explanation for all this: people don't read enough to be well informed. According to library surveys, they hardly ever read any serious books; according to newspaper surveys, they pay more attention to the comics than to anything else in the paper. In studies of over a hundred newspapers, it was found that only one news story in twenty-five is read by even half the readers.

Some people say the trouble is that newspaper language is too highbrow. There's a lot in that. Consider that good old expression *free enterprise*, used in hundreds of editorials every day. When the Gallup poll asked people what it meant, only 30 percent had any clear idea. The others either couldn't define it or thought it meant freedom to put over a fast one in a business deal. Or consider a phrase like *Magna Charta*. They polled Canadians on that. (Americans would probably do worse.) The result? The phrase was known to 18 percent.

If you think you could do better than that, remember that Congressional debate when Representative Walter G. Andrews

(Princeton, '13) flunked several items from the Army General Classification Test. Among other things, he couldn't define the words *ambient*, *torsion*, and *recondite*.

Well, you say, people do better on ordinary words. Depends on what you mean by "ordinary." Tests have shown, for instance, that a good many American farmers don't know the meaning of *essential*, *equivalent*, *specified*, or *sufficient*. And there's the true story of the film company that polled moviegoers on whether they liked advertising with or without adjectives. It turned out that one out of three didn't know the meaning of *adjective*.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that most people are morons. Some students have jumped to that conclusion, but I don't agree with them. If a person doesn't know much, that doesn't necessarily mean he's unintelligent. After all, intelligence is the ability to learn. Remember John Beck, who had never heard of Berchtesgaden but was smart enough to rise to the rank of major in the Air Force. And remember the often quoted saying by the late Glenn Frank: "We often overestimate the stock of information readers have, and underestimate their intelligence."

Here's a good example of what happens if you overestimate people's information. The Department of Agriculture puts out thousands of leaflets to help farmers in their work. As a test, a county agent once asked a fourteen-year-old boy to write down how he tanned a goat pelt by following a government bulletin. The boy wrote this:

Mr. George Adams gave me a goat pelt if I would write about how it was tanned. He said it was from a crossbred Angora. The pelt was fresh when I got it Monday.

Mr. Thornton sent me a bulletin about tanning. I was a long time finding the place that told how to tan a goat pelt. It is on page 12 about furs and hair robes. It told about tanning 100 pounds of hides but not about a goat pelt. Another paper by Mr. Thornton told about tanning 2 sheepskins in a $\frac{1}{2}$ barrel.

Clean off flesh and fat was the first thing to do. Daddy

did most of that. He didn't seem to know much about it and cussed a little and tried to phone Mr. Thornton to cuss him and find an easy way to get the red meat and fat off, but Mr. Thornton had left town. Daddy worked about three hours at it with the pelt over a barrel in the garage at night. He said the dam goat never had been skinned yet. So he skinned it all over again a little piece at a time. The fat fell on the concrete floor and daddy slipped down in it and spoiled his good pants.

The bulletin, No. B-86, says to use just enough water to cover the hide. We used the ice-cream freezer bucket. The paper says use 1 gal. water for 2 skins. We used $1\frac{1}{2}$ gal. but did not know how much salt was 6% and 5% alum of a $1\frac{1}{2}$ gal. Daddy did not know how many ounces in a gallon. The dictionary said $\frac{1}{10}$ liter was 35.274 oz. and there are 3.7853 liters in a gallon. Daddy figured that on a slide rule to be 133.5 oz. per gal. Our dip bucket measured 100 oz. or $\frac{3}{4}$ gal. Daddy figured that at 5.4 lb. with a slide rule but he made a mistake because I figured 6.25 lb. but too late. He put in 2 buckets that he called 10 lb. but was $12\frac{1}{2}$ lb. of water. Then we put in a $\frac{1}{2}$ -pound can of salt and a little over $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. of alum, that should be $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. So I guess we had 4% alum instead of 5% and $4\frac{3}{4}$ % salt instead of 6%.

Then the freezer bucket began to leak. Two hoops were off. Daddy put on wire hoops. It stopped leaking some time in the night. But the pelt was still under water in the morning. We put a window weight on it to hold it under.

After the freezer was fixed it was way past bedtime but we made the paste to tan with. The paper said use 1 lb. of alum, 1 lb. of salt, 1 lb. of flour, $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. of egg yolks, $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. of neat's-foot oil and 1 gal. of water for 2 skins.

For one skin we measured 64 oz. of water in the dip bucket and poured in the rest of the alum and salt. We woke up Mother to find out how much flour is $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. She fussed and said 2 cups but for goodness sake to go to bed, and told Daddy he had better be working on his annual reports.

Then Daddy didn't know how much 4 oz. of egg yolk was. Neat's-foot oil was the same so we poured out the oil and filled the bottle with water. Then we poured the water in a cup to measure it. It took 8 yolks to make enough, all that Mother had for breakfast. When it was all mixed it was not a paste but thin as milk. We figured up the cost and went to bed . . .

