CONTRACTING TEXTS

It is perhaps obvious that clear thinking leads inevitably to clear writing. The most essential part of the teaching of composition, then, I believe, is the teaching of clear thinking. If a student is convinced that he has something to say, he can write. Because I teach composition as part of an American Literature survey course meeting only forty minutes three days a week, I do not have a great deal of class time to spend on writing. Most of my writing instruction gets done on an individual basis. But since the problem of unclear thinking is almost universal, I found it more efficient to deal with it in class. I needed something that could be taught and learned quickly, and something that would improve students’ structured writing. A skill called contracting texts solved my problem.

The skill is not new, of course. I stole this variation of precis writing from a class that I took in a French University. It is developed by practice and includes notetaking, paraphrasing, and abstracting. It demands that students listen to an article that is read to them, take notes on what they have heard, and then reproduce the content and the intent of the article in as short a space as possible.

Nor is teaching the skill difficult. I begin, early in the semester with a short news article from the local newspaper, reading it aloud so that students can listen for the general idea. I read it again so that they can take notes, and then give them five to seven minutes to write a paragraph that contracts the original article and retains only its essential points.

When their paragraphs are finished, I break the students into discussion groups of three or four. Each group must reach some agreement about the relative importance of the information in the article and come up with a contraction that satisfies them all. The groups then compare their products and work at a set of general rules for contracting. When the class is satisfied with their contractions, I pass out copies of the article so that they can test the accuracy of their work.

I repeat the exercise a week later using the same steps with a slightly longer article. The performances nearly always improve. When students have mastered the technique, usually after the third attempt, I move to a different type of writing. I substitute feature stories, because they are usually longer and always padded. The students recognize the padding for what it is and weed it out. From feature stories I move to short editorials, wherein the students’ job is to contract the argument to its essentials without injecting their own opinion.

The advantages of this exercise are that students become adept at spotting superfluous material, and they learn that what is not organized cannot be condensed. This second point is extremely important in the application of the skill to the students’ own writing.

Once contracting is mastered, after about four weeks of irregular practice, it can be used in other contexts. When writing about literature, the student can apply contracting skills to effective use of quotations from both primary and secondary sources. He can contract whole novels to supply the background information necessary for his thesis. Persuasive precis, belles lettres, essays, editorials or even sermons like “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” can be contracted and rebutted. The quality of the rebuttal depends on the quality of the contraction.

The greatest value of contracting, though, lies in its critical application to the student’s own writing. He can read his essay to a group of friends to see if their contractions of it match his intentions, failing which, or if contraction proves difficult or impossible the student knows that he has more work to do on his paper.

A word of caution. Some students have difficulty contracting arguments. They can deal with the facts of news stories and feature articles, but the more abstract concepts of editorials stump them. They need more time and more practice. A very few will not master the skill even after a couple of months.

In addition, contracting a text will not:
1. stimulate “creativity.”
2. motivate a student to write a “literary” text.
3. cure any social evil.

Some Suggestions:
1. Remember to do it early in the year.
2. Begin with short, three paragraph news articles, anecdotes, narratives.
3. Don’t grade the exercises until the third time around. A grade indicates that the teacher takes the exercise seriously; however, waiting allows a period of grace while students learn what is probably unfamiliar.
4. Don’t do the exercise often, at most, twice a week at the semester’s beginning, not more than once a week thereafter.
5. Do it fast. The whole exercise, first reading to paragraph contraction, should take less than 20 minutes. (Groups can be dispensed with after the second attempt.)
6. When students get it right, quit doing it.
7. If it worked, keep “contract” in your vocabulary.
8. If it didn’t work, forget it. Try something else.

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