Royal Fireworks Language Arts by Michael Clay Thompson

The Writing of Literature

Third Edition

Michael Clay Thompson

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Learning to Write: General Thoughts

It might seem that you learn to write by writing. What could be more logical? To learn to write, just write and write until you can write. Is that not how you learn to write?

Well, yes and no. Certainly you have to practice writing, but to regard writing as a pure writing problem is, oddly enough, wrong. Why? Someone once asked Harper Lee, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, how you learn to write. Her answer was a surprise: "Read your head off."

To learn to write, read.

It is readers who become writers, who write reading.

In order to understand this better, let us approach writing from a different direction. Imagine that you took a writing class, and the teacher said that before you began your writing assignments, you would first examine masses of writing so that you could see what writing looks like, how writing is arranged, and so forth. Before writing yourself, you would first study writing. How could you do that? What would you use to study writing? Where would you find writing to study?

Books.

To find writing, look in books.

Read books.

Books are where the writing is.

Look there.

We almost forget, do we not, that when we read, we read writing, and when we write, we write reading. Reading and writing are two participations of one experience. That is what Harper Lee meant; if you want to write, read your head off, because reading shows you writing. The more you read, the more writing you see. By reading thousands of pages, you see thousands of pages of writing, and when you begin your own writing, you have that vast model of your reading as a memory. Because you have read, you know what you are doing as a writer; you have seen writing thousands of times. You have been there before.

Even readers, of course, have to practice writing, but readers begin with a profound language memory that nonreaders do not have and can never acquire without reading. Writers are people who love the writing they read and want to do it too.

Imagine that you have never heard of basketball and have never seen a basketball game, and someone puts you on a basketball court with a ball and tells you to play. There you stand, the ball in your hand, and you are told to play. You would have no idea what to do. It would be different if you had watched basketball games all your life. Because you had watched so many games, you would already know to dribble the ball, to shoot at the basket, to practice foul shots, and other aspects of the game that you had absorbed by watching hundreds of games before you tried to play. As you watched the games, you had fun. You did not think of yourself as studying; you just loved to watch basketball, and you were unaware that you were effortlessly internalizing myriads of details about the game.

Writing is like that. It is hard to play a game you have never seen before. If you have not read much, you have not seen writing, and you are at an absurd disadvantage. You have no idea what you are being asked to do. You have not read enough writing to know what writing is like. You have not read classic novels or strong nonfiction. You have no model in your mind. But if you have absorbed an understanding of writing by reading lots of books, you can begin to write with a strong sense of what you are trying to do. When it comes to writing, if you are a reader, you are not really a beginner.

Let us think more deeply about the place of reading in our education, with an emphasis on strong education. Of all the experiences that we encounter in school, reading is the most educational. Schools are full of other assignments, but no other assignments are as educational as reading. When you read a book, you see words, punctuation, sentences, and paragraphs. You see what they look like. You see vocabulary, and you get to know the sculpture of each word. You see spelling, see the same spellings over and over again in print. You see grammar, so you see the difference between *would have* and *would of* (there is no such thing as *would of*). Seeing language is crucial to the educational value of reading, and every book reinforces what you know.

Think about the educational power of reading a classic novel such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, or Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, or Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. With only a few exceptions...

Every classic novel is a punctuation exhibit.

Every classic novel is an extended spelling demonstration.

Every classic novel is a display of good sentences.

Every classic novel contains long, complicated sentences.

Every classic novel shows poetic techniques used in prose.

Every classic novel shows how good writers make paragraphs.

Every classic novel immerses readers in good grammar.

Every classic novel is a vocabulary lesson.

Every classic novel is a chance for readers to practice sustained attention.

Every classic novel is a chance to read back in time.

Every classic novel is a chance to read an earlier version of English.

Every classic novel is an opportunity to interpret.

Every classic novel is a chance to meet famous characters.

Every classic novel explores human themes.

Every classic novel is an opportunity to discuss and articulate ideas.

Every classic novel is an opportunity to write an essay.

Every classic novel gives readers a personal acquaintance with a classic writer.

Every classic novel makes other classic novels easier to read.

Every classic novel gives readers something to share with other readers.

On each page of a classic novel, all or most of these things are happening at once. In a grammatically correct sentence in a well-made paragraph in which everything is properly spelled and punctuated, you see, for example, two strong vocabulary words used next to an adjective that is alliterated with its noun, and the paragraph expresses the heartbreak of a person who has lost a friend, with a theme of individuality. It is extremely strong. And that is one paragraph of five on the page, and the page is one of seventeen pages in the chapter, and the chapter is one of thirty-one chapters in the book, which is read all over the country and all over the world. And when you finish the book, you love it so much that you immediately want to read another book by the same author.