The thing to do, of course, is to find out what people know and what they don't know, and then to write accordingly. You'd think, for instance, that a good cookbook—in contrast to a government bulletin—would always be understandable to the average housewife. Well, one women's magazine found that that isn't so: the cookbooks take a great many things for granted that are baffling to this generation of brides. So the magazine plunged into a new style of recipe writing and came up with this:

Old Style Recipe:

Chocolate Roll

Beat eggs until thick and lemon colored. Add $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar gradually. Mix and sift together flour, baking powder and salt. Add all at once and blend thoroughly. Melt chocolate over hot water. Remove from fire. Add remaining sugar, water and baking soda. Stir until thick. Fold into cake mixture and add vanilla extract. Line greased 16"x11"x1" pan with greased wax paper. Pour in batter. Bake in moderate oven 350F 20 minutes.

New Style Recipe:

Chocolate Roll

Set oven at 350F which is moderate. Line the bottom of a 16"x11"x1" pan with brown or waxed paper. Grease both bottom and sides. Sift flour; measure it into a cup *lightly* with a spoon. Don't shake it down because extra flour makes a cake dry. Return this flour to sifter; add baking powder and salt. Melt chocolate over hot water and leave on the stove until you need it. Break eggs into a good-sized bowl. Beat until they're so thick you can actually lift them up with the beater. Beat in sugar, a tablespoon at a time. Sift flour into eggs and sugar mixture all at once. Mix thoroughly. Take chocolate off stove; stir in vanilla extract, baking soda and water. Add immediately to cake mixture before chocolate stiffens. Mix very well. Pour batter into pan. Bake 20 minutes.

If you study this closely, you'll see that the magazine must have done quite some research to find out what housewives know and what they need to be told. There's hardly anything more important for readable writing: the more you know about the kind of person you are writing for, the better you'll write.

Naturally, it isn't always possible to go into research studies, surveys, and polls. But a good estimate is better than nothing at all. Nowadays lack of information usually goes hand in hand with little education and low income; so if you are writing for people in the lower income brackets or people who haven't gone to college, it's a good guess that they won't have much background knowledge. Or, if you want to conduct your own miniature Gallup poll, make it a habit to try your stuff on the charwoman or the elevator man.

Amount of information is important, but it isn't the only thing to consider. People can be classified in many other ways—most obviously by age and sex. You'll have to write one way for young people and another way for older people, one way for men and another way for women.

Aristotle—who, as I said, *did* use the scientific approach—had this to say about the difference between the young and the old:

Young men have strong desires . . . they are fond of victory, for youth likes to be superior . . . they are sanguine . . . they live their lives in anticipation . . . they have high aspirations . . . are prone to pity . . . fond of laughter . . .

Elderly men . . . are cynical . . . suspicious . . . they aspire to nothing great or exalted, but crave the mere necessities and comforts of existence . . . they are not generous . . . they live in memory rather than anticipation . . . they are mastered by the love of gain . . .

Or, to put it in more modern terms, young people like romance, adventure, and daydreams, and old people like practical, down-to-earth, bread-and-butter stuff. Check any public

library, and you'll find that preference for fiction or nonfiction is mostly a matter of age.

So, when you want to convey information to young people, take a hint: make it a story—with a happy ending.

Then, of course, there's always the difference between the sexes. You know all about that, but a little reminder will do you good next time you write a piece for women (if you're male) or for men (if you're female). Remember that in intelligence tests, boys do better in mathematics, science, economics, and spatial relation tests, and girls in so-called "social intelligence"—understanding of people and intimate problems of everyday life. And remember that according to newspaper surveys, most readers of business news and sports are men and most readers of society pages and local news women. In other words, to make a wild generalization, men love figures, gadgets, and things, and women love talk, sentiment, and people.

Here is a little specific evidence. Not long ago, a farm paper ran a story "Nylon Is Here Again." It started like this:

Nylon doesn't always mean just a precious pair of sheer stockings any more. It can mean any number of bright, new garments that are made of nylon.

There are blouses, slips, children's clothes, coats and such things as curtains, rugs and upholstery materials.

Nylon is one of the new-comers in the field of textiles. Production for civilian uses was practically stopped during the war, but now nylon is again being made on a large scale. And it won't be long before much of our new clothing will be made of this material.

There are a lot of things about nylon materials that will make the fabric welcome to the homemaker . . .

As an experiment, the paper printed the same story also in a different version, which started as follows:

Edna, my neighbor, was lucky. She has a big family. In 1940, she bought a pretty green nylon and wool coat for Bonnie, her eldest daughter.

Bonnie wore the coat for two years. Then, when she became a war bride, she got a new coat that would match her wedding suit.

Marilynn, a pretty blonde, was next in line for the coat. She looked lovely in its bright green color. It gave her good service, too, for she wore it two years.

When Marilyn made up her mind to spend money she had earned for a new coat, Donna got the green one. Donna is a brunette. But she looks well in the coat and is still wearing it.

The surprising thing is how well the coat holds up . . .

Result of the experiment: For every two women who read the first version, there were three who read the second one.

Or here is some evidence on the male side: In 1947, the editor of *The Scientific Monthly*—clearly a men's magazine—looked through his requests for reprints to find out which of his articles had been a "best-seller." The subscribers—many of whom doubtless play with their sons' electric trains—promptly showed their preference for mechanical toys and gadgets (and their sense of humor). Overwhelmingly they had picked a satirical article "On the Mathematics of Committees, Boards, and Panels," chockful of mock formulas, ironical graphs, and fanciful equations.

