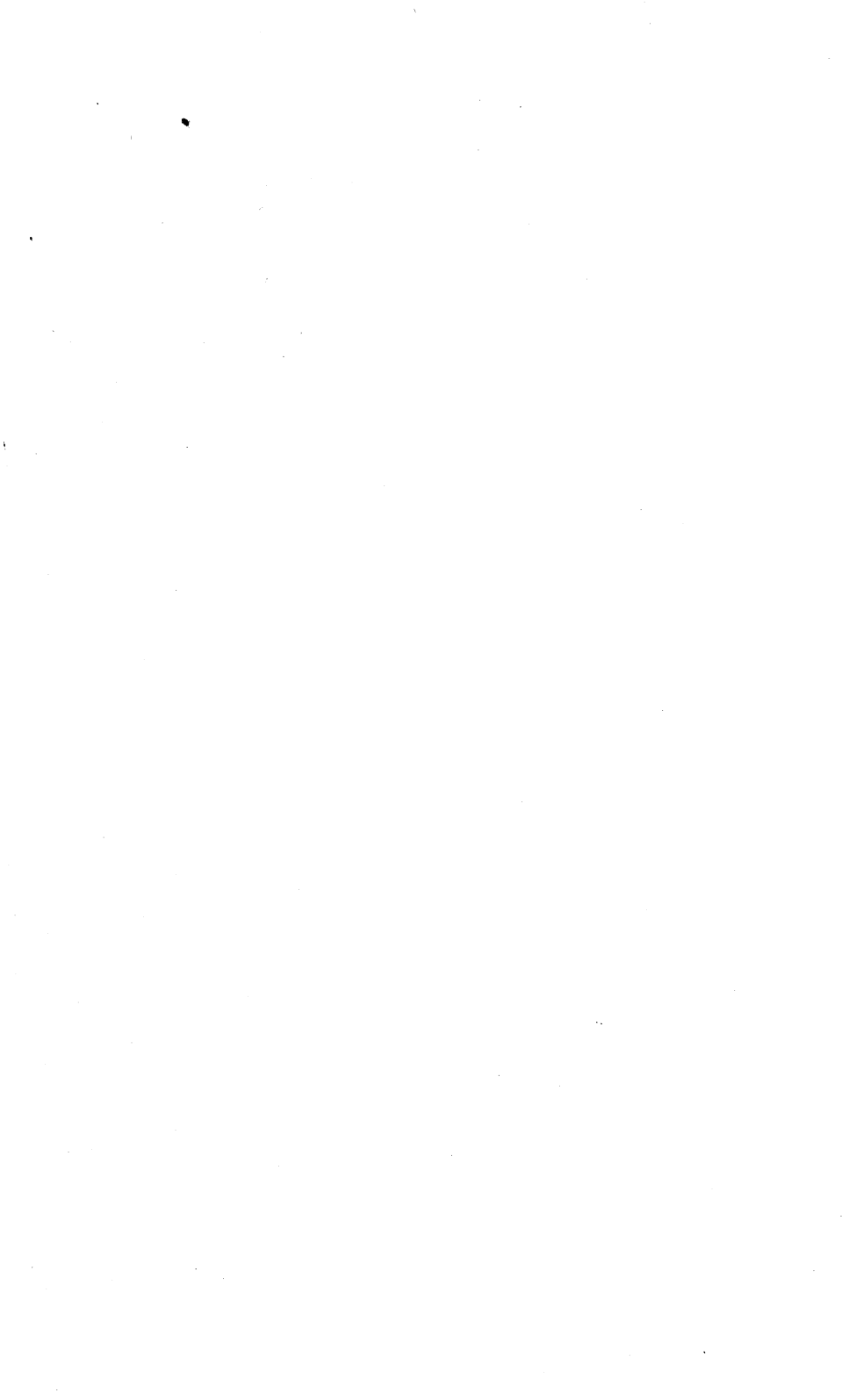


PART ONE

*News of Special Fields*



## CHAPTER 1

### THE WRITING PROBLEM

**T**HE ultimate purpose of any writing is to convey ideas. This is a trite axiom which is blithely accepted, but frequently forgotten by the one who writes. The axiom implies the association with any writing of at least two minds or groups of minds, and frequently there is a third.

Expanded, the axiom reads: The purpose of any writing is to put the ideas in the mind of one person into a verbal form which will render these ideas assimilable to the mind of another.

The ideas which are to be conveyed may be ideas in the mind of the author. In this case he must express these ideas in terms which will render them available to the minds of the particular group of readers for whom they are intended.

