

Words Without Training

By Ralph Sewell, '42ba



Ralph Sewell—editor and assistant managing editor, Okla. City Times.

GIVE OR TAKE a few old sticks of furniture, O.U.'s journalism students now write amid splendor which makes their predecessors drool.

Yet, I question whether the new plant—with all its finery—and the professors—with all their ability—will find it possible to turn out newsmen in the quantity and the quality of the classes of the 1920s and 1930s.

We did have some very important intangibles which, it seems to me, have been lost today.

The most important of these was freedom of expression extended to the journalism student of pre-World War II days.

It resulted, on occasion, I'll concede, in some pretty wild editions of *The Oklahoma Daily*. But day in and day out, the *Daily* was interesting, and students grabbed them from the newsstands.

Today's *Daily*, by contrast, is a pretty humdrum affair.

For by and large, the writing follows the public relations format of never-offending-anyone. For days on end, it is just a university bulletin board.

Consequently, I often find myself wondering if the average O.U. student ever would plunk down a nickel to pick it up. Sooner or later, the would-be editor must learn how to package such a product.

Equally important: I wonder if J-students have any fun putting out the present-day *Daily*.

Fun was one thing we had lots of in the Good Old Days. And, more substantially, we had freedom that produced newsmen who came out of school unafraid to ask embarrassing questions when such questions must be asked.

The blame for the current sad state of *Daily* affairs lies not with today's students, or with the Journalism faculty.

Rather, the villains are other faculty members—who have no interest in journalism, *per se*, and more importantly, the University Regents—the Regents of the now 15-year-old faculty supervision policy which they established in indignation after an over-enthusiastic *Daily* editor became highly critical of the then-president of the University.

In the Good Old Days, there was J-faculty criticism of the students' efforts—but this was *after* the paper had appeared.

Today, the emphasis has changed to *pre-screening*. The J-faculty member (dedicated to press freedom himself) has an unhappy job. In practice, he doesn't say: "Thou shalt not!" But, caught in the middle, humanly enough, he tries to talk the editor out of things which might offend the administration.

The result is an enthusiasm-dampening affair. The *Daily* shows less and less initiative and has become progressively duller.

The faculty outside the journalism school has welcomed this change. They never were conditioned for student journalists. Even though they took for granted that their own students would make mistakes, they expected a polished performance from the beginning journalist.

The result of this 15-year misguided policy is that graduates—with rare exceptions—lack imagination and enterprise.

And on campus, it has contributed to a declining student body.

All of this comes at a time when the profession needs more journalists, and when the nation, itself, needs more and more competent people to factually report and interpret our complicated modern society.

More freedom of expression for students, of course, is only one of the things which must be done if we are to have enough competent people in communications.

An orientation course in communications should be offered as a freshman elective. I think it should be required for those who specify Journalism as a major. But it should be designed, too, to help non-Journalism majors who wish to elect it. Many otherwise well-educated persons lack the ability to express themselves effectively in writing—and have absolutely no idea how to advance their ideas via newspaper, radio or television.

More help, too, should come from working journalists.

They can do this by offering summer jobs—and by giving the new generation a taste of the fun in the news business.

They can do it by encouraging Regents to revoke the short-sighted faculty *hold* on the campus paper.

In all this, they'll be doing themselves the favor of preservation of their profession, and doing the newcomer a favor as well. For in what other business can you earn a living and have so much fun.

Words Without Meaning

By Foster-Harris, '25ba

IN NO AGE in all history have there been more needless noise than in ours—more words printed and fewer read, more spoken and less heard, more transmitted and less received. And in this strange reversal—the return of communication to its original sex and violence bellowings—our nation leads all the rest.

Books by the hundreds of millions pour from our presses. Yet in no major, civilized nation is the per capita reading of books lower than with us. Tens of millions of Americans, including college graduates, do not average one book a year. Nor is the status of our periodical literature any alternative to which we may point with pride.

