Second edition

BRAIN TRAIN

STUDYING FOR SUCCESS

RICHARD PALMER

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Brain Train

Studying for success

Second edition

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all my students, past and present. If it weren't for their enthusiasm, interest and industry, I'd have finished it in half the time.

It is also dedicated to Annie—for everything and forever.

CONTENTS

PREFACE TO REVISED EDITION

No profit grows where is no pleasure ta'en; In brief, sir, study what you most affect.

The Taming of the Shrew

This is a book about how to study, and its stress throughout is on enjoyment. You may find that combination surprising; if so, you're wrong. Study is like anything else: the more you enjoy it, the more likely you are to succeed.

The book is written mainly for the voluntary student—i.e. anyone over the age of sixteen. You've chosen to study, for whatever reason: to do well, you need to derive pleasure, even *fun,* from your work. It would be absurd to suggest that you don't need to work hard—of course you do. But there is no need for working hard to be a dull joyless grind which you resent and fear.

There are a number of books on study skills available now. Most of the ones I've read are sound and helpful, and some of them are more than just that. But nearly all of them, I have found, are written in a dry and solemn way which can deflate the nervous student. In stressing enjoyment, therefore, I hope you can approach your course with a feeling more positive than anxiety. It is highly improbable that you possess no talent: most students are a lot brighter than they think. Bear that in mind from the beginning, and you've taken the first important step towards regarding study as pleasure rather than work.

I wrote those words for the first edition in 1984. Obviously, I still hold to them—hence their appearance now. However, not everything is the same as it was then, either in these pages or in the world of education and study which they address.

First, the book is my own work, apart from Chapter 11 on Computers And Study, written by friend and colleague Bob Eadie. The original edition was written with Chris Pope, who was then a student himself. He not only wrote two 'Student Point of View' chapters but oversaw and advised on all the others with his much more recent *student* experience in mind; we felt that such 'insider in-put' made the book more attractive. I have abandoned that strategy for three reasons—two of them practical, the other philosophical.

Sheer convenience heads the list. Writing in partnership is an intricate and time-consuming process, and as I observe shortly, I am far from being the only person for whom time is at a premium these days. Furthermore, there are now so many different *kinds* of student, engaged upon so many different courses across such a huge range of disciplines that I reckoned it would be impossible to find a single student co-author who would be properly 'representative'.

However, in dispensing with a co-author I am not abandoning the principles that inspired the original edition, and that leads me to my third reason. I remain very grateful to Chris for his contribution, but the very fact of our collaboration may have implied a 'Them & Us' ethos which is the last thing I would want to

signal. Education may involve a struggle, but not one between teacher and student: all good teachers, examiners and educators in general are wholly pro-student. The people who teach you—even if they are hundreds of miles away, as happens with Distance Learners, for example—want you to do well, and successful study hinges on a *partnership* with them. So while this new edition has no student co-author, it is if anything more *'on your side'* than was the first. In addition, I've met and taught a great many new students since 1984, which has allowed me to extend my research into everything I cover, and test it to destruction!

Second, the importance of 'Study Skills' has not been recognised—or at any rate implemented—in the way that I hoped for a decade ago. That may seem an odd remark: many schools and colleges run special courses on Study Skills, and what I will call the 'Study Aid Industry' is rampant.* But a lot of this is cosmetic even when it isn't merely trendy, for Study Skills are still not *taught* in a systematic, organic way.

There is much to be said for intensive day courses: it was one such that first got me interested in the whole matter. There is also something to be said for individual lectures, Induction Days and indeed anything that increases students' (and teachers') awareness of what studying means and involves. And I am also well aware that a good many 'study skills' are specifically and automatically *subject oriented,* and are thus acquired almost invisibly. Nevertheless, there are a number of crucial things which are rarely addressed, which I can best illustrate with an anecdote.

While putting the finishing touches to this manuscript, I happened to run a twelve-session General Studies course at my school on 'Speed-Reading and Advanced Study Skills'. It was for Sixth formers, and about two dozen—mainly students in their 'A' level year—opted for it. At the start I gave them a simple questionnaire to find out how much advice they'd received over the years on reading, note-taking, the psychology of writing, memory, work-patterns etc.—in short, most of the areas which this book covers. I ought to say that I was not expecting all that much; even so, the answers were alarming. They'd had a lot of (good) advice on exams, on writing skills specific to their subjects, and on 'Life Skills'—i.e. job applications, completing and submitting UCAS forms and so on; otherwise, very little. The most disturbing feature was that not one of them had received any advice on reading for years, and most had had none at all since the age of six or seven.

Some of my disquiet was prompted by the reflection that I was partly to blame: after all, I'm an English teacher! But it went beyond that. The overwhelming inference was that our education system regards reading in a dangerously simplistic fashion, as a *single* skill. That's not to say it doesn't take reading seriously: it is the key to all literacy, and as such its fundamental importance is duly stressed. But it is somehow made analogous to learning to ride a bicycle: once the skill has been acquired it is there for life, and no further monitoring or instruction is necessary.

The notion that the skills and behaviour appropriate to the acquisition of basic literacy are identical to those attending the absorption of a sophisticated literary text or a demanding scientific survey is preposterous; yet it is daily enshrined (if that's the word I want) in virtually all our academic institutions. And if I seem preoccupied with one particular skill, that's chiefly because reading governs or affects so much else in the student's life—note-taking, long-term memory, revision and examination skills, and *time.*

That last concept has a major bearing on the lack of provision which I'm lamenting. Since I wrote that first edition there has been what amounts to a revolution in education at all levels. Changes and developments have been almost innumerable; the six that strike me as central are:

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*For my further thoughts on Study Aids, please see pp. 92–5.

The obsession with 'qualifications'

Actually, this was a pretty hefty consideration when I was a schoolboy thirty-plus years ago, so no real change there. Except that there are so many *more* qualifications to be aimed at these days, so many more bits of paper available. It was always a problem to get most students—and more than a few teachers—fully interested in something that didn't result in an examination and a concrete product, but never more so than now.

The obsession with 'Accountability'

By the same token, the teaching profession itself is under immense and constant scrutiny. League tables, parental power and choice, Ofsted Inspections and near-weekly pronouncements from assorted (and powerful) quangos—all these induce an understandable conservatism which regards 'non-product' courses as a potentially harmful luxury.

The change—and increase—in the student population

On the whole, this is not something I would want to complain about. Quite the reverse: the fact that so many more people are pursuing tertiary courses, whether vocational or otherwise, is warmly to be welcomed. But it's a change which this book has had to take full note of —which is why there is specific advice for such 'types' as **The Returning Student, The Distance Learner** and **The Young Manager/Professional**.