What it all amounts to is that everything you write has to be slanted toward your audience. That doesn't necessarily mean that the simpler version is always the better; it all depends on who you are writing for. Let me give you two more examples:

Some time ago an expert in corporate finance gave an address on "Interstate Tax Barriers in Marketing" before the American Marketing Association. His listeners obviously expected something rather on the scholarly side and so he started with a dignified glance at history:

The subject of interstate tax barriers to marketing is a very important one, for if there had been no interstate tax barriers, there might never have been a United States of America. As we know, during and after the Revolutionary

War, the colonies operated under the vague and loose arrangement called the Articles of Confederation. Every state could and, in fact, did tax any shipment that passed through its contiguous waters . . .

The editor of a business newsletter discovered this address in *The Journal of Marketing* and rewrote it for his subscribers. His version was called "Interstate Marketing—Undersell by Minimizing Taxes." It started like this:

You can shout about modern merchandising until the cows come home; perfect your product, popularize your prices; line up your markets, employ the shrewdest buyers, the sharpest advertisers, most enterprising salesmen, keenest accountants. But withal, you must inevitably recognize this: in today's highly competitive market the business that gets by with the lowest tax bill is the one that will undersell the rest!

Or consider the difference between the stately *New York Times* and the tabloid *New York Daily News* with its tremendous circulation. Editorials on the same topics in the two papers are apt to be light-years apart in their approach. In 1941, when Lord Halifax arrived as British Ambassador and President Roosevelt sailed out to greet him off Annapolis, the two editorials read:

New York Times

His (Roosevelt's) extraordinary action in going personally to Annapolis for this purpose will be interpreted everywhere as it was intended to be interpreted: as a tribute to the courageous people whom Viscount Halifax has come to represent and a testimonial of the ties which bind us to them in this time of crisis.

New York Daily News

Lord Halifax must have felt from Mr. Roosevelt's manner of receiving him that the United States was saying to Great Britain, in our breezy American idiom, "Pal, the joint is yours."

But let me add this: When I say, study your audience and slant your writing toward it, I don't mean that you should write only what people want to read. Lately, what with radio and the

movies taking more and more to audience research, there's been quite some discussion about following poll results in writing. I'm on the side of Lee De Forest, who said of today's radio with its Hooperatings and audience measurements: "What have you gentlemen done with my child? He was conceived as a potent instrumentality for culture, fine music, the uplifting of America's mass intelligence. You have debased this child. You have made him a laughing stock to the intelligence."

And this goes for movies, books, magazines, newspapers, too. Never mind writing what the public wants—or what you suppose the public wants. Study your audience and then write what you want to say in the *form* that is most likely to appeal to them. Don't worry about your literary friends who will say you should have been more artistic. Let me quote a review of that best-selling novel against anti-Semitism, *Gentleman's Agreement*: "There will be those who will object to this book because it is tastelessly written. They will be overlooking one of its greatest assets. *Gentleman's Agreement*, exactly as is, can perform a tremendous service . . . Women who wouldn't touch *The Nation* or *The New Republic* with a ten foot pole are going to read *Gentleman's Agreement* as they sit under the dryer, and they're going to urge their husbands to read it."

If a worthwhile idea or work of art is skillfully popularized, everybody stands to gain. After Iturbi had played Chopin's "Polonaise in A-Flat" in *A Song to Remember*, people bought two million copies of the record. Which was a good thing for Iturbi, for Chopin, and for two million American families.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING TRIVIAL

"Unimportant, of course, I meant," the King hastily said, and went on to himself in an undertone, "important—unimportant—important—" as if he were trying which word sounded best.

LEWIS CARROLL, *Alice in Wonderland*

SCHOPENHAUER said: "The first rule for a good style is to have something to say; in fact, this in itself is almost enough." The British diplomat Harold Nicolson wrote: "The first essential is to know what one wishes to say; the second is to decide to whom one wishes to say it." And the Hungarian mathematician George Polya came up with this one: "The first rule of style is to have something to say. The second rule of style is to control yourself when, by chance, you have two things to say; say first one, then the other, not both at the same time."

No doubt Nicolson and Polya made valuable additions; but, as you see, Schopenhauer's first rule still stands. It is likely to be put in first place by anybody else who may want to draw up rules of style.

But, you will say, that doesn't help much. That just passes the buck back to the person who wants to know how to write. "Have something to say" sounds much like saying "Be smart" or "Have a mind of your own."

In the main, that's true. But having something to say also means having a good stock of facts; and there are ways and means of getting at facts and keeping them handy. Most people who do any writing (without being professional writers) are handicapped by simply not knowing how to collect their material.

Let me tell you a little story: It was a Sunday evening. I was putting the finishing touches on a research report I was working on. Suddenly I realized that I didn't have certain figures on magazine circulation that I had meant to use. If I couldn't get these figures at once I would miss my deadline. I was on the spot.

The solution was as simple as can be: I called the Public Library and had my information within two minutes.

The moral of this tale is that I knew something about libraries and didn't hesitate to get my taxpayer's money's worth out of them. I knew that a reasonably well equipped public library can furnish the answers to most practical—and impractical—questions, and that librarians make it their business to be helpful.

Most people don't seem to know this. They forget that great American institution, the public library, and when they want to know who invented the zipper they are apt to interview a dozen top-rank zipper executives instead of simply looking it up.