The experience of classic novels changes your brain.

No other school activities are as educational as great reading.

Later in life, you will not remember the worksheets you filled out or quizzes that you took, but you will remember Frankenstein's pitiful monster forever, staggering through the snow with firewood for a poor family he hopes will be his friends. You will remember Peter Pan and his friendship with Tiger Lily. You will remember the brave young Jane Eyre standing up for herself against her domineering employer, Mr. Rochester. Education is not about how many activities you have done; it is about the books you have read. It is reading that makes you educated.

Well-read people accumulate strengths that cannot be acquired any other way than by reading.

People who read good literature learn to read long works that may have three or four or five hundred pages. They learn to sustain their attention for extended periods of time—a strength required for all advanced education and for professional life. Almost all famous works are long, so to avoid long reading is to avoid the necessary intellectual education that famous reading affords. If you do not yet realize that long reading is normal, is the ordinary form of educated reading, then when you get to college, you arrive unprepared and naive. Long books are the norm. Before you get used to great reading, you might imagine that long works are a bad experience, but good readers love long works. They want more chapters. They want the story to continue, and they are sad to finish the book. They want to read it again.

People who read good literature also learn to read old books, books written in previous centuries. It can take a few readings to adjust to a century. When you first read a nineteenth-century novel such as *The Red Badge of Courage* or *Pride and Prejudice*, you might find it difficult because you are familiar only with the language of your own time. When you read your second nineteenth-century novel, it will be easier, and by the third or fourth novel, you will be accustomed to the language, and you will not remember why the literature of that century seemed difficult at first. You will become an intellectual citizen across centuries. You will begin to realize that books are a time machine, taking us to scenes from the past and allowing us to encounter for ourselves the voices of those who came before us. Even today, we can read directly, for ourselves, the words of Benjamin Franklin and Frederick Douglass and Jane Addams.

The key in this experience is to want it; to have a mature, positive feeling about it; to be strong; to be excited about getting the most education possible, rather than settling for the easy least. It is easy to resist learning, to resist the rigor of education, and to rationalize against the first work of reading. It is easy to pretend that you do not have the time for long or old works. But after you have read a few novels from a century, you will find—I promise you—that you love the experience. Suddenly the big words seem wonderful, and the complex sentences feel good in your brain, and the depth of character is exciting, and the world of the book takes you in, and you begin to live there, and you come to love the literature. You never hear real readers complaining about the language or complexity or length of classic novels. Like many experiences in education, once you work your way through the acquaintance phase, you love being educated. In great knowledge, you find yourself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Then, advancing obliquely towards us, came a fifth. Their armoured bodies glittered in the sun as they swept swiftly forward upon the guns, growing rapidly larger as they drew nearer. One on the extreme left, the remotest that is, flourished a huge case high in the air, and the ghostly, terrible Heat-Ray I had already seen on Friday night smote towards Chertsey, and struck the town.

At sight of these strange, swift, and terrible creatures the crowd near the water's edge seemed to me to be for a moment horror-struck. There was no screaming or shouting, but a silence. Then a hoarse murmur and a movement of feet—a splashing from the water. A man, too frightened to drop the portmanteau he carried on his shoulder, swung round and sent me staggering with a blow from the corner of his burden. A woman thrust at me with her hand and rushed past me. I turned with the rush of the people, but I was not too terrified for thought. The terrible Heat-Ray was in my mind. To get under water! That was it!

"Get under water!" I shouted, unheeded.

I faced about again, and rushed towards the approaching Martian, rushed right down the gravelly

CHAPTER THREE. The Wild Wood

'Rat!' he cried in penitence, 'you're a wonder! A real wonder, that's what you are. I see it all now! You argued it out, step by step, in that wise head of yours, from the very moment that I fell and cut my shin, and you looked at the cut, and at once your majestic mind said to itself, "Door-scraper!" And then you turned to and found the very door-scraper that done it! Did you stop there? No. Some people would have been quite satisfied; but not you. Your intellect went on working. "Let me only just find a door-mat," says you to yourself, "and my theory is proved!" And of course you found your door-mat. You're so clever, I believe you could find anything you liked. "Now," says you, "that door exists, as plain as if I saw it. There's nothing else remains to be done but to find it!" Well, I've read about that sort of thing in books, but I've never come across it before in real life. You ought to go where you'll be properly appreciated. You're simply wasted here, among us fellows. If I only had your head, Ratty—'

'But as you haven't,' interrupted the Rat, rather unkindly, 'I suppose you're going to sit on the snow all night and TALK? Get up at once and hang on to

Kenneth Grahame *The Wind in the Willows*

The Writing of Literature

The Writing of Literature is my seventh book about writing, but unlike the first six books, this one is about literary writing, focusing on the language of classic fiction and nonfiction. My other writing books were about formal academic writing: academic essays and research papers—the sort of nonfiction writing that students must do in academic courses and in most professions.