It is also, incidentally, why all the material in Chapters 11 and 12 is new, since there's been a Computer revolution as well. An increasing number of students have their own PC, which affects working methods and habits; this has its dangers as well as its advantages, and both are covered in detail.

The transformation in employment and the marketplace

In a way this goes hand in hand with 'accountability' and 'qualification mania'. The business of 'selling oneself' was probably always fraught and certainly important, but there can be little doubt that it has reached a new intensity. As a result, you need Study Skills to *get work* as well as to pass your course; that's why I've written a whole new section on **Study Skills and Employment.**

The National Curriculum

For most of you, I would imagine, the National Curriculum is something that is (thankfully) no longer directly relevant. But it may explain why you didn't get much ancillary Study Skills advice when younger. Even in its drastically-reduced* form, the NC imposes large constraints on schools and teachers. Time is more precious than ever before, and elasticity often has to be sacrificed.

Finally:

Our 'Overwork Culture' and occupation-frenzy

I shall shortly explain in full what I mean by that phrase. For now I just want to say that the intensified Protestant Work Ethic that governs so many walks of life has taken root in schools and colleges too, further

aggravating the problem of *time*. There is so much that our institutions are required to do—and document—that they often struggle to deliver central curricular services: small wonder that desirable but ultimately ancillary courses cannot be accommodated.

The picture I've been painting over the last few pages is in several respects a grim, forbidding one. So how can I help you?

Well, first if things *are* that bad, then the need for a book like this has never been greater. Of course, I *would* say that, wouldn't I?! But given that certain extremely important matters do not get covered in the normal run of school and college life, I believe you'll find my material of significant assistance.

Second, I return to my beginning: *enjoyment*. I hope you will find what follows fun to read as well as instructional; more important, you should try to derive as much *pleasure* as possible from your work. That will not only make your life as a student much nicer: it will, to repeat, greatly increase your chances of success. For it is a fact of life that these three things go together:

Enjoyment Confidence Success

Assuming that you have some aptitude, once you acquire one of these the others follow, often rapidly. Conversely, once you *lose* any of them, the others tend to fade as well.

Third, I can offer you another fact, as cheering as it is fundamental:

You are in charge.

As you will quickly come to notice, that is almost this book's 'motto'. I stress it again and again because so much of what a student does best comes from a serene sense of control. And as I also point out early on, no matter how diffident or ignorant you may be feeling, there is one thing you know better than anyone else:

You.

Healthy self-awareness—including both vanity and humility! —is a crucial asset. You know best how, when and where you best work; you also know what gives you the most trouble. Knowing your strengths and weaknesses is not only morally a Good Thing: it is the key to studying well. So while I like to think that you will find my ideas and tips interesting and valuable, you should only adopt them if they are *right for you*. There are as many ways of working well as there are students: pick the one that suits you best.

Fourth, and finally, I return to the phrase 'Overwork Culture'. One of the weirdest, and most insidious, features of contemporary life is that more and more jobs are being done by fewer and fewer people working longer and longer hours. It's everywhere—in my own field, in trade and commerce, in all the professions. Those lucky enough to be in full employment find that they take on an ever-increasing range of tasks, requiring a similarly-enlarged range of skills. [That's another reason why the Section on **Study Skills and Employment** has been added.] And one of the many consequences of this is to put a premium on *effort* and on *visible occupation.* Hard work is not only its own reward, it seems, but a supreme virtue in and of itself.

The reason for that paragraph is this:

As a student, do not confuse working *hard* with working *well*.

On the very first page of the main text I emphasise that I am not advocating laziness! But it's amazing how many people imagine that mere industry or sheer plod is the way to do it. It isn't: as noted, there's got to be an element of pleasure for success to ensue. There are a lot of time-saving tips that I hope will help you make the transition from a sense of *labour* to a sense of *fun,* allowing you to look on your study as a friend rather than an exacting boss. Remember: you are in charge.

NOTE In view of my observations about reading, and the problems so

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*Or 'streamlined', as the government chooses to call it

many students seem to have in this area, you might find it a good idea to have a look at **Chapter Six, Eyes Right: Effective Reading** first. The ideas and techniques discussed there may help you to get more out of the rest of the book, and more quickly!

Richard Palmer, Bedford, April 1996

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Most of all I thank Annie my wife. She devised and drafted much of Part Four from her extensive experience in the field; her cogent advice throughout has been priceless; and without her good humour and loving tolerance during my countless hours in front of the word-processor this book would never have survived.

PART ONE

APPROACHES AND ATTITUDES—HOW TO GET THE BEST OUT OF YOUR MIND

TESTING…TESTING
1

I like work; it fascinates me. I can sit down and look at it for hours.

Jerome K.Jerome

What would you say the following had in common?

1. Getting up in the morning
2. Writing an essay
3. Cleaning the car
4. Reading *War and Peace*
5. Re-decorating a room
6. Mowing the lawn
7. Having to practise the piano
8. Sending off thank-you letters
9. Preparing a meal
10. Chatting up someone you fancy

You might answer that, with the possible exception of (10), they are all unpleasant or a drag but will have to be tackled sooner or later. Another possible answer, though, is that they are all difficult to start doing, but that once you have started, they're not so bad—even pleasant. Initially, however, there must be a degree of motivation present for you to be willing to start the task.

Since this is a book about study, and since study, like all things, requires such initial motivation, it is appropriate to suggest that this might be paraphrased as your 'interest' or 'enjoyment'. Indeed, the emphasis throughout the book is on enjoyment. Few people succeed at anything while finding it dull; and most really successful people— whatever their job—derive an enormous amount of good old-fashioned fun from what they do. So just about the worst thing you can do when starting a new course is to dwell miserably on what hard work it's going to be. If you *expect* a course to be difficult, obscure or boring, the chances are it will be. From the start, therefore, cultivate a sense of enjoyment; believe in the pleasures and satisfactions that await you.