Using a library is easy as long as you remember three basic rules:

- (1) Try the handiest source of information first.
- (2) Look for something that's specially designed to answer your question.
- (3) Let the librarian help you.

For example, if you want to know the meaning of a legal term, try first an ordinary dictionary, then try a legal dictionary, then ask the librarian whether she has anything else. (She may give you a book on law for laymen.)

But this isn't a book on how to use a library. Let's suppose you have found your source of information—in the library or somewhere else—and you are ready to collect your raw material. If you want to come up with a piece of readable writing, you must lay the groundwork right then and there.

For ordinary writing, it may be enough to have assembled your facts; for readable writing it is not. At the same time as you gather your facts, you must also get hold of two more things: first, your framework, and second, your verbal illustrations.

Your reader will need a firm framework and colorful verbal illustrations to enjoy and remember what you have written.

The framework—the slant, the angle—will often become clear to you while you are taking notes on your facts. Trouble is, ideas of this kind are apt to be vague and fleeting; by the time you are through with taking notes, they have usually disappeared. That's why Graham Wallas, in his *Art of Thought*, recommends putting these "fringe thoughts" down (in square brackets) so that you have some record of them right among your notes. That's why it is a good idea—if you are using books you own—to put random ideas on the margin. When your writing job reaches the stage of creative thinking, these seemingly irrelevant stray thoughts will be most valuable to you. Any device to nail them down is good—as long as we haven't yet got Dr. Vannevar Bush's imaginary thinking machine that will perform this function at a push-button signal.

What it comes down to is that you must concentrate on getting your facts, but not too hard. There's always the chance that your wandering mind will hit upon a good "angle" while you are copying a sheaf of statistics.

The importance of good verbal illustrations is even greater. Your facts may be complete and convincing, but your reader won't remember them ten minutes afterward if you haven't bothered to find specific illustrations. Whenever you write about a general principle, show its application in a specific case; quote the way someone stated it; tell a pointed anecdote. These dashes of color are what the reader will take away with him. Not that he will necessarily remember the illustration or anecdote itself; but it will help him remember the main idea.

Of course, direct quotations are the stock in trade of any good journalist. Albert Deutsch, for instance (in his article "Unnecessary Operations") uses them skillfully to set the stage:

Ten years ago the American Foundation made a survey in which hundreds of reputable doctors throughout the country were polled. The findings were published in a report

entitled *American Medicine: Expert Testimony Out of Court*. Here are some excerpts:

A member of the American Surgical Association said: "It is probably true that at least half of the surgical operations in this country are done by physicians without special qualifications."

An obstetrician in the South commented on the many small hospitals in his region owned by a single doctor with overaverage ambition and business acumen, who "takes a short course in surgery and returns as owner and chief surgeon. In time he trains himself as a fairly efficient operator, but not before lives are sacrificed, and useless surgery is done."

A midwestern doctor, certified in both surgery and clinical pathology (examining the excised parts of the body after operations) said: "I put in three mornings a week as pathologist in one of our large hospitals. I have a choice collection of organs which have been removed, if sincerely then unconsciously, for revenue only."

And here is how a *New York Times* reporter uses direct quotations to point up a piece about the Hunter College Elementary School for gifted children:

A 4-year-old child in the nursery class was asked what he does in school. He answered very simply: "I fight and take tests." And when a student-teacher urged a 5-year-old to put on his own rubbers, he replied majestically: "Of course I can put them on myself, but a student-teacher's job is to help little boys put on their rubbers, isn't it?"

On another occasion a student-teacher was trying to quiet some children during the rest period. In exasperation she said to one of the 5-year-olds: "If you don't get quiet I'll send you back to your room." To which the alert youngster corrected her: "You shouldn't say that! You should say:

'Which do you prefer, to get quiet or to go back to your room?'

Both these examples show how important it is to take note of the exact words in such verbal illustrations. Neither Mr. Deutsch nor the *New York Times* reporter could have made their points so effectively if they hadn't used *the exact words that were said*. Sometimes the words used are practically the whole story, as in this little excerpt from a United Nations session:

After it had become clear that most of the delegates opposed Manuilsky's announcement that the Argentine resolution had not been carried, the Liberian representative . . . demanded that a vote be taken on the chairman's ruling. Mr. Manuilsky passed over the Liberian request . . . until Senator Connally said emphatically:

"A vote must be taken now, immediately. Immediately, not tomorrow. Immediately, not after more speeches from the chair. Immediately, not after Mr. Manuilsky gets some more advice from his advisers. Immediately."

The vote was taken immediately.

Tracking down illustrative material and copying the exact words of quoted matter is often a nuisance, but it pays. Anecdotes are useful for all sorts of purposes.

Here is an excellent example from the late Professor Wertheimer's book *Productive Thinking*, showing the solution of a problem by sudden insight:

Now I shall tell the story of young Gauss, the famous mathematician. It runs about as follows: he was a boy of six, attending grammar school in a little town. The teacher gave a test in arithmetic and said to the class: "Which of you will be first to get the sum of $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10$?" Very soon, while the others were still busy figuring, Young Gauss raised his head. "Ligget se," he said, which means, "Here it is."

