THINKING MADE EASY: Ten Tentative Steps Toward Wisdom

Whatever wisdom we achieve comes through hard thinking about our experience before we speak and write, and a willingness to sharpen and re-fashion our ideas once we've tried them out.

It was 1969. We were leaving one of those faculty meetings at which the faculty, in a fit of resigned goodwill, had voted to establish joint faculty-student committees that would control every aspect of school life short of access to the principal’s toilet. It was then that my friend went into his H.L. Mencken mode: “I do not,” he said, “believe in the inherent wisdom of children.” As most of my lesson plans at the time were based on the assumption that each of my teeny bopper charges was some kind of budding Lao-Tze, I squirmed.

Since then, however, I have come to accept my friend’s assertion, and in fact, I’ve moved on past it; presently, I do not believe in the inherent wisdom of anyone. Whatever wisdom we do achieve comes through hard thinking about our experience before we speak and write, and a willingness to sharpen and re-fashion our ideas once we’ve tried them out. The card-carrying NWPster calls these activities pre-writing and revision.

I wish here to present an activity which will teach students in response groups to ask questions that facilitate rhetorical clarity, a crucial step on the road to wisdom.

We can expect students in response groups to do only what we have taught them to do. If we want them to share their writing, we need to teach them to read aloud well and to listen carefully. If we want them to help each other with correctness, we must teach them to pounce on the “this” without a clear reference and on the modifier that seems to be looking for another sentence. If we wish students to help each other to achieve stronger diction and a more vigorous style, we need to share with them, regularly, models of strong and weak style so that they may learn to make comments specific enough to be useful: “I liked the way you compared the skin tone of that guy working the Nautilus machine to the color of an over-ripe persimmon, but four prepositional phrases in a row? I can’t follow you.”

But how do we teach students working in response groups to help each other think more clearly, to write focused and convincing prose that keeps the reader in mind? The ten paragraph essay that follows may serve as an early step. Each paragraph in my essay is dominated by a different rhetorical problem. These problems are a catalogue of the most common rhetorical difficulties I’ve encountered on my sojourns into the sometimes Dark Wood of Student Prose.

The task here is for the response group to ask the writer of the piece one question about each paragraph, a question that will lead the writer toward revision. There may be objections to this process. It is true that many of the problems present in these paragraphs might have been avoided with extensive and appropriate pre-writing. Even the topic itself, a distinction between workers and “true workers,” reflects a kind of “real men don’t eat quiche” logic.
that should have been cut off at the pass. But the
ten rhetorical blunders, on display here in exagger-
ated form, are blunders most of us make regularly
despite extensive pre-writing. If we do not catch
them in revision they will live on to haunt us.

Why not try this essay out with colleagues
before you try it out with students? See if you can
agree on a question that will lead to revision of each
paragraph. My experience shows this won’t be easy.
Read my questions at the end of the essay only after
you’ve finished, and then treat them less as answers
than as other possibilities. The process, then,
becomes a kind of game in which we test out
whether we are moved to ask similar questions when
confronted with a paragraph crying out for revision.
Play this game, even before you try this activity out
with students, and, to paraphrase a man less wise
but more rich than Lao-Tze, “You may already have
won.”

MY CAREER AS A TRUE WORKER

1. Work, to me, has always been important but
not just as a way of earning spending money.
Rather, I think of myself as a “true worker.” A true
worker devotes himself to an idea, an idea dedicated
to perfection and the accomplishment of a good life.
The true worker strives for that consummation
which embodies all that is important in existence.

2. We can tell a true worker by his behavior.
He does not forget to pay his union dues, nor does
he curse out his fellow workers when it is he who
dropped the wrench on his own foot. He carries his
own lunch and drives a medium priced car. He will
work to be a supervisor but has no interest in
becoming an executive. If a true worker is allowed
to listen to a Walkman on the job, he will not have
it tuned to a top-40 station. He often likes bright
colors. A true worker says to himself at the end of
the day, “I’ve earned my money.”

3. Go through the day with a true worker and
here’s what you’ll see. He will arrive promptly and
work diligently all day. He’ll be curious about his
work. He’ll show his concern for his fellow workers
and he’ll always do that little bit extra. The way he
carries himself at the end of the day makes clear he’s
pleased with his performance.