It is of course idle to pretend that any course of study does not involve work—hard work. But the key to that phrase lies in the adjective 'hard'. If you think it means 'laborious', or its cousin 'tedious', you're going to lose a lot of will power immediately. If, however, you can latch on to the alternative meaning, of 'muscular' or 'concentrated', you will be setting up a tough and clear-sighted attitude which will sponsor

enjoyment. All success requires care and industry: if you've picked up this book hoping for some smart alec way to by-pass necessary toil, you might as well put it down again right away. On the other hand, effort is not ultimately enough on its own: pleasure and enjoyment are vital ingredients too.*

I am assuming from the start that you are past the age of intellectual consent. For my purpose that is the same as the law prescribes in more physical matters: sixteen. Up to that age, in the United Kingdom at least, school is compulsory, and you may not have any choice about how you study and what. After sixteen, it is up to you. You can stay on to do A-Levels, go beyond those to a degree or diploma course, or take up a course after years away from study. Since it is just stupid to go on doing something you really dislike, I further assume that you are more or less pleased to be doing the course you've chosen. If you're not, this book can I hope still help you. But some kind of motivation is necessary, even if it's only the pleasure of looking forward to when you stop!

To help you work out your own attitude in more detail, here are four caricatures of 'student types'. They are meant to amuse; but I can assure you that any teacher (and most students) will have encountered them all at some time.

THE WOULD-BE STUDENT

Would-Be Students like the *idea* of studying rather than the *fact*. Like the person who fantasizes about being a concert pianist, but never practises, WBSes enjoy the prospect of success, plan the way they will use it, but find it extraordinarily irksome to get down to any work. They expect the teacher to do most of the work for them. Of course, they would be hurt, even angry, if it were put to them in this way. But it sums up their fundamental reliance on being served a regular diet of pre-digested information and opinion.

In schools this process is called 'spoon-feeding' and is regarded as a necessary evil. Authentic WBSes go further: they expect the teacher to pre-chew the stuff for them. Or, put another way: the WBS is a sponge. S/he finds remarkable any suggestion that it is necessary to think rather than merely absorb.

WBSes are also hostile to exams, condemning them as unfair and evil. They constantly search for tricks with which to outsmart the system. By the time the exam is imminent, they have bought their own body-weight in those dismal 'Study Aids' which now infest the market.* Saddest of all, the WBS expends formidable energy finding excuses not to work. These are often brilliantly ingenious: one marvels at them, but also wonders what might have been achieved if their inventor had devoted the energy to doing the work.

THE EARNEST STUDENT

The Earnest Student is all mouth and notebooks. ESes cannot for the life of them find anything in the classroom or at their desk remotely amusing: ESes want to work, not take part in some comedy show, and anything as trivial as a joke wastes their time. ES doesn't approve of a light-hearted approach from the teacher; to ES, Teacher is God Almighty—until His fallibility is exposed. He then becomes a liability, if not a menace.

ESes are fascist, in the strict sense of that word: they expect Authority to be right, and right in a watertight fashion. ESes don't like discussion or argument: these are either time-wasting or a fatal sign of ignorance and uncertainty. ES demands that everything be Relevant: all things not of direct and immediate benefit to one's current studies are mere chaff. In addition, ES is also a towering snob, especially if engaged on an

*For further thoughts on this question of 'work' versus 'pleasure', see Preface to this edition.

The Would-Be Student

The Earnest Student

Arts course. Shakespeare is a Good Thing; stylish light fiction won't do at all. Beethoven Rules OK; the Rolling Stones are repellently noisy ageing yobs, and as for Jazz…BBC-TV is properly serious; ITV and Sky are cheap and nasty. And if a passage has 'George Eliot' printed beneath it, it will be very fine; should the name 'Dick Francis' appear instead, it will be escapist rubbish. Naturally, no scrutiny of the text itself will be required.

ESes may be able, or they may not. They may be vocal and aggressive, or they may sit in Olympian silence. Whatever their personality and talent, however, ESes are absolutely clear about one thing, thank you very much: Study Is a Serious Business. There is no time for humour, digression, scepticism, tolerance of the non-serious, tolerance of most kinds, in fact. ESes expect to end up knowing all the answers: they are not remotely interested in the questions.

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*If interested in my further thoughts on the matter of Study Aids, you might like to consult Chapter 6, pp. 92–5.

THE LUCKY STUDENT

At school, Lucky Students are often known as 'swots'. They find it hard to understand why they attract envy and ridicule. They simply like working. LSes read voraciously and enjoy lessons, even when they are apparently boring. Eventually the hostility ceases, even if the jealousy remains, for LSes are cheerful and at one with themselves and their work, so that they disarm criticism.

LSes do not always triumph. It is unlikely that such natural workers will do badly very often, but they have their difficulties and failures like everyone else. Nor are LSes necessarily 'gifted' or bright: they will however *become* brighter through their commitment to work, for quantity changes quality. Their 'luck' is the luck of anyone fortunate enough to find an activity they love.

And if you *are* an LS, you don't need this book or any other kind of artificial aid: you've got quite enough advantages already!

THE ADMIRABLE STUDENT

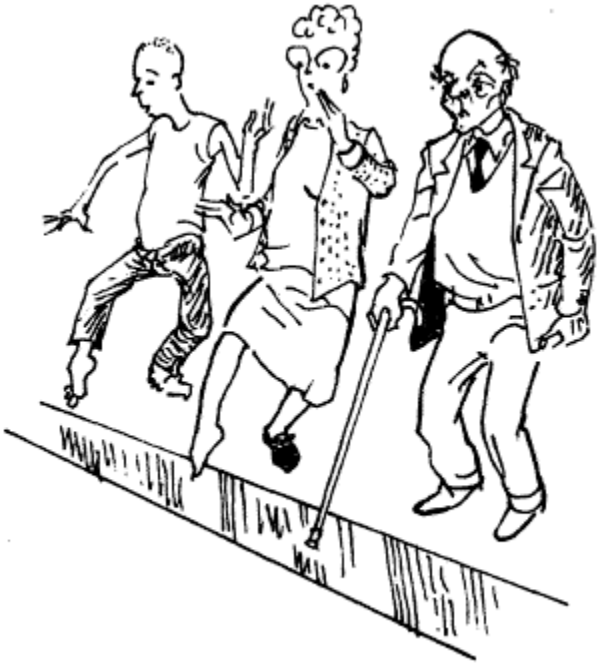
Admirable Students are not paragons. They get fed up and bored with study sometimes, and have periods of total lethargy. But this is entirely normal, and they know that and refuse to worry about it. Essentially, however, AS wants to learn, and is prepared to work at doing so. In no way should s/he be confused with the Earnest Student, who no matter how diligent expects merely to be *taught*. ASes are unsolemn and open: they study because they like their subject.

ASes accept that what they are asked to read and listen to is worth taking seriously, but they are not unquestioningly reverent. If something jars on them, they will say so. ASes prefer to be delighted and impressed, but their minds are not closed to the much under-rated pleasures of destructive criticism. ASes are humorous, and find laughter and even the occasional silliness an important ingredient of their enjoyment of study.