"How the devil did you get it so quickly?" exclaimed the

surprised teacher. Young Gauss answered—of course we do not know exactly what he did answer, but on the basis of experience in experiments I think it may have been about like this: "Had I done it by adding 1 and 2, then 3 to the sum, then 4 to the new result, and so on, it would have taken very long: and, trying to do it quickly, I would very likely have made mistakes. But you see, 1 and 10 make eleven, 2 and 9 are again—must be—11! And so on! There are 5 such pairs; 5 times 11 makes 55." The boy had discovered the gist of an important theorem.

This may sound like a mild anecdote, but in a scholarly book on psychology it is striking enough. Less restrained is this one, used by Bennett Cerf to show the principles of terse, economical newswriting:

Stanley Frank and Paul Sann tell a classic story about a cub reporter in Johnstown, Pa., at the time of the disastrous flood in 1889. The first flash reached the nearest big-time newspaper office late at night when only the newest addition to the staff—a droopy youth just out of school—was on tap. The editor hustled him to the scene of the catastrophe, and spent the next hour in a frenzied effort to get his veteran reporters on the job. By then it was too late, however. All wires were down, and the valley was isolated. For twenty-four hours the only reporter in the devastated area was one green beginner!

The press of America waited feverishly for his first report. Finally it began to trickle in over the telegraph. "God sits upon a lonely mountaintop tonight and gazes upon a desolate Johnstown. The roar of swirling waters echoes through . . ." The editor tore his hair and rushed a wire back to his poet laureate: "Okay. Forget flood. Interview God. Rush pictures."

Finally, here is an anecdote that was used well to advertise a book on farming:

Last spring we had an author with zest for what he was doing—B. F. Bullock, who wrote *Practical Farming for the South*. He had suggested certain illustrations, and we'd been collecting them. When he came to the Press to look them over, he'd hardly put his briefcase on the table before he asked, "Could you get a picture of Spring Brook Bess Burke?"

Apologetically we admitted we couldn't. We knew he'd be disappointed. Spring Brook Bess Burke was a cow he'd said some especially nice things about. "Not Spring Brook," we repeated, "but we do have one of her daughter, Spring Brook Bess Burke II." We took the picture out of a folder and handed it to him.

There was a silence while he scrutinized it. Then he laid it down on the table—gently—and gently said, "Well, she isn't the cow her mother was."

No wonder reviewers found *Practical Farming in the South* full of valuable information, written with sympathy and understanding.

At this point you may possibly say that I am using this chapter to dish out a bunch of miscellaneous anecdotes I happened to like. But I am not. I am simply following my own recipe, hoping that you will remember these little stories and, with and by them, this chapter's main lesson: that for readability you need not only basic ideas and solid facts, but also a good collection of seemingly useless information.

THE SHAPE OF IDEAS

Success in solving the problem depends on choosing the right aspect, on attacking the fortress from its accessible side.

GEORGE POLYA

WHEN the *Saturday Evening Post*, in its article series on American cities, got around to St. Louis, it assigned Associate Editor Jack Alexander to the job. Alexander went to St. Louis, spent ten days collecting material, and returned to his desk in Philadelphia. But he wasn't yet ready to write. He wasn't even ready to draw up an outline. According to the *Saturday Evening Post*, this is what he did: "His first job was to organize all his information and ideas. It was partly a mental and partly a mechanical process. He spread out his typewritten notes on a big table. Gradually he sorted his notes—and, more important, the facts and ideas in his head—into classifications. This process is hard for Jack to explain; he doesn't know just what happened. Somehow, after a day of work, he got to the point where he could think through the whole mess. He was ready to start planning the actual writing job."

Think of what this means. *After* he had collected his raw material, and *before* he felt ready to make an outline, Mr. Alexander put in a full day's work getting his ideas in shape. This seasoned professional writer assigned a full work day to what amounts to just sitting and thinking.

This may seem strange to you. Yet actually it isn't strange at all. Every professional writer knows that this period of just-sitting-and-thinking between legwork and outline is the most

important part of the whole writing process. It's what makes a piece of writing what it is.

You won't find anything about this in the textbooks. Students are not supposed to just sit and think. Open any English composition textbook and you'll find that note-taking is followed by outlining without even a five-minute break for a smoke.

If you want to find out about this mysterious business of just-sitting-and-thinking, you have to go to the psychologists. They know quite a bit about it; but the trouble is that they don't write English but their own special language. They talk about *recentering*, *restructuring*, and *configurations*, and the whole school of psychology that deals with these matters goes by the formidable name of *Gestalt Psychology*.

Let me do a little translating for you. In the original German, the word *Gestalt* means nothing particularly exciting; it simply means *shape*. And that's what this whole business is about: when you do this kind of just-sitting-and-thinking, you are trying to grasp the *shape* of your ideas. The *configurations*, the *recentering*, the *restructuring*—all these words mean that your mind is operating just like your eye—or your camera—when it is looking at an object. To see the object clearly, you have to find the right focus, the right perspective, the right angle of vision. Only when all these things are taken care of do you really see what the object is like.

The same way, in your writing you must first go over your material in your mind, trying to find the focus, the perspective, the angle of vision that will make you see clearly the shape of whatever it is you are writing about. There has to be one point that is sharply in focus, and a clear grouping of everything else around it. Once you see this clearly, your reader will see it too. And that, the shape of your ideas, is usually all he is going to carry away from his reading.