4. A true worker particularly stands out
because of his attitude toward very hard work. He
sticks by the job even though he finds the job
unpleasant but is perfectly willing to quit if he
decides he doesn’t like the job that much. I have
always been a true worker, and the fact that I have
never quit a job goes to prove that. I have stayed
with jobs even though they seemed unbearable. In
another way though, the song “You can take this job
and shove it,” also comes close to describing the
“true worker’s” attitude.

5. Another characteristic of a true worker is
that he does not enjoy being idle. That’s why most
teenagers are not true workers. Even though there
are plenty of jobs out there most kids don’t want to
work. The great majority would rather gossip on the
phone with their friends about members of the
opposite sex than call about a job their mother saw
listed in the paper. There is a four letter word that
describes kids today. It starts with an “I” and ends
with a “y” and has a “z” in it. These kids are
definitely not true workers.

6. On the other hand, a true worker like myself
seeks out jobs. I once applied for a job no one else
would take, and despite the hideous working condi-
tions this job involved, I, as a true worker, was
disappointed when I was turned down. On my very
first job I sought out work for only a few days in a
very distant city. The job was at a Burger King and
they said my job had nothing to do with warming
buns, and as far as I have ever been able to find out,
does not exist in any other Burger King. Even
though I’ve had some weird jobs like this I’ve always
been willing to work, a sign of the true worker.

7. Once I get a job I have the “stick-to-it-
iveness” characteristic of the true worker. I had a job
at Fisherman’s Wharf selling pretzels. I liked this
job a lot except for serving the rude people who
acted so hungry for pretzels they started foaming at
the mouth. One time a woman asked for a pretzel
and I told her that the pretzels weren’t ready yet.
She then charged off snorting through her gigantic
nostrils. Shocked out of my senses, my blood began
to boil and steam and smoke almost came out of my
ears. But, because I am a true worker, I stayed with
the job.

8. A true worker does whatever he is called to
do. Most of my jobs have been right here in San
Francisco, a major Northern California City, and
one of them was at a San Francisco McDonald’s.
Here I did everything that was required of me.
McDonald’s is a large fast food franchise that sells
hamburgers, cheeseburgers, cokes and French fries
all over the world. In order to understand how I
worked at McDonald’s you need to understand that
each McDonald’s store has many employees; some
work with the customers out front and some cook in
back. During the time I worked at McDonald’s I
willingly worked both in front and in back. What-
ever they asked me to do, I did.

9. One reason that I enjoyed working at
McDonald’s is that I respect their commercials. In

(continued on page 17)
one commercial a new born baby takes all his mother's attention and a three year old kid feels left out. The father takes the three year old to McDonald's and makes the child feel a lot better. This actually happened to me when my little sister was born!

10. I hope I have made clear in this paper the qualities of a true worker. He is determined to be resolute. He is resolved to be dedicated and committed. The true worker is tenacious and also persevering, intent and zealous. It’s this variety of qualities that makes the true worker special. I hope when I get ready to retire I will be able to say, “I have not just worked; I have truly worked.”

My Questions
Paragraph 1.
Can you describe one true worker involved with a job? (Strong writing is concrete, avoiding mazes of abstractions.)

Paragraph 2.
How are these behaviors linked? (In strong writing, general statements guide the reader’s interpretation of specific detail.)

Paragraph 3.
Can you show the worker’s curiosity, his concern for his fellow workers, etc.? (Strong writing shows rather than tells; it does not depend on adjectives.)

Paragraph 4.
Which is it? (Strong writing is consistent.)

Paragraph 5.
Do you believe this? Is this true? (Strong writing relies on defensible assumptions.)

Paragraph 6.
What will the reader want to know about this? (Strong writing answers the reader’s questions.)

Paragraph 7.
Really? (Strong writing is believable.)

Paragraph 8.
What here does the reader already know? (Strong writing does not belabor the obvious.)

Paragraph 9.
What does this paragraph have to do with true workers? (Strong writing remains relevant to the key ideas under discussion.)

Paragraph 10.
What’s the difference between these qualities? (Strong writing is concise; it is not redundant.)

Art Peterson is a Fellow of the Bay Area Writing Project, University of California, Berkeley. This piece was reprinted, with the author's permission, from the Bay Area Writing Project Newsletter.