Most important of all, ASes are humble. (This is not to be confused with modest.) They are neither afraid to be wrong nor determined to be serious all the time: they know that the brain must have its periods of rest and moments of sheer laziness. ASes do not worship their study at a shrine, but live with it as an intimate pleasure. At best, they retain that quality of wonder that characterizes the child: they love their subject, and particularly relish the sense of their own progress and understanding. ASes at their most impressive closely resemble Benjamin Franklin's ideal of 'the wise innocent'.

Well, which type are you? In fact, most students contrive to be all four types at different times: I know that *I* have. The obvious point to make is that the Would-Be Student and the Earnest Student are invariably unsuccessful students, while the Lucky and Admirable Students usually prevail with some distinction. And the single biggest difference between the two pairs is the ingredient I have termed 'fun'. WBSes, underneath whatever surface liveliness they may show, find work boring and unsatisfying, while ESes are so solemnly determined to improve themselves that they forfeit all possibility of actual pleasure from the beginning. LSes and ASes, on the other hand, enjoy what they do. Underpinning all their industry, concentration, frustrations and disappointments, they believe that study, like life itself, is in the last analysis a pleasure.

The four 'portraits' above were written in 1983. I believe they stand up well, otherwise I'd have altered or omitted them. However, this chapter would not now be complete without a look at three further types of student. These are not so much caricatures as thumbnail sketches designed to be illuminating and helpful; I would stress again the central importance of pleasure, and of the principle outlined in my Preface to the Second edition—you are in charge.



The Returning Student: a momentous step

THE RETURNING STUDENT

Nowadays more and more people return to study after an absence of many years—out of necessity, vocational impetus, or sheer desire and interest. The original godsend for such students was the Open University, whose foundation Harold Wilson considered the greatest achievement of his 1964–70 Labour Government. Over a quarter of a century on, the OU's pioneering example has been followed by the majority of tertiary institutions; there is a thriving nationwide 'University of the Third Age' for retired people; more and more graduates are returning to study part-time for further degrees; and so on. This proliferation seems to me cause for unambiguous celebration; nevertheless, although such familiarity does not breed contempt, it may encourage the idea that a return to study is an easier and more comfortable matter than it used to be. Not so:

> **The Returning Student may be a far commoner 'type' than was the case a generation ago, but that does not mean the step is any less momentous or nerve-wracking.**
>
> **The Returning Student: a momentous step**

If my experience as a teacher for the OU and elsewhere is anything to go by, the RS is almost invariably humble—sometimes excessively so. To begin any new course has its daunting side, whoever one is; to do so after many years away from such a world seems forbidding indeed. Returning Students feel 'rusty', naturally enough; that can all too easily lead them to feel that they are out of touch, technically deficient, ignorant, or all three. Presumably those are not their sole or even chief feelings, or they'd have abandoned

the whole thing already. But it's a most unusual RS who does not harbour at least a residual sense of such doubts and fears.

If *you* are a Returning Student, you almost certainly possess three major strengths, which you should bear centrally in mind:

1. You're doing your course because—above all else—you want to. There is no substitute for such 'hunger', and just like literal hunger, satisfying it brings immediate satisfaction and pleasure.
2. However diffident you feel returning to the world of books and essays, **you know a great deal**—through having left home and learning to cope with independence, the work you do and the jobs you've had, your experience as a parent and/or partner, and simply by virtue of having lived longer than a 'normal' undergraduate. I detest the term 'The University Of Life',* but it does suggest, rightly, that there are other ways to learn and acquire knowledge and wisdom than academic ones. That knowledge will in all probability be directly valuable.
3. Almost certainly, you will have a clearer idea of why you've launched yourself on this new enterprise than your younger counterparts, many of whom come straight from school in almost conveyor-belt style and who, for all their undoubted intelligence, have not necessarily thought too searchingly about why they're doing what they've chosen. More than most students, in short, **you are in charge**.

I am aware that the single term Returning Student takes in a multitude of possible 'types'. It can describe the twenty-five-year-old returning to do an MA after a gap of three years, or the octogenarian opting for a non-vocational Local History course; the middle-aged housewife/house-husband who feels the need and has the freedom to do something more stimulating, or a person who through whatever circumstance had to leave school at sixteen (or younger) and who feels entitled to a second chance; the bereaved or the divorced, the bored or the hungry. No matter their variety, I hope the above sketch is both usefully informative and energizing. Nevertheless, two specific *kinds* of RS deserve a separate look.

THE DISTANCE LEARNER

Correspondence courses have been around for well over a century, but once again it was the Open University that gave them fresh impetus and genuine academic status, and again other institutions have followed suit.

Any DL who lasts the course (to coin a phrase!) for more than a few weeks is invariably well-motivated. My OU experience of such students includes a merchant seaman whose monthly assignments would arrive successively from Hong Kong, Cape Town, Buenos Aires, Seattle, and so forth, and a lady living in the North Orkneys who needed over twenty-four hours to get home from a Summer School in York! Both got distinctions—a tribute as much to their determination and powers of organization as to their intellect.

The chief problem for DL is of course isolation—including sheer loneliness. One of the great pleasures of being a student is the chance to discuss with your peers and teachers—both formally and informally— the things that you're learning and which exercise, stimulate or frustrate you. DLs are by definition denied that,

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*I detest it on two separate counts. First, it is almost always used by people both smug and defensive about their lack of formal education, in a manner designed to suggest that all such study is inferior to 'the real world'—another loathsome phrase! (That attitude is of course the furthest possible cry from that characterizing the RS.) Secondly, when enlarged into the phrase 'A Graduate of the University of Life', it is illiterate, indeed absurd. Graduates have, by definition, left university, so logic compels us to deduce mat the GUL is, in fact, *dead*!

The Distance Learner

apart from such lifelines as Summer or Day Schools (provided they can actually attend them). Nobody, least of all me, will make light of such deprivation. But DL has some surprising advantages too.

1 . The independence and strength of mind that are essential to survive such isolated study very often shine through in written argument. For in the absence of 'discussion' (which can be a distraction as well as a pleasure), that arguing is based on dedicated reading and research—which is *always* a private affairl, whoever and wherever you are.
2. You work when you want to, or when you can—which in the case of the determined DL amounts to the same thing. That means you are always fresh, or at least fully focused, when you address your tasks; it also means that you don't have to sit through lessons or lectures which are only marginally useful—and every teacher delivers those,
3. Books and every piece of back-up material—including radio and TV programmes—become your close friends rather than mere important adjuncts. That might sound a touch mawkish, but time and again I have been struck by how valuable to the DL is such a feeling of intimacy; moreover, that closeness virtually gurantees a degree of absorption and critical* response not easily achieved by DL's 'orthodox' counterpart.