I know of course that all this still sounds vague. But don't worry. From this point on we are getting down to brass tacks.

The most widely used device for getting ideas in shape is to buttonhole some unsuspecting victim—the kind of person who

is apt to read later what you have written—and to rehearse your ideas aloud. This has two advantages: first, it forces you to funnel your ideas into a limited number of words; and second, the other person will tell you what your ideas look like from where he sits. Allan Nevins, the historian, puts it this way: "Catch a friend who is interested in the subject and talk out what you have learned, at length. In this way you discover facts of interpretation that you might have missed, points of argument that had been unrealized, and the form most suitable for the story you have to tell."

This is fine, except that Mr. Nevins says "at length." Actually, the rule here is, the shorter the better. If you can manage to spring your ideas on your friend in one sentence, then you have found the sharpest focus of them all. Everything else will arrange itself around this one sentence or phrase almost automatically. This is what newspapermen call writing "from the headline" or "from the lead." It's a useful trick.

Let me give you a few examples of this. The most famous editorial on the atomic bomb was written by the editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Mr. Norman Cousins. It was firmly built upon an inspired title: "Modern Man is Obsolete." The best-known advertisement of the same year was run by the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway. It proceeded straight from an unbeatable headline: "A Hog Can Cross the Country Without Changing Trains—But YOU Can't!"

Or think of the remarkable sentence-building career of Mr. Elmer Wheeler, the author of *Tested Sentences that Sell*. This man spends his life thinking up sentences that will bring sales-talk into sharp focus. In his book he proudly tells of the millions of square clothespins that were sold with the words: "They won't roll!"

But to come back: A good way of using someone else for focus and perspective is to put such a person right into your piece of writing. You present your facts and ideas as seen by an observer with a detached point of view. This will make things clearer to yourself and will help your reader in catching on.

Take, for instance, the following "Duet on a Bus" by Douglas Moore:

I overheard a bus conversation the other day. It was a long one, lasting from Grant's Tomb to Forty-second Street. A young Frenchman, recently arrived, was apparently being shown the city by a lady of middle age who took her culture as a heavy responsibility . . . It went something like this:

"I shall be happy to attend the opening of the opera."

"Yes, it couldn't be nicer. 'Faust,' you know."

"It will be amusing to hear 'Faust' in English."

"Oh, this won't be in English. All our operas are done in the original language."

"Why? Do American audiences understand French?"

"No, but it is much more artistic that way and the singers' French is usually so poor even French audiences wouldn't be able to understand them."

"The singers aren't French then?"

"Only one or two. Albanese will be Marguerite and Pinza Mephistopheles. They are both Italian."

"What happens in the Italian operas? Are they sung by Italians?"

"Well, now let's see. In 'Rigoletto' there's Tibbett, Kullman as the Duke, Antoine as Gilda, and Kaskas as Maddalena."

"They're all Americans, aren't they?"

"So they are. Well, they sing Italian anyway. Isn't it wonderful so many of our best singers are American now?"

"It is an amusing idea, operas in the original language. Is 'Boris Godounov' sung in Russian?"

"No, that would be too hard except for Kipnis. He's Russian. The rest of them sing Italian."

"You mean at the same time?"

"Yes, most of them are not Italians but it seems a good language to use."

"Why?"

"Well, you see in the old days there were really two companies at the Metropolitan, the German and the Italian. I suppose when this opera came into the repertory the Italian wing sang it."

"Why don't they sing it in English? That is closer to the Russian in sound and the audience might understand it better."

"Well, we have tried some operas in English but I don't believe the public likes it."

"Why not? Are they afraid they might catch a few words?"

And so on. (Sorry I can't print the whole thing here.) You see how useful the stooge with another viewpoint is to a writer.

But of course you can't do this sort of thing all the time. What else can you do to gain focus and perspective?

It depends on the material you are working on. Often the answer will suggest itself. Whenever you are writing about a group or an organization, for instance, the natural thing to do is to focus on a typical member of the group. Start by describing him (or her) and go on from there.

This sounds simple, but there is a pitfall in it. It's hard to look away from the eye-catching, outstanding—and therefore *not* typical—members of the group. I once talked to a writer who was working on an employee pension-plan booklet. He had all details worked out for a "given case"—but his "given case" was a \$10,000-a-year man! This meant that he got nice round figures when it came to working out percentages; but it also meant that the example didn't mean a thing to the average \$3,000-a-year employee.

So keep your eyes on the ground when you use the typical-person device. See what Bernard DeVoto did when he had to cover an American Medical Association meeting:

Back home—which might have been Iowa or West Virginia or Oklahoma—they probably called him Doc, and

most likely Old Doc; for he would be close to seventy, his untidy Van Dyke was white, his shoulders were stooped and there was a slight tremor in his fingers. Seersucker will not hold a crease and God knows how old his straw hat was. He liked to stand in a corner at one of the pharmaceutical exhibits in the Technical Exposition. Behind him were large charts showing the molecular structure of the firm's newest product, photographs three feet by four showing how it was synthesized, and equally large graphs with red and green lines curling round the black to show its results in the treatment of anything you please—rheumatic fever, hypertension, duodenal ulcer.