Nowhere else in the world, not even in such classic centers of sin as Paris and Port Said, do open newsstands overflow with such rivers of visual sewage as do ours: yards and wards of pornography, of illustrated dissertation on sex perversions, pictures, descriptions and diagrams of every conceivable crime and sin in the decalog and out—all handily arranged for the free perusal of any child who happens along.

Civilization is sick in our times. It is sick with self-interest, sick with freedom pursued to perversion, numb with the terrors of its own imaginings, sick unto death with objectivity pushed to its utmost, objectionable extremes.

In our passion to expand the frontiers of science, to attain a mechanical, materialistic perfection, we have forgotten that objects do not communicate. Objects, any material,

twenty years ago. The book is an interminable record of an elderly lecher engaged in the systematic, statutory raping of a 12-year-old girl.

Most normal adults have pretty decent instincts. A few times, yes, they may experiment with amorality and perversion, they may permit their minds to become so soiled that even Billy Graham's latest spiritual detergent will not quite remove the stain. But, not having been raised as geophagists, dirt-eaters, they will not habitually wallow in the noxious stuff purveyed as reading matter by today's American publishers, they will turn from it for the same reason that trade avoids the Greasy Spoon.

In the opinion of at least several authorities the American novel has committed suicide, thanks to the excesses of editors and publishers catering to the jaded tastes of communist-oriented, metropolitan minorities. Meantime the quality of our short fiction has dropped at least 25 per cent since the war. Non-fiction, with a tremendous increase in reader percentage, has perhaps held its own quality-wise.

But the imagination is nurtured by fiction, not fact. Starved for nourishment, the individual imaginations of millions upon millions of younger Americans have turned from tainted print to other media, primarily, of course, television.

Much more rigidly censored and regimented than the printed page, TV, for all its faults, does have one tremendous advantage. It is compelled to cater to a mass, rather than class, audience. Lowering its

This article by the co-chairman of the Journalism School's spectacularly successful Professional Writing Department is the second article of The New Face of Man series.

having attained its destined form and usage can only thereafter rust, wear and rot; and this is just as true of an objective communication system, objective words, diction and grammar as it is of the motor in a car.

As I write, for sickening example, the current literary sensation (choice of two top book clubs) is a piece of filth which would have put somebody in the penitentiary even

sights accordingly, it comes very much closer to the ideal of communication, that is, easy comprehension by everybody, than does any modern print. Nor are many of its seeming drawbacks actually disadvantages.

Thus when a television station, happily

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Foster-Harris—top Western fiction and fact writer, J-School teacher.

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or otherwise, presents a 1937 movie, shop-worn though it may be, at least the picture probably has a story. Which is more than most modern movies boast. Even a comforting proportion of its live presentations has been clipped from books and magazines of yesteryear, from a vanished America where such words as subjective value, morals, religion, ethics were not—as now—mere empty cartons, discarded soap boxes for street corner neo-existentialists to kick around. Still more, when TV takes advantage of its unique ability to transmit non-verbal communication right into every living room, to use, that is, gestures, actions and sounds in lieu of words, why it wields there a tremendous weapon.

But unfortunately, when a culture begins to revert from the printed word to manual gesture, from language to sign language, it is taking a great step backward. Monkeys gesticulate. It is the sign of civilization that it communicates with the written word.

Alarming and unmistakable signs of degeneration in our basic communication system have been evident for more than a generation now, beginning, I think, about 1925, when, under the curse of so-called "progressive" education many of our elementary schools switched from the old, proven A, B, ab phonic method of teaching reading, to the new and completely idiotic "word-recognition" system.

Now nothing could be better calculated to make a nation of illiterates than this read-by-rote system which, fortunately for me, I am old enough to have escaped; but which you probably had to endure. As Dr. Rudolf Flesch says in his angry little book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, it just throws 3,500 years of civilization out the window and goes back to the benighted idea the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians and Chinese had of writing. It ignores the letters and, instead, makes of each word an ideograph, like a Chinese sign or an Egyptian hieroglyphic. These you have to memorize, since you are given no alphabetic key to unlock them and break them down.