In addition to those endemic strengths, recent developments in Information Technology and computer systems are greatly to the advantage of Open and Distance Learners. My friend and colleague Bob Eadie's observations in Chapter 11 on Electronic Mail and 'Newsgroups' should prove particularly helpful to the DL.

More than *any* other kind of student, DL is **in charge**. Isolation may bring its privations, but I hope and suspect that much of the advice and ideas this book contains are particularly suited to the person who is perforce self-reliant.

THE YOUNG MANAGER/PROFESSIONAL

It would be silly to suggest that this 'student type' has surfaced in the decade or so since I wrote the first edition; young managers and professionals have *always* needed to study, to be refresher-trained or in some cases radically *re*-tained. Nevertheless, programmes of study for them have increased considerably of late, or at the very least acquired a much higher profile. Part of this has to do with the computer revolution, Information Technology, and the related mushrooming of systems analysis and all that implies and involves; but it also reflects our current culture's emphasis on in-service training, vocational momentum and the acquisition of skills.†

YM/P students particularly interest me because, in contrast to the majority of the 'audience' I am assuming, their needs are unlikely to be primarily academic. This is not always so, naturally: plenty of young professionals decide or are advised to strengthen their CV and their expertise in the discipline they studied at university or college. But in the main it would seem that YM/P's needs are technical, practical and skills-based, with a notable stress on matters of *information supply* and *presentation.* I believe that'a good deal of my material can be of lasting value to such students; before I give chapter and verse on which sections they might profit from most, a word or two about YM/P's chief advantages—*and* the possible dangers that face them.

Young managers or professionals have a number of major strengths that are no less important for being obvious.

1. The very fact that they *are* young implies a prodigious energy and drive; it also means that their brains are at, or near, the peak of efficiency.*
2. Such people are clearly able, otherwise they wouldn't be where they already are. That should be remembered at all times—especially if and when the course-going gets tough—for it safeguards arguably the most important quality any student can have: justified confidence.

   They are also ambitious (in the best sense), which means they are eager to progress. I cannot think of a combination more likely to presage success than such an amalgam of **confidence** and **hunger**.
3. Unless they are very unlucky, they are unlikely to be sent on any course of study that wastes their time. Even the most benevolent firm or imaginative MD has no interest in throwing money away on enterprises that are useless or fail to deliver significant benefits! And if you *do* eventually encounter a course that makes you one of the unlucky ones, it can still be a useful learning experience: 'negative feedback' is as important to a young developing professional as it is to any other kind of student.

I talked just now of 'possible dangers', but in truth I can think of only one: **impatience**. Intriguingly, if this occurs it will probably be the negative expression of the strengths just logged, or the vice of those virtues.

Direct vocational relevance will invariably—and rightly—be the central criterion by which the ambitious YM/P judges any course of study s/he undertakes. Fine; but do not fall into the trap of emulating the **Earnest Student** caricatured above. A modicum of business-like abrasiveness is not only perfectly in order but a useful corrective to the excessive humility that, as noted, can characterize certain other Returning

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*In the best sense of that word. See Chapter 6 on Reading.

†Less kindly or positively, one might add that, given the transformation (i.e. disappearance) of the UK's traditional industrial base, plus the little matter of 2 millionplus unemployed, re-training, even unto fundamental re-education, has become an overwhelming economic and political imperative.

*See the next chapter, which addresses in some detail the properties of the brain and its astounding capacities.

Students. No student should meekly accept *chronic* irrelevance or woolliness, especially when being charged for the course! But once engaged on a programme of study, it's always sensible to see it as worthwhile in and of itself and to 'go with the flow' for a while. You will almost certainly find (if the course is any good) that apparent detours or side-issues turn out to be illuminating, enriching one's undertaking of mainstream material.

Besides, the *kind* of concerns that will exercise the YM/P are likely to be highly sophisticated, requiring lateral or divergent thinking as much as singly focused concentration. In addition, you will find such an approach more relaxing and more fun: this private pleasure will almost certainly sharpen the course's vocational value. And on a more utilitarian note, the more you get to know about *anything* that pertains, no matter how tenuously, to the world in which you work and the matters that draws upon, the more aware and **in charge** you will be. In this respect I am reminded of a remark made by Eddie 'Lockjaw' Davis, the magnificent tenor saxophonist chiefly renowned for his time with the Count Basic Orchestra. He chose to spend a period of his career away from the bandstand working as a booking agent and band manager When he later resumed playing, he maintained that his time away made him a better musician and a more fully rounded man, saying

The better he knows the product, the better the salesman.

The analogy is telling: the better you know your way around all possible aspects of the things that concern you professionally, the better you will 'sell' or manage them.

I would hope that the following sections will be of particular value to the YM/P: **Memory; Speed-Reading; Note-Taking; The Writing of Reports;** and of course all the material on **Computers** and **Word-Processors.**

You should now have a good idea of the kind of student you are or want to be. Attitude is very important, as is a degree of self-knowledge. But no matter how well-motivated you are, no matter how temperamentally suited to the activity of study, there is always that difficult time when you've got to start. It's time to have a look at the launching pad.

IGNITION
2

> A body continues in its state of rest or uniform motion unless acted upon by a net external force.
>
> *Isaac Newton*

At the beginning of Chapter 1 I listed ten activities which I always find difficult to begin. I also pointed out that, although they might be difficult to *start* doing, once they're under way they're not so bad. Just as a car requires more 'juice' to start it than keep it ticking over, so your brain and body need more impetus to begin a task than to continue it. Ignition in all things demands a lot of energy.
What I'm saying holds good for almost any activity, and there is a good scientific reason for it:

That which is inert wishes to remain so.

That is a simplified paraphrase of Newton's first Law of Motion quoted above. So is this next sentence, its natural converse:

That which is in motion will wish to remain so.

It's easy to prove the truth of these two principles. Imagine yourself (body-weight between, say 110–160 Ib) straining to shift a boulder weighing a quarter of a ton (560 Ib), in order to get it rolling down a hill. All your muscular effort will be expended on moving it the first few millimetres. Once you've created even a tiny degree of motion, the task becomes rapidly easier—until suddenly it will be quite impossible for those same muscles to halt the movement.

