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THIS GAME OF WRITING: A STUDY IN REMEDIAL ENGLISH

CARRIE ELLEN STANLEY¹

The door opened and a young man stepped inside. Another freshman, a repeater, I thought, as I looked at him standing there, tall, awkward, uncertain. He held a folded paper in his hand. A theme marked "Fd," I conjectured.

At my greeting he came directly to my desk and sat down in the proffered chair on the opposite side. Yes, he was a freshman, he said, and he had failed the first semester, and he would be failing again, if his string of "D's" and "Fd's" meant anything. His face no longer bore the sheepish grin; it was showing real concern.

Yes, he had played basketball; he'd played all through high school. When he told me his name, I remembered him as the "crack" center on the state championship team of the year before, though he was too modest to make any claims for himself. Basketball was one thing; writing papers for English or history or geology he had found to be quite another. Writing papers was much more mysterious, too mysterious for his comfort.

In the minutes that followed we talked mostly about basketball. He told me (as have some other fallen heroes during the past few years) about the necessity of knowing and observing the rules, and the need for practice, and the duties of the various players under the different coaching systems, and the ways of working the ball down the court, and the double responsibility of keeping an eye on the other players as well as on the ball—all

of these and many more points he explained clearly and well.

Surely not impossibly poor, I told myself, as he handed me the theme that his instructor had evidently sent along. A glance down the page left no doubt that the young man was in trouble, and the reason was easy to guess: *he was trying to play his game with neither ball nor basket nor court nor players*. His topic had been an assigned one, something—anything—about his home town. In conversation he really advanced some opinions about his home town, but his page held merely a list of unrelated statements, the first indented as for a paragraph. That the same statements were quite as applicable to many other home towns, he realized, though he would not admit that his had no characteristics of its own.

Yes, he could come in for extra lessons twice a week, he said—Tuesday and Thursday at eleven; he'd be mighty glad to do whatever he could to pick himself up. He certainly didn't want another funk.

And so another student was entered on our remedial English record, one who seemed bent on acquiring, if possible, a facility in directing his thought somewhat comparable to his precision and ease in directing the course of a basketball, sending it where he wanted it to go. Would he be able to do it? The next few weeks would tell. Anyway, he understood what we had talked about, he said, turning to leave.

For the last nine years students have been finding their way to the same door in search of help with their writing, some

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better than the basketball player just mentioned and some far less promising. For a single conference or for whole semesters of additional hours in practice literally dozens have come in, largely sophomores, many freshmen, a good sprinkling of juniors and seniors, from English and other departments as well, even from graduate college. Not all are so simply analyzed as the young athlete, who was able to understand rather quickly that, lacking content, his paper was poor, of course: the thought he must be able to "handle" first of all. Occasionally a very different sort of person drifts along, one so empty of ideas and so inaccurate in expression as to make us wonder where is the better place for him to begin. One such was the second-semester freshman of several years ago whose teacher had reported him in advance as either a fool or a genius, leaving us to discover the young man's exact status as best we could. Often, however, very good students drop in to try to straighten out more minor difficulties. Some of these keep returning to study ways of speeding up their writing, perhaps, or to eradicate some certain weakness of long standing. One young man, conscientious and intelligent, may well illustrate the predicaments of many of this latter group. All because he did not know how to spell words that he really needed to use, his writing had a looseness and roughness of style which he deplored. When he realized that there might be a way out of his difficulty, he set about energetically to learn to adjust his diction not to his incapacity as a speller, as he had always done, but to the thought that he wanted his paper to convey, and to learn, besides, to make most of the letters slip into their right places in his writing vocabulary. Yes, even spelling makes a difference. It need not

be the bugaboo for many students that it is often considered.

Because the question frequently comes as to how this problem of the outer fringes of composition—and of reading, too—is met, I have set down here something of what remedial English is, as we conduct it here at the State University of Iowa, and of how it works, although our method is so flexible that it is not easy to explain once and for all. What we do depends almost entirely upon what we find in each particular case. Yet through the years the plan has adhered quite definitely to its original purpose as expressed briefly in its very first announcement:

.... to provide opportunity for directed practice in composition for those who write under continued handicaps, the department of English maintains its own laboratory. Each afternoon, and at other times by appointment, instruction is open to students who are recommended by any instructor as deficient in, or hampered by, even slight particulars of composition. Remedial English offers no credit; it yields no grade; it has no requirement other than a spirit of willingness on the part of the student, whose agreement to appear is wholly voluntary; it is, in fact, not a course at all. To improve his ability in evaluating his ideas and his skill in presenting them will be a student's only purpose in seeking the assistance offered.

This aid is available to any student in the University; whether he comes from physical education or history or engineering or political science, or, of course, English itself, no one who asks for it is refused a place.