Again, the ideas, which it is the writer's problem to express, may be originally lodged in the mind of another. Now he has a double task: He must ferret these ideas out of the mind of the person to whom they belong, and he must clothe them in such verbal forms that a selected group of readers can acquire them.

Apparently a simple and even an easy undertaking. But the degree of the success of the writer is measured by the degree of similitude which the ideas, implanted by him in the reader's mind, have to the original ideas. In an ultimate sense, it is impossible to perform this task with absolute accuracy. It is the desperate elusiveness of this effort, one of the most difficult tasks that man has so far succeeded in setting for himself, that gives its challenge, its romance, to writing.

It is from this fact that one can distill another truism: The greater the writer—the more sincerely he envisages his problem—the less satisfied he will be with his writing. A writer must be vastly ignorant of his task who often feels that he has expressed an idea as well as it could be expressed. Conversely, it is when an author

has approached or touched the goal that we get the deathless phrase which illuminates an idea for all time.

The difficulties that stand in the way of good writing involve two processes, one psychological and one technical. Because he cannot see or hear accurately or cannot comprehend ideas completely, the writer is unable to give to his reader a veritable picture of the things he has heard, seen, or attempted to understand. Again, the problem of knowing the mental capabilities and processes of his readers is one with which the writer has always to wrestle.

Technically, he has to deal with the problem of presentation—how most effectively to clothe thoughts in words. He has as the primary tools of his craft a dictionary full of words and a great variety of sentence structures.

Words lead double lives. They have, on the one hand, a humdrum, every-day, utilitarian existence and on the other a life that is romantic and imaginative. A word both defines an idea and suggests other associated ideas. The point for the writer to remember, in this connection, is that words vary both in their denotative and connotative powers. He will wish to choose, for the expression of any given idea, the words which in that connection have the highest power of defining the idea and suggesting appropriate associations with it.

Trite words and phrases are bad, not because they are old, but because they have lost much of their power of defining and suggesting. With the loss of this power they acquire an air of insincerity. The phrase, "rooted to the spot," was at one time a strikingly original and graphic figure of speech. But it has been used so often that the reader accepts the words without investigating the idea. It has become insincere and ineffective.

A writer has an almost unlimited number of sentence forms at his command. Count over a few of the possibilities. He can cast the simple sentence, by means of inversions and the use of prepositional, participial, and infinitive phrases, into eight or ten forms. He can express three different shades of thought with combinations which he can make with three words: They laughed heartily, heartily they laughed, heartily laughed they. The possibilities for

variety are tremendously greater in the compound sentence. Here one has not only the combinations that can be made with subject and verb and their modifiers, but with groups of subjects and predicates. Further intricacies are provided by the complex sentence.

Another type of vitality—and variety—can be put into writing: that supplied by rhythm. One can secure a certain effect with sentences that are long and easy and smooth of movement; he can secure other effects with short sentences, inverted sentences and sentences in which the characteristic rhythm is broken.

Words and sentences, then, offer the writer, if he apprehends their use—and that is his business—a very fine set of tools for expressing the subtle tones of ideas. He may not always be able to give to words and sentences the absolute reality of thought as it existed in his mind, but he will be able to go very far in that direction if he knows the refinements of their use.

The basic problem of writing, then, to convey ideas in words, is common to the two great fields of writing, literature and journalism. There is an essential difference in the two, however, in spite of the fact that some journalism takes on the qualities and characteristics of literature and some putative literature is journalistic. Literature is typically suggestive. It is the re-creation of life as filtered through the mind and the personality of the writer. Journalism, on the other hand, is typically objective, concerned for the most part with the transcription into words of current events and ideas without their being first transfused and individualized by the mind and emotions of the writer.

This fact implies a difference in technique. With one of these techniques this book will have nothing to do. The other, the technique of journalism, and especially its application to technical subject matter, it will attempt to analyze.

#### ASSIGNMENTS

1. List all words in a column of a newspaper which you think are markedly ineffective because of triteness or markedly successful because of their appropriateness to the idea they are intended to illuminate.
2. Repeat the above assignment with a column or article from any current issue of a class, trade, or technical magazine.

3. Explain briefly the essential difference between subjective writing and objective writing. Find and clip an example of each and discuss their respective characteristics and differences.

4. Find ten sets of synonymous words which express different shades of meaning and use them in sentences to illustrate their variations in meaning.

5. Find ten sentences in any newspaper or periodical article which seem poorly written, either in structure or wrong words. Re-write these to make them more effective.