The human brain does not operate in quite the same way; but the brain, once started, works awesomely fast. (Yes, even yours!) Indeed, one way to ignite your study-energy is to remind yourself that you are the proud possessor of the most powerful and sophisticated machine that has yet appeared on earth: the human brain. Since it is so much easier to start a task if you feel confident about it, I am going to dwell for a few minutes on some of the amazing properties of that small chunk of grey matter between your ears. I want to show that, no matter how dozy or stupid you may feel, your real capacity is staggering!

The most sophisticated machine on earth – the brain

YOUR BRAIN: OR WHY YOU CAN LOOK DOWN ON COMPUTERS

The human brain weighs between 2.5 and 3 lb, and is made of microscopic cells. The first mind-blowing fact is:

> **It it were possible to unwind the brain's tissue into one single strand, it would stretch from here to the Moon and back: it would, that is, be half a million miles long.**

I can't grasp figures like that, beyond the vague realization that they're sensational. Still less can I cope with the two overwhelming sets of figures that are on page 16: but I can assure you that they are accurate even if you, like me, find it impossible to imagine them.

Let's brood on those figures for a moment. 10^{100} (a convenient way of expressing Fig. 2.1(a)) denotes the number of atoms in our universe. When you consider that your little finger contains several *billion* atoms, you may get a vague sense of just how many 10^{100} is. And now you can gape a little more knowledgeably at the concept of 10^{800}, which is the similarly convenient way of expressing Fig. 2.1(b). As the caption says, that's the number of interconnections and patterns that it is possible for you to make, using the ten billion (10 000 000 000) individual neurons of your brain. As Tony Buzan says: 'your mind is better than you think'.* It is certainly far superior overall to the most advanced computer yet built, or even planned.

I am not the Luddite the last sentence suggests. Computers are electronic, and the speed of the electrical impulse is about 100 miles per second—not quite the speed of light (186 000 miles per second) but still quite nippy. Now, the majority of human brain functions are chemical rather than electrical, and such impulses travel significantly slower—about 190mph (miles per *hour*). Sometimes brain-response is electrical. When a red-hot cinder flies towards your eye, or when a snake appears in your path, the primitive brain doesn't waste time asking the analytical mind what to do. It just does it, with the speed of instinct. Some sophisticated thought operates nearly as fast, especially when based on knowledge you are certain

*Buzan, T. (1971) *Use Your Head,* BBC, London, p. 13.

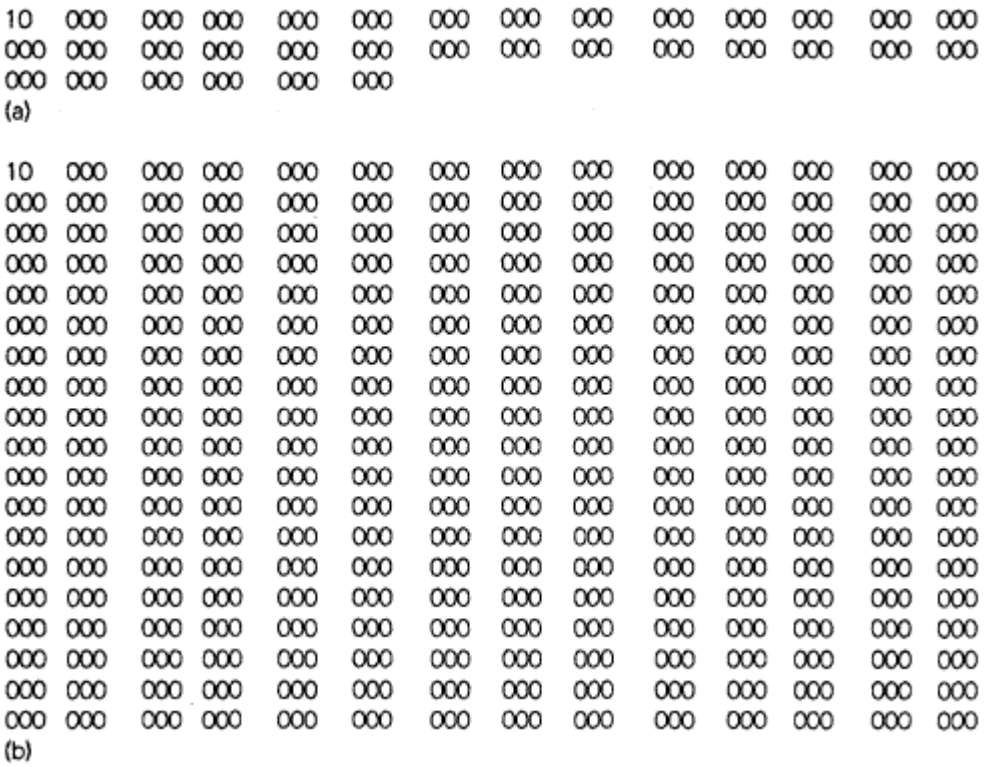

Fig. 2.1 (a) The number of atoms in our universe. (b) The number of interconnections one human brain can make.

about and have used often. But human thought is mainly a chemical process, and significantly slower than a computer. That is the strength of a computer; but it is also its limitation. No computer can *think* in fashion comparable with humans. It can perform feats of seemingly limitless recall; in the time it takes humans to blink, it can warn, solve, illuminate and confirm. But it cannot think creatively; it has no imagination. A computer, whatever winsome and amusing anecdotes one sees in futuristic films, has no personality whatever. (If any of you have seen a poem written by a computer, you'll know what I mean.)

Compared with a computer, the human mind is wonderful. Not only do you possess a most extraordinary machine behind your face; you have also a unique personality fashioned out of countless experiences, influences, feelings, desires, and thoughts. Bring that personality in to work for you. I don't mean that you should be self-conscious in the obstructive sense, smugly watching yourself 'working hard'; nor do I wish to preclude that marvellous experience we refer to as being 'quite lost' in an activity that grips us. But if you stay sensibly tuned-in to your reactions, thoughts and condition as you study, you will work more efficiently —and enjoyably—as a result. Polonius, the interfering and tragi-comic character in *Hamlet,* may be a pompous ass, but his remark 'To thine own self be true' is a wise policy for any student.

Right: now you know how clever you are, and what phenomenal resources you have at your disposal, you ought to be feeling more confident about getting down to work. But, even if your mind is now willing, how can you get your body to agree? How do you get off the sofa, out of bed, or away from the television, and to your desk?