From the beginning we make it clear that the success of a student lies in his own initiative, for instead of class sessions this work is characterized by individual instruction. From four to six make the usual limit for each assistant during any one period. In a room fitted out with tables, of the library type for privacy, and with dictionaries and texts

and reference books at hand, the students write; and, as they write, we make the rounds. One by one and sentence by sentence we show them how to recognize what is sound in their ideas and statements and what is incorrect or unsound. As soon as possible, usually the very first day, the student is directed toward composition proper, very likely the object of his coming in, anyway. Since a paragraph of a page or two more nearly fits into our time (and his, too) than does a longer paper and since it offers greater possibilities for combining ideas than does the single sentence, we usually compromise by beginning with that unit, working on a larger scale only after the shorter is fairly well mastered. In preparation for his first hour we talk over with him some subject with which he is sufficiently familiar and then try to relate some of the various points about that subject to a central unifying idea. If necessary, as is usually true, we provide him with a simple sentence outline for a beginning, though we expect him very soon to be able to make one for himself. Before he is ready to start his paper we feel that it is good for him to think ahead just what he is to say in his paragraph and in just what order he is to say it. More frequently than not this degree of certainty on his part requires many hours of conference and trial and error, but in this way is the once baffled one now truly learning to guide his own thinking.

For the rank and file who find themselves lacking, this matter of learning to look ahead can hardly be overstressed. Doubtless many have already been taught to outline, many who scorned such instruction in earlier years. But here with their backs to the wall they are likely to have an enthusiastic response to the good streamlined device

for mastering organization: the sentence outline. The planning of topic, sub-topic, and concluding sentences—this is the beginning for the great majority. And a useful beginning they find it. In a few days some are able to compose the four or five sentences of the outline so that an idea is started, carried along, and then finished off neatly at the close. Since most of them are still contributing members of their regular classes, before long they are interested in seeing how the same technique may apply to the papers of greater length that they are handing in from time to time to their instructors; now, instead of merely counting off the assigned six hundred words, they are aware that they should turn the six hundred words into progressive discussion. Certain students require a much longer period in which to learn to look ahead, writing every sentence haltingly; and some few others, for all their expenditure of time and show of zeal, have for all their persistence only an inexplicable hope. Those whose purpose it is to gain speed often find the sentence outline an effective means of having a place for everything and of putting everything into its place with dispatch; they really are able to compose more quickly. Those whose ideas have been jumbled in their class papers like the systematic clarity of their thoughtful planning, and those who have never had much to write often find that, with their thinking turned to a purpose, their "talents" have increased a hundred fold. They are now genuinely respectful of organization, of a line of thought, clearly defined.

By this time the young man with the assignment to write about his home town is able to do a bit more with it. Instead of simply listing the various stores and garages and churches and lo-

cating them properly with reference to the courthouse square, he sees some of the town's important traits. He can now show in his outline ways in which it is progressive or backward or particularly democratic. He has thought through and around his chosen topic until, before he has fairly started writing, he knows whether it is one sufficiently fruitful for him to try to discuss. A little later he may be ready to analyze the same topic on a broader basis, showing, for example, its more significant social relations; but for a time he will do better to try only as far as his confidence extends, leaving the more complex treatment until he thoroughly understands simple analysis and direct expression. Furthermore, he will do well to practice by analyzing one topic after another until the process of his thinking is quite definitely established. Nor is he thinking in a vacuum; for his plan, if it is to be usable, cannot take shape before he has considered actual material, before he has thought of the many pertinent details that each sentence of his outline stands for. There is his material; there is worked out his organization. Now remains the actual writing of his discussion. Whether it is to be one hundred or one thousand words long, he must draw it together in his best clear-cut fashion. When he reaches this stage he begins to feel an assurance that he has not known before, to understand how to play the game of words. "Oh, yes," he says, "it's something like basketball. You've just got to start it with the whistle and keep it going 'til the gun." He is beginning to have an idea for himself; he is beginning to be a free man.

And if organization has been his sole trouble, he is truly free, this persistent student. More probably, though, he is only well started, with other woes still

apparent. He has been writing sentences all this while, sentences indeed quite correct possibly—in terms of grammar. But now he finds that a sentence has a responsibility other than the carrying of a subject and a predicate; he finds that it must take shape to accord with its thought, an idea often brand new to him. And so begins the necessary elimination of hampering mechanical errors and the toning-down or building-up of vocabulary. That only confusion can result from such demons as poor transitions, weak reference of pronouns, shifting tense and person, misleading commas, dangling participles, warped parallelisms, he soon realizes and is grateful for our advice or for the text that we hand out on grammar or punctuation or rhetoric. Each day before he leaves we check his day's work with him so thoroughly that he knows just where he is to begin next time. Bit by bit and hour by hour we watch so that our basketball player or dramatic-arts major or budding lawyer may enter his state of complete independence as soon as possible. First, we think he should be able to decide what his whole idea is; second, what it consists of; third, how he can best phrase every part in order to unfold it clearly; and, fourth, how he can punctuate it to make his meaning unmistakable.