Doc stood there and talked with the young man from the drug house who had all the statistics by heart and because he had been trained in public relations never gave a sign of boredom but went on smiling and nodding. Doc described his cases back home and told how he handled rheumatic fever or hypertension, and said he had always got good results from potassium iodide, and ended by taking out a pad and writing down his favorite prescriptions for the young man's consideration.

It must have been a different Doc from hour to hour and from exhibit to exhibit but he always seemed the same. One observer remembers him as clearly as anything else at the Centennial Celebration (and ninety-seventh annual meeting) of the American Medical Association, at Atlantic City in the second week of June.

Everybody else was there too . . .

Sometimes this device is strikingly effective in a situation where you wouldn't think it possible to arrive at any average. Look at this (from John Gunther's *Inside U.S.A.*):

Composite Portrait of a New England Legislator

He is tall, gaunt, wrinkled, and there are great reserves of character in the face and raspy voice. He earns a living in a garage, and also owns a bit of real estate. His salary as

legislator (which in New Hampshire would be two hundred dollars a year plus traveling expenses; in Vermont four hundred) is an important addition to his income. His wife is a farmer's daughter from the next county; they have been married twenty-four years and have three children. The eldest son was a carpenter's mate first class, another son is in his third year in the public high school, and is crazy about gliders; the daughter wants to go to Vassar. Our legislator has two brothers: one is a lobster fisherman in Stony Creek, Connecticut, and the other left Massachusetts many years ago, and is believed now to own a small farm in Iowa. Several generations back there were some complex marriages in the family; one distant relative is Greek born, and another married a Finn; but also our legislator is related to no less a personage than a former governor of the state. He believes in paying his bills on the dot, in the inherent right of his children to a good education, and in common sense. He gives ten dollars a year to the Red Cross, believes that "Washington ought to let us alone," knows that very few Americans are peasants, and feels that the country has enough inner strength to ride out any kind of crisis. In several respects he is somewhat arid; but no one has ever fooled him twice. He is a person of great power. Because, out of the community itself, power rises into him. What he represents is the tremendous vitality of ordinary American life, and the basic good instincts of the common people.

So much for groups and types. How about describing a series of events? The principle is the same: Focus on one point that is so significant that you can hang your story onto it. Invariably there is such a point—the turning point, the key event that explains everything before and after. The only problem is to find it; and it is important, with events just as with people, not to overlook the simple because of the more glamorous or spectacular. Turning points have a way of happening long before the big fireworks start.

Early in 1945, for example, when everybody was talking about

Beardsley Ruml and his pay-as-you-go tax plan, *The New Yorker* ran a profile on Ruml by Alva Johnston. But the profile was not written around the pay-as-you-go tax. Instead, after a few introductory paragraphs, the writer focused on an earlier turning point in Ruml's life:

Ruml was projected into commercial life by a quirk in the mind of the late Percy Straus, head man of Macy's. Unlike most business men, Straus spent much of his time mixing with the intelligentsia. He knew that Ruml was regarded as a two-hundred-and-forty-pound imp and *enfant terrible* because of his habit of challenging established ideas and cross-examining everything. "I want to get Ruml in as treasurer," Straus said to Delos Walker, then general manager of the store. "We need somebody to challenge our thinking. We're in danger of becoming too self-satisfied. It's good to be shaken up."

Ruml was thirty-nine at the time and had a distinguished academic berth—Professor of Education and Dean of the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago. He had no training to fit him for a job like that of treasurer of a department store. "You'll have no duties whatever," said Straus, "except to annoy me." This was an irresistible offer, particularly since Ruml felt that his accomplishment in three years as dean had been disappointing. One of his colleagues at Chicago said that Ruml was suffering from the occupational disease of university executives which was described by President Gates of Pennsylvania as "being pecked to death by ducks." Mrs. Hutchins, wife of the president of the University of Chicago, was the author of Ruml's academic epitaph. "He left ideas for notions," she said.

Or take this passage from a *Reader's Digest* article on Federal Mediator Ching. The writer goes even further back to find his focal turning point:

One day in 1904 a husky young trouble shooter was trying to fix a loose shoe fuse on a stalled Boston subway train. As he leaned over he slipped, and a terrible voltage flashed through his body. It enveloped him in blue flame, blew the powerhouse and stopped the entire subway system.

Six days later the young man regained consciousness. The doctors thought he had a chance to live but would be permanently blinded. Actually, within four months he was well recovered and his sight restored.

This obscure happening more than 40 years ago has had a pervasive influence on labor relations in America. The young man, Cyrus Stuart Ching, survived for a long and useful career as an industrial peacemaker and sage. And he remembered something. During the long weeks of his convalescence, nobody from the company management came to see him. There was no workmen's compensation in those days, but when he returned to his job the company magnanimously gave him a new suit of work clothes. This treatment set his ruminative mind to work on the queer chasm between the boss and the worker. He has been thinking about it ever since.

And now Mr. Ching—71 years old, but still carrying his six-foot-seven-inch frame with jaunty vigor—has taken over the touchy post of director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, as set up by the Taft-Hartley Act.

Proper focusing becomes difficult when you have neither a group of people nor a series of events. Then what? There is a way, but it's rather hard to put in simple words. Let me try.