This book is part of a literary strand of books, including *The Vocabulary of Literature*, *The Grammar of Literature*, and *The Poetry of Literature*, all devoted to providing you with a foundation for great reading.

But what can be the purpose of a book about the writing of great novels? Could it be to teach you how to write novels? Probably not. Today, the population of the world is more than seven billion people. Of that population, how many people are famous novelists? And within that group, how many are great novelists, immortal novelists, such as Jane Austen, or Robert Louis Stevenson, or Charlotte Brontë, or Charles Dickens? Is there a novelist alive who will enter that pantheon of great writers?

It is easier to list writers who make money writing best-selling potboilers of crime or romance than it is to list immortal modern authors who probe human truth and who compare with profound novelists such as Nathaniel Hawthorne or Herman Melville, Virginia Woolf or Kenneth Grahame. Let us think about this again: Is there a writer today who is the literary equal of George Eliot? If we consider languages other than English, is there today an equal of Leo Tolstoy, or Fyodor Dostoevsky, or Victor Hugo? Is there a writer today who rivals the great Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez, who died in 2014? Perhaps there is, even probably there is, but time will show. Toni Morrison, the 1993 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, seems destined for immortality.

The material point is that whereas every student must learn to write academic papers—that is the kind of writing expected in high school and college courses—only a microscopic minority, fewer than one student in 1,000,000 probably, will make a living writing novels, and of those, almost none will become immortal. Writing novels can be a beautiful dream, but almost no one *needs* to learn to write fiction. Almost no one will ever write a great novel. Our task is to see what writing secrets great novels can teach us about the kind of writing that we do and to absorb writing elements that help us become great readers.

Is that possible? Is there is benefit to studying the writing secrets of the great fiction and nonfiction writers? Yes, there is great benefit. Classic novelists show us deeper strategies that are not usually mentioned in school instructions for beginners. One reason that the writers of immortal books are immortal is that they take commonly known writing techniques to uncommon heights, finding profound depth and beauty in the ways they use them. Every ordinary program of writing instruction tells students the things you learn during the first days you think about writing: to connect paragraphs, to use verbs precisely, to use good grammar, to punctuate properly and meaningfully, to use high-precision nouns and verbs instead of wordy (I almost wrote *blabby*) adjectives and adverbs, and to structure sentences so that the placement of the words and phrases is clear.

Introductory writing lessons, however, do not venture into the advanced principles and subtle techniques and flexible tactics that are the daily reality of great writers. Introductory programs tend to show a simple, learnable model and say, here is *the* way to do, for example, paragraphs, and that is how we begin. But when we read, we see that great writers work at a flexible level beyond the introductory models in textbooks, producing beautiful and perfect paragraph streams, making grammar take the form of life, and punctuating not merely according to someone's list of correct rules but according to the meaning and the scene of the chapter.

We can learn from those ideas. We can appreciate simple, beginners' writing ideas that help us get started, but we can also look beyond beginners' rules to see what creative writing techniques the greatest writers use.

In *The Writing of Literature*, we will look closely at what great writing shows us about all writing, beginning with one of the most important elements: the paragraph. I will assume in this discussion that you have studied sentences and paragraphs before and that I need not review the basics about sentence structure and about paragraphs being about one idea and being indented and so forth.

Before you turn the page, take a good look at how gracefully Kenneth Grahame (p. 10) and H.G. Wells (p. 13) connected their paragraphs. No reader, reading such smooth connections, could get lost on the page. Good writing is both more fun to read and more fun to write than its alternative.

2. The End Effect

One of the most important strategies that we introduced in the first chapter was that the end of a paragraph is a power place where good writers emphasize a detail. It is worth devoting extra attention to what we might call the **end effect** so that you can incorporate that touch into your writing.

Before we expand upon the idea, note that the end effect is an artistic option and not a requirement. We must not imagine that every paragraph is so constructed as to have a power word at the end. Not only is that not true, but also it would become a boring obligation instead of a swift, artistic touch that we only use sometimes. Effects are more effective when they are unexpected.