"And what are the troubles that you find most frequently?" I am often asked. In their variety lies the interest, I suppose. Nothing short of taking a handbook and reading the list of "Thou shalt nots" will suggest all the kinds of faults; yet from the assortment a few stand out as common to a great number of students. If, for example, we ask for a discussion of a topic designed to reflect ideas from what the students are reading (the kind of topic that their instructors expect them to be able to develop), the first

general weakness that comes to our attention is their failure to know the text under consideration specifically, whether it is *Henry IV*, *Paradise Lost*, or the *Odyssey*. This means, then, that the thinking must be at fault; it means that, in trying to compose from material that is unfamiliar to them, these students can produce at best only a vague show of words instead of a sensible, well-ordered whole. Frequently, we find, they have little notion of the story or the theme or the purpose of the text, and even less of an idea how to read it. Often, too, they have been merely waiting along, Micawber-like, hoping that something would turn up to render their labor of reading unnecessary. And so, out of this part of the experience, they soon realize that they need to know their text thoroughly, so thoroughly that when they begin writing they will not have to finger it along line by line.

The relation existing between this special training and the regular class work is almost wholly one of accomplishment. Our hope is that these students may actually give to their teachers evidence of having learned, not facts alone, but how these facts or ideas are interwoven; of having gained an awareness of the significance of these facts and a facility and correctness in their expression. And there is, besides, another feature of this training, one that should carry over to all other college work. Through his constant exercise of patience as well as perseverance, and through his newfound willingness to profit by criticism, many a student builds up a whole new morale. Instead of pretending understanding or of being content with shoddy preparation or of falling back on some excuse for his shortcomings, he is developing, we often see, a will to improve as fast as he can. Such a will may find root as

we talk with him about his material, and he begins to realize something of its richness. Sometimes a single word will start the growth. One young man found himself in trying to explain just how cold it was for the pioneers in *Giants in the Earth*; when he remembered the blizzard and the snow swirling around the barn and the pellets stinging Per Hansa's face, his explanation came clear. Words really made a difference, he suddenly realized, and he would find out that difference before he was through. He would never be so dead again. Nor was he! Unfortunately, not all respond in such glowing fashion. There are those students who prefer to reproduce Coleridge or Bradley for their original papers on Hamlet, and those content to begin with a flourish and then fade out, and those beaten before they start because, as they say, "Mother always had a bad time with English, too." Remedial English is not, unfortunately, a cure-all.

Nor, as we have it, does remedial English make pretense of creating a blissful utopia for teachers of composition. We only know that class teachers and students alike are spared long hours of spoon-feeding, both agreeing that it is better for the student to "show the teacher" by learning for himself to do better as soon as possible. We know, too, that with constructive help, both free and legitimate, the problem of plagiarism is lessened. We are also aware that many instances of dissatisfaction are explained away before there is opportunity for conflict in the open. These situations often come to our attention through the dean of men or the dean of women or through the advice and recommendation of some earlier "satisfied customer." We feel, too, that, making available as it does to students of all levels and in all degrees of difficulty the opportunity of achieving

independence, it comes very close to meeting the ends of true education. A young man or woman who voluntarily spends extra hours, often thirty or forty a semester, and who assumes the added responsibility week after week, if necessary, to perfect as well as he can a most useful tool for learning is catching more from his experience than book knowledge alone. Even a single hour successfully devoted to clearing out of the way a conscious stumbling block is quite as worth while for the student who has only so much need. Because usually day by day there is some tangible evidence of accomplishment, eagerness and industry and pride begin to replace indifference and laziness; fear and antagonism begin to give way to self-confidence and optimism. That an awareness of thinking is certainly better than chaos and prejudice is the philosophy behind our procedure. The one student at a time is the one whose problem is ours until he is able to find his way through it.

A thousand and more young men and women have taken advantage of the "clinic," as it is often called, since February, 1934, when it was first established. These have come from East, West, North, and South and from many foreign countries, as well as from our own Midwest. Quite to the discomfort of a few of our troubled guests—often the poorest, who expect to be transformed during the first hour—we make no pretense of performing miracles. But we are pleased when someone asks (and many do) to have his hour saved for the new semester; "for," he says, "what I am learning has helped me in my other semester exams, and I'm just getting started." We are pleased, too, that even when there is no question of passing or failing many keep on com-

ing, hoping eventually to gain for themselves that complete freedom of a person who can think what he wishes to think and can express what he wishes to express and can understand what he needs to understand from the words of others. This is a freedom that armies today are defending.

It was near the close of the semester. The door opened and a young man stepped inside, holding a folded paper in his hand.

At my greeting he came directly toward my desk, his face showing not concern this time but boyish pleasure. He sat down in the proffered chair on the opposite side and tossed the theme across to me.

"At last—a 'B,'" he said, "and am I glad!"

In the minutes that followed he talked—not about basketball mostly, as he had weeks earlier, but about his writing. He told me (as have some others in the last few years) how he felt about knowing and observing the rules until you could forget them and still write pretty well, and about the need for practice, and about the ways that you could dribble and toss and pass the thought around until you finally made a basket. Thought could be handled just like a ball, once you learned how. Writing was after all a game, he concluded, and he was always going to remember that, even in his finals next week.

I thought back to the early days of his dire need for careful coaching.

Truly, not a miracle, I told myself as he went out of the door, but never again merely a high-school star. Put on his own, a young man may grow up!