What you are after, as you are turning your material over in your mind, is something like the one-sentence headline, the typical group member, the turning point in the chain of events—some one thing that will point up the significance of the subject as a whole. Even if your material looks at first like a shapeless mass of totally different items, there must be one point at which they all converge—otherwise you wouldn't, or shouldn't, treat

them all together in one-piece of writing. The trouble is that this common denominator is usually so simple and obvious that it's practically invisible. It's the thing you take so much for granted that you never bother to give it a second thought. And that's exactly the trick: find the underlying feature that you have taken for granted and try to give it a second thought.

To come back, for instance, to Jack Alexander's *Saturday Evening Post* article on St. Louis. Alexander's problem was this: He had returned from St. Louis with a heap of notes but didn't know how to pull them together into an understandable whole. After having spent a day in thinking, he hit upon the solution. The obvious way to describe a city is to stress the things in which it is outstanding; but somehow, in the case of St. Louis, these things were hard to find. Alexander gave that a second thought and decided to write his piece around the theme that St. Louis made a virtue of *not being outstanding in anything*. He wrote:

The spell which the city exerts is paradoxical . . . St. Louis pursues the commercial strategy of limited objectives. It has no vast industries . . . (Its) citizenry is simultaneously hospitable and suspicious of the East, gay and stubborn, serious about living and yet fun-loving . . . A booster crude enough to preach the common American gospel of giantism achieves no more than a dry rattle in his throat . . . St. Louis has never fallen for skyscrapers . . . St. Louis might have grown up to be another Chicago or Detroit—a fate which now seems to St. Louisans to be worse than death . . .

In this fashion, Alexander wrote a memorable article by turning the underlying theme upside down.

Of course, there are all sorts of ways of doing this, and I cannot possibly show you exactly how the principle applies in every case. But I can give you a few more examples:

Shortly after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there appeared an unforgettable article on the atomic bomb. It was written by Bob Trout in the form of an imaginary news broadcast of the day atomic bombs hit *the United States*.

In 1947, *Harper's Magazine* printed a highly illuminating article about the British crisis by the economist Barbara Ward. It too started "upside down"—by explaining that there was not one British crisis but four: "the country has been struck by four different crises simultaneously."

Another frequent topic of magazine articles in 1947 was the community property law which gave married couples in certain states the advantage of splitting their income tax. Before Congress incorporated this feature in the federal income tax law, the subject was a natural for popular presentation—provided the writer could really make it interesting. One writer (Bernard B. Smith in *Harper's Magazine*) was highly successful; his piece was widely read and quoted. Let's compare it with an example of the garden-variety approach (by John L. McClellan in the *American* magazine):

Divorce Is Cheaper Than Marriage
by Bernard B. Smith

Only one marriage in three these days winds up in the divorce courts, which must mean that two-thirds of America's husbands think it is worth paying the Collector of Internal Revenue a substantial premium for the privilege of maintaining the institution of the family. For that is precisely what they are doing. The amendments to the Internal Revenue Code enacted by the 78th Congress in 1942 made it cheaper for a man to get a divorce and pay alimony than to stay married, and this is economically practical for anybody whose net taxable income is more than \$2,000 a year . . .

.....
It's high time for Congress to set this absurdity straight, and make the institution of marriage as attractive financially as the institution of divorce.

Where You Pay Less Income Tax
by John L. McClellan

Although there has been much debate about it in Congress, few persons realize how the community-property law in a few lucky states has perpetrated a system of special privilege that has reduced the federal income taxes of a favored minority at the expense of a majority.

Most husbands and wives assume that if they live in New York, Illinois, or Wisconsin, for instance, they pay the same federal income tax that is paid by couples with the same income in California, Texas, or Oklahoma. They are wrong. They pay more. Frequently a great deal more.

.....
It is the duty of the Federal Government to provide an equitable system of income taxes, and it is the responsibility of the Congress to amend present law, so as to remove this injustice and provide equality under the law to all citizens alike, irrespective of their state domicile.

There can hardly be any question that Smith's upside-down treatment of the subject is more effective than McClellan's conventional approach. Mind you, I am not saying that the McClellan article is bad: it's a good, craftsmanlike popular-magazine piece. But the divorce-is-cheaper-than-marriage idea is the kind of thing that sticks in the mind; it's that extra something by which we remember what we have read.

C H A P T E R V

ALL WRITING IS CREATIVE

*Theoretical insights flourish best when
the thinker is apparently wasting time.*

J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER

“SOMEHOW it wouldn't come around. He couldn't sleep. One night an idea suddenly came to his mind; he leaped out of bed and started writing. He wrote six pages that night . . .”

What do you think the man wrote? A poem? A story? A chapter of a novel? You're wrong: he was working on a magazine article. The quotation refers to Mr. Maurice Zolotow, a contributor of articles to the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Don't think that this method of writing nonfiction is unusual. It isn't. In fact, it's rather typical. And that's why, in this down-to-earth book, you are now going to read a chapter on the unconscious mind.

Ordinarily—not always, but more often than not—writing proceeds like this: Collecting material—trying to find a good approach—spending some time on something else—getting a sudden bright idea—planning and organizing—writing—revising. The most mysterious—and most fascinating—part of the whole process is the one you don't read about in the handbooks: the search for a good approach, the period when you abandon the search, and the moment when, out of nowhere, an idea pops into your mind.

Maybe you won't believe me when I say that this is common experience. All right, I'll cite chapter and verse. This is the way the human mind works in creating *anything*—whether it's the