'a small indulgence that you can look forward to at the end of your study period'

THE PLEASURES OF BRIBERY

It is now generally accepted that most students respond better to the carrot than to the stick; and this principle is very well worth extending to your *own* treatment of yourself. If you approach your desk feeling resentful about working, you've lost the battle before you've begun. Instead, set yourself a prize or small indulgence that you can look forward to at the end of your study period—a drink, a television programme you know you'll enjoy, anything you fancy. This makes the soundest sense, as well as being pleasant. Good work deserves some kind of reward, so get ready to spoil yourself in some small but merited fashion!

One study aid that I've come across refers to this practice under the heading of 'self-contracting', which is an unfortunate phrase more reminiscent of a drastic method devised by Weightwatchers than anything to do with study. But the underlying idea is sound. It proposes a bargaining process between your various, and conflicting, desires. To cite Isaac Newton again:

For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

It's not simply pleasant to look forward to a rest and a treat: it's as natural (and important) as breathing. If you adopt this rhythm as a matter of course, you will enjoy your study much more, as well as making it much easier to *start*.

HOW NOT TO BRIBE YOURSELF

Self-bribery is no good at all unless you are tough about it. It is only useful if the reward is *postponed*: enjoying the treat first as a way of getting yourself into a working frame of mind is invariably unsuccessful. Putting something off, as we all do, is an insidious process: the longer we leave a task, the more difficult it becomes to get round to it. So on no account allow your bribes to degenerate into excuses.

We are exceptionally good at finding excuses. It is an area where everyone is remarkably creative. And all serious students must be on their guard. If you really do feel ill or exhausted, then it is of course tupid to attempt any proper study. You need rest to fight whatever is ailing you; to put an extra burden on mind and

body at such a time would be unproductive. But don't kid yourself that you're ill if you're merely sluggish or fed up: that feeling will often evaporate as soon as you start working.

Similarly—and this is more important if less obvious—don't believe anyone who suggests that it's not worth working for less than an hour. As I'll be showing in Chapter 3, the brain's optimum span of concentration is between twenty and thirty-five minutes; and it is surprising just how much can be achieved in that time. It also explains why virtually all school timetables have been organized around a lesson-length of thirty to forty minutes over the last hundred years. Such a period matches the brain's natural activity.

Finally: don't spend too long *organizing* the bribe! The treat you plan for yourself is a trigger—something to fire you into working. If you day-dream in too much detail about what you'll be doing afterwards, you'll lose the impetus and be back where you started—doing nothing.

USING YOUR BRAIN'S NATURAL FACILITY

I've offered a few basic insights into the awesome instrument that is the human brain; more follow in subsequent chapters. But one is best mentioned immediately, although it is fully developed in Chapter 4 on Memory. It concerns the brain's remarkable elasticity, and in particular its ability to do several things at once.

There follows a slightly edited version of a long and concerned speech delivered by the schoolmaster Bartle Massey in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*. The passage first appeared in 1859, but in view of its astoníshing prescience in matters now known as Study Skills, it is worth bearing in mind that it is actually set in the year 1799. The italics are my own.

> You want to learn accounts; that's well and good. But you think all you need to do to learn accounts is to come to me and do sums for an hour or so, two or three times a week; and no sooner do you get your caps on and turn out of doors again, than you sweep the whole thing out of your mind. You go whistling about, and take no more *care* what you're thinking of than if your heads were gutters for any rubbish to swill through what happened to be in the way; and if you get a good notion in 'em, it's pretty soon washed out again. You think knowledge is to be got cheap; but it isn't to be got with paying sixpence, let me tell you: if you're to know figures, you must turn 'em over in your own heads, and keep your thoughts fixed on 'em. *There's nothing you can't turn into a sum, for there's nothing but what's got a number in it*. A man that had got his heart in learning figures would make sums for himself, and work 'em in his head; when he sat at his shoemaking, he'd count his stitches by fives, and then put a price on his stitches, say have a farthing, and then ask himself how much money he could get in an hour; and then ask himself how much money he'd get in a day at that rate, and then how much money ten workmen would get working three, or twenty, or a hundred years at that rate—and *all the while his needle would be going just as fast as if he left his head empty for the devil to dance in*.
>
> And the long and the short of this is—I'll have nobody in my night-school that doesn't strive to learn what he comes to learn, as hard as if he was striving to get out of a dark hole into broad daylight. I'll send no man away because he's stupid; but *I'll not throw away good knowledge on people who think they can get it by the sixpenn'orth, and carry it away with them as they would an ounce of snuff. So never come to me again, if you can't show that you've been working with your own heads, instead of thinking you can pay mine to work for you.*

Set nearly two hundred years ago, that stern but witty lecture is almost identical in ethos and advice to contemporary educational thinking and the latest Quality of Learning initiatives. Bartle Massey articulates three principles of fundamental importance and value to all students from thirteen upwards (if not even younger):

1. If you're going to be any good at anything—of which study is merely one example—you've got to *care* about it.
2. No matter how masterly and inspiring a teacher may be, s/he can only do *some* of the work—less than half. The major part has to come from you.
3. The brain is multi-active. 'Single-minded' may be a good dutiful metaphor, but in human beings it is hardly ever physically true or even literally possible. The brain is staggeringly elastic and versatile, able to do a number of things well at the same time. *Use* that facility: you can, in an oblique way, study productively while also engaged upon something apparently quite different.

SUMMARY

You can, then, do a good deal to get yourself started. You can take comfort in the knowledge that *all* of us find it difficult to begin virtually everything. You can cheer yourself up by remembering that your brain is the greatest instrument yet devised by nature or by man. You can further increase your confidence by regarding your personality as a strength, as a powerful force that will help you to understand and master whatever it is you need to learn. You can make all sorts of agreeable deals with yourself to ensure that each time you work there beckons some delightful indulgence to lighten your way. And you can take immense encouragement—and make significant progress—from the brain's ability to study for you when you're away from your desk and giving your main attention to other things. There are, in short, at least five good ways to bring your horse to water.

Mind you, as the proverb goes on to say, the rest is up to the horse/student! Nobody can make you study, not even you yourself, unless you want to—which is perhaps the biggest and most decisive point in Bartle Massey's lecture. Since, however, there's not much point in organizing yourself intelligently unless you *do* want to study, I will take it that it is now time to look in detail at how best to continue. You've reached the starting-blocks: how can you most efficiently plan the race?

LIFT-OFF
3

We are wiser than we know.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

You have ignition. The brain has fired: its energy is compellingly available. It needs to be harnessed, however. What are you going to *do* with all this power? Where do you want to go? And what's the best way of getting there?