By the time you have memorized five or six thousand of these stupid little curlicue signs (which is about the vocabulary of the average literate Chinese) you too are heartily sick of the whole business and turn instead to television, radio, movies, the comic books, or picture magazines for your entertainment and information, letting reading revert to what it was in remote antiquity, the exclusive prerogative of the learned priesthood attending the sacred cows in temple colleges.

Now, rather angrily and unjustly, perhaps, this is what I suspect some of our teachers and professors would like to have happen. It may be unconscious on their part. But the brutal truth remains, they have achieved a nation of non-readers, more and more and more they have herded "literature" into a sort of profane hieroglyphic language which the ordinary American will not read, largely because he can't; they have contributed alarmingly toward an impending Tower of Babel breakdown in our everyday ability to communicate even with each other.

The carrier current of communication is empathy. It is a subjective feeling, a first person quality transmitted by the writer, received by the reader. Without it there is no understanding, no communication, no matter how skilled with words, how admirably objective the transmitter is.

Words without worth (with apologies to Shakespeare) never to heaven go. And that just might have something to do with the accompanying semi-Shakespearean line: And Russian missiles soar, but ours stay down below.

CHARLIE AND HIS BOYS

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recently spearheaded the successful Speech and Hearing Clinic development fund drive.

The Coe boys show every sign of growing up to be as active as their parents. Chuck, the eight-year-old, might succeed his dad in the golf department. He recently came in second in the Oklahoma City Golf and Country Club's junior tournament.

Do the boys get any lessons from the National Champion along with their lawn chipping?

"Very little," said Coe. "I enjoy golf, but I wouldn't want to force that enjoyment on them. They all take lessons at the club and they have some special children's clubs. If they like the game, fine; if they don't—that's fine also."

Coe, who won his first National Amateur Championship in 1949 at the age of 25, thinks golf is becoming a young man's game—particularly after having to wrest his second Amateur's from Tommy Aaron, a Georgia college senior.

It's a sentiment the younger Coes agree with completely. Asked if he wanted to grow up to be a champion like his father, Ward's face lighted up in startling contrast to the traditionally solemn expression which his father sports on the fairways: "Sure," he laughed, "I'll be a champ'n, too. It's easy!"

NEW BOOKS

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gotten. And when at last the lips were closed, and the fatal push was given, even the stern executioners of inexorable law felt a tremor run through their stalwart, muscular limbs."

This picture, my friends, has nothing to do with justice. It seems quite obvious to me that the reason lynchings packed them in is an esthetic reason. It would be hard in those Cecil B. DeMille-less days to find a dramatic match for the demise of Seminole. Saturday night is the Devil's own when you've had a bath and there's not a decent movie in town.

Lynchings and the like are done so much better even on TV now that I seriously doubt if today's Coloradan would bother to look out his living room window if a modern Seminole were having the bad luck to be executed prematurely from a nearby elm. It is easy to see how something like that would pass out of fashion.

The Romans had the right idea: I am not at all sure about the bread bit, but there is no question in my mind about the value of a circus. What this world needs is a good nickel movie.

RECOMMENDED: To anyone who enjoys a good lynching—vicariously.

Mathematics in Fun and in Earnest, by Nathan A. Court, Dial Press.

My particular bent is against mathematics. The last time I ever had anything to do with the subject was back in my high school days when my trigonometry teacher proved to everybody's satisfaction that one equals two.

Many a mathematician finds his logic leading him to the land of one equals two, but not many can joke about it. Happily, Dr. Nathan Court, O.U.'s Warsaw-born Professor Emeritus of Mathematics, is a mathematician who, as the title of his new book implies, can work with figures either in fun or in earnest.

There are many facets of this comprehensive book on the history, foibles, and glories of mathematics which recommend it to a general audience; but the most prominent are Doctor Court's lucidity and wit. The book had its origin in Doctor Court's popular lectures, and, to use a phrase which Doctor Court ridicules, "it is obvious that" he still has an audience very much in mind.

RECOMMENDED: An ivory-tower man visits the rest of us in excellent style.