The end effect can occur at the end of a paragraph, where there is a hard stop caused by both the end of a sentence and the end of a paragraph at the same time, followed by an indentation for the next paragraph. These elements create what amounts to a silence in the mind, and that silence allows the last word to stand out and be heard. But this effect occurs not only at the end of a paragraph; it can also occur at the end of a chapter or a sentence or even a clause, so long as some sort of stop helps promote a word. It is a question of stopping when something is important. We want the text to say something important and then be quiet, if only for the length of a period. Thinking happens in the space.

Here is an example of the end effect in Lewis Carroll's classic novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Notice how *hall* connects the paragraphs.

> There was not a moment to be lost: away went Alice like the wind, and was just in time to hear it say, as it turned a corner, 'Oh my ears and whiskers, how late it's getting!' She was close behind it when she turned the corner, but the Rabbit was no longer to be seen: she found herself in a long, low hall, which was lit up by a row of lamps hanging from the roof.
>
> There were doors all round the hall, but they were all locked; and when Alice had been all the way down one side and up the other, trying every door, she walked sadly down the middle, wondering how she was ever to get out again.

Carroll brought Alice up short with a strong semicolon. He used two stressed syllables in a row, *all locked*, to increase the effect. Her pursuit is stopped.

Let us look at a similar passage from James M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*:

> That was the story, and they were as pleased with it as the fair narrator herself. Everything just as it should be, you see. Off we skip like the most heartless things in the world, which is what children are, but so attractive; and we have an entirely selfish time, and then when we have need of special attention we nobly return for it, confident that we shall be rewarded instead of smacked.
>
> So great indeed was their faith in a mother's love that they felt they could afford to be callous for a bit longer.
>
> But there was one there who knew better, and when Wendy finished he uttered a hollow groan.

Barrie communicated the smart sting of the idea by choosing *smacked*, a word that ends in the harsh *kt* sound, and then stopping the sentence and paragraph after that one-syllable word so that we cannot miss it. Examples like this not only teach us to write, they teach us to read. They teach us that the stops matter, that stops have meaning, and that when we read, we should not simply barrel through the ends of sentences and paragraphs but should allow the structures and punctuations to direct the way we read, even when we read silently to ourselves. In great writing, both the sounds and the silences count.

Here is an end effect from Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*:

> '...The River-bankers stuck up for you, and said you had been infamously treated, and there was no justice to be had in the land nowadays. But the Wild Wood animals said hard things, and served you right, and it was time this sort of thing was stopped. And they got very cocky, and went about saying you were done for this time! You would never come back again, never, never!'
>
> Toad nodded once more, keeping silence.
>
> 'That's the sort of little beasts they are,' the Rat went on. 'But Mole and Badger, they stuck out, through thick and thin, that you would come back again soon, somehow. They didn't know exactly how, but somehow!'

Grahame used a one-sentence paragraph, emphasizing Toad's silence with a structural silence, ending both the sentence and the paragraph.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens used the end effect with chilling power:

> "The hour itself," said Scrooge, triumphantly, "and nothing else!"
>
> He spoke before the hour bell sounded, which it now did with a deep, dull, hollow, melancholy One. Light flashed up in the room upon the instant, and the curtains of his bed were drawn.
>
> The curtains of his bed were drawn aside, I tell you, by a hand. Not the curtains at his feet, nor the curtains at his back, but those to which his face was addressed. The curtains of his bed were drawn aside; and Scrooge, starting up into a half-recumbent attitude, found himself face to face with the unearthly visitor who drew them: as close to it as I am now to you, and I am standing in the spirit at your elbow.

This small Dickens passage is a tiny writing class. It begins with a one-sentence dialogue paragraph. The subject of that paragraph is *Scrooge*, and the following paragraph begins with a graceful pronoun, *he*, that links back to *Scrooge* without having to import a connecting word. The second paragraph is two descriptive sentences arranged in chronological order, but the masterpiece of the passage is the brilliant passive voice verb *were drawn*, employed as a creepy end effect.

Let us look closely at that. First, the curtains of the bed are being drawn by a ghostly spirit, and passive voice is perfect for that because unlike active voice, passive voice does not identify who is doing the action. Active voice might be *Robert opened the door*, but passive voice would be the creepy *The door was opened*. We see passive voice often in scary contexts such as *They were watched*, in which the identity of the watcher is left unknown. What Dickens did was to use the passive voice as a scary end effect; notice that it creates two stressed syllables in a row, *were drawn*, which in poetry we call a spondee. The curtains of his bed were drawn....wooo (I'm outta here).

The third paragraph links perfectly into the second by using the final words *were drawn* as a theme throughout. The entire three-paragraph passage is beautifully rendered, perfectly connected, and powerfully creepy because of its combination of passive voice, end effect, and a spondee. Notice also the alliteration in *deep dull* and the low vowels in *spoke*, *before*, *hour*, *sounded, now*, *dull*, *hollow*, and *One*—all in the same sentence to capture the sound of the hour bell. Dickens combined poetry and prose to achieve the passage. And did I mention the wonderful vocabulary of *melancholy* and *recumbent*?

Now let us look at an extended passage from H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. We see that Wells introduced each paragraph with a reference by the Time Traveller to himself, but he ended each paragraph with a reference to the burning of a match in the darkness—a vivid and disconcerting image.

I tried to call to them, but the language they had was apparently different from that of the Upperworld people; so that I was needs left to my own unaided efforts, and the thought of flight before exploration was even then in my mind. But I said to myself, "You are in for it now," and, feeling my way along the tunnel, I found the noise of machinery grow louder. Presently the walls fell away from me, and I came to a large open space, and striking another match, saw that I had entered a vast arched cavern, which stretched into utter darkness beyond the range of my light. The view I had of it was as much as one could see in the burning of a match.

Necessarily my memory is vague. Great shapes like big machines rose out of the dimness, and cast grotesque black shadows, in which dim spectral Morlocks sheltered from the glare. The place, by the by, was very stuffy and oppressive, and the faint halitus of freshly shed blood was in the air. Some way down the central vista was a little table of white metal, laid with what seemed a meal. The Morlocks at any rate were carnivorous! Even at the time, I remember wondering what large animal could have survived to furnish the red joint I saw. It was all very indistinct: the heavy smell, the big unmeaning shapes, the obscene figures lurking in the shadows, and only waiting for the darkness to come at me again! Then the match burned down, and stung my fingers, and fell, a wriggling red spot in the blackness.

I have thought since how particularly ill-equipped I was for such an experience. When I had started with the Time Machine, I had started with the absurd assumption that the men of the Future would certainly be infinitely ahead of ourselves in all their appliances. I had come without arms, without medicine, without anything to smoke—at times I missed tobacco frightfully—even without enough matches. If only I had thought of a Kodak! I could have flashed that glimpse of the Underworld in a second, and examined it at leisure. But, as it was, I stood there with only the weapons and the powers that Nature had endowed me with—hands, feet, and teeth; these, and four safety-matches that still remained to me.

In this passage, Wells not only used the end effect to capture our imagination, as we hear the fizzle of the match at the end of the first paragraph (in the word *matCH* itself); he also multiplied the effect by repeating it at the ends of the following two paragraphs so that it looms even larger in our minds—the foreboding of the threatening darkness and the tiny, fragile match that burns but then burns down and falls like a glowing coal into the darkness, leaving only four matches left. Part of the fascination of this passage is that we are accustomed to seeing continuity achieved through the first sentences of paragraphs, but here Wells doubled up the continuity by using the ends of the paragraphs as well. It is brilliant, and we begin to understand why Wells was so admired by other writers. Notice too the powerful vocabulary: *halitus*, *grotesque*, *spectral*.

Here is another example from Wells's *The Time Machine*, but in this case the end effect occurs at the end of a clause, followed by the strong silence of a colon, rather than at the end of the paragraph. The effect is doubled by being a spondee, a double stress—the same technique we saw Charles Dickens use in *A Christmas Carol*.

> Well, one very hot morning—my fourth, I think—as I was seeking shelter from the heat and glare in a colossal ruin near the great house where I slept and fed, there happened this strange thing: Clambering among these heaps of masonry, I found a narrow gallery, whose end and side windows were blocked by fallen masses of stone. By contrast with the brilliancy outside, it seemed at first impenetrably dark to me. I entered it groping, for the change from light to blackness made spots of colour swim before me. Suddenly I halted spellbound. A pair of eyes, luminous by reflection against the daylight without, was watching me out of the darkness.

We cannot help but notice that the final sentence in the paragraph is also an example of the end effect, a haunting sentence succeeded by the hard silence of the period and the paragraph transition.

We begin to understand that the end effect can be effective in a sentence, in a paragraph, at the end of a chapter. It can be one or two words long, or it can be an entire final sentence. What all the examples have in common is that they take advantage of silence. Silence amplifies.