There are probably as many answers to those questions as there are students. But there are all sorts of ways in which you can help yourself to use that formidable energy sensibly and profitably, and this chapter addresses about a dozen of them. If they have a common theme, it is the one with which I began: **you are in charge.** It is *you* who usually knows best what suits you, what's happening to you, what you need, and what you enjoy. Indeed, we can elevate that into a governìng principle:

> **No matter who you are—what age, background, gender and so on —there is one thing on which you are the world's leading expert: *you*. You may feel you're inexperienced, know virtually nothing about the subject you're about to study, and that your teachers not only know much more but also know best Most of that may well be true; but *nobody* knows you better than you do, and never forget that.**

I am not encouraging you to be smugly contained, ignoring all advice: if I were, there wouldn't be much point in my writing this book! But study is an intense activity, even stressful at times, and you won't get far if you adopt practices that are uncomfortable and alien. So my first advice has to be:

1.
DISCOVER YOUR OWN BEST METHOD OF WORKING

In schools especially much rubbish is talked about the best working methods. Anyone who says to you, 'The way to work is this, and only this' or words to that effect is a fool, and thus a very dangerous guide. There are as many *ways* of working successfully as they are *people* who work successfully. If you feel you work best lying on a large cabinet freezer listening to Cliff Richard while drinking Ribena-and-soda, I might say you were pretty odd, but I wouldn't say you were 'wrong'. After all, nobody but you is doing the work: it follows that nobody but you is fully qualified to tell you how to go about it. So find your best method. Not your teacher's; not your friends'; *yours*. And stick to it for as long as it goes on succeeding.

The principle I've just outlined is fundamental, but it is also necessarily general, even a little vague. The next four 'tips' seek to put flesh on the skeleton.

2.
BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF, BUT NOT PURITANICAL

Many students mistakenly imagine that working requires a Spartan environment and attitude. If such an ambience genuinely suits you, fine. But if it doesn't, there is no value in depriving yourself of pleasant working conditions simply because you feel it is 'right' to do so: indeed, it is positively unwise to adopt such a practice. Part of you will be tense and resistant as a result, which will interfere with your concentration.

Therefore, if you like working to music, then work to music, and tell those who nag you critically about it to do something difficult and dangerous with their hair shirt. If, on the other hand, it *is* a distraction, then stop conning yourself and turn it off. Stick to your guns by all means, but only if they're shooting straight! A brief anecdote illustrates both sides of this argument very well.

My father likes silence when he's working, as it suits his temperament and his formidable powers of concentration. In my early teens, however, I discovered that I need to control my aural environment,* and used music to do so, as I still do. Dad and I used to argue heatedly about this when I was at school; now we realize that each way works for each of us. We're *both* 'right'—and we'd both be 'wrong' if we assumed our way to be the *only* way.

Similarly, if you smoke, and enjoy it (and what other reason can there possibly be?!), then smoke if it helps. A solemn determination to abstain from cigarettes is a good idea only if it helps you work. Any other reason is that of a phoney saint, and work requires enough effort without creating extra problems. Of course, smoking does carry a major health risk, but that is a separate issue from 'how to work'. The real point is that you should be natural and comfortable when working.

Identical considerations apply to any wish for a cup of coffee or a stronger drink: if you want one, have one. Of course, it makes no sense to work in the condition sometimes referred to as 'tired and emotional', but a judicious amount of alcohol may assist you. Alcohol relaxes the nervous system, and thus can increase your sense of well-being and enjoyment. As with all these things, the key criterion is your awareness of yourself: if even the slightest suspicion of booze in your system renders you mentally chaotic, then put that bottle down at once!

3.
LEARN TO BE SELFISH

That looks a contentious piece of advice, even a disagreeable one. I'm not seeking to turn you into a raving egoist inhabiting a universe of one, nor am I advocating self-righteous confrontation. But I have long been struck by Oscar Wilde's observation that our crowded and complex society gives rise to 'the sordid necessity of living for others' and his converse suggestion that the only immoral kind of selfishness is not

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*Not only does silence distract me (I've never been able to work for any length of time in a library, for example): in my experience *true* silence is extremely rare. Dogs bark, children play, cars drive past and aeroplanes fly overhead: music helps to shut out those sudden and frequent sounds that are beyond my control. Besides, it makes me happy and thus increases both my pleasure and my energy—excellent bonuses when working!

that of doing as you want, but of expecting everyone else to live and act as you do. These ideas are worth exploring, for they are particularly relevant to anyone undertaking a course of study.

All human beings are selfish. What Freud termed The Pleasure Principle is basic to our nature: it is the desire to do what we want to do, and to avoid what we don't want to do. It is as silly to find this immoral as it is to call a cobra evil because it is venomous, or a shark wicked because it is a voracious and mindless feeder. All these things are fundamental to the creatures' make-up; and it makes about as much sense to feel *guilty* about being selfish as it would to blame the rain for being wet or the fire for being hot!

Study is a selfish activity. However supremely organized you and your family are, they are going to have to make adjustments and sacrifices in order for you to succeed. I am not suggesting that you adopt an attitude that is cavalier and insensitive, such as 'like it or lump it': that is Wilde's second point. But you will have less time for certain things that used to be a part of your life before you started the course, and it's silly to imagine that you can somehow expand your day to fit such things in *somewhere*. As well as the time consumed by your study, other circumstances or conditions will probably require adjustment. I said at the start of this chapter that it is essential to find your own best method of working and stick to it; and that means that you can't afford to consider everyone else's needs. If you need silence, find it. If you need space, locate some. I realize that this is extremely hard for, say, a home-based student with two small children, and I wouldn't dream of making light of such problems. Nevertheless if you simply decide to give in and 'make the best of a bad job', that is *exactly* what you'll do: a bad job. All good workers, like all good practitioners of anything, must finally be selfish. The number of people who have triumphed at an activity through sheer altruism can probably be counted on the fingers of one foot.

The next section develops the previous two, or rather re-visits them from the point of view of younger students still living at home with their parents. If you do not fall into that category, you may care to skip it, although I hope you might find some of the observations amusing and useful.

4.
THE PROBLEM OF PARENTS, AND THE LIMITATION OF 'HARD WORK'

If you are a GCSE or an A-Level student, you already know a great deal about pressure. In these days of League Tables, fierce competition for UCAS places, and the ever-increasing importance of grades and certificates, young people are obliged to work in a hot-house atmosphere immeasurably more intense than was the case a generation ago. It's not *all* bad news: most of the courses are more interesting than they were thirty years ago; they do not hinge entirely upon one-off examinations; and specialization occurs later than it used to, giving your education a broader and sounder base. But as you are doubtless aware, your work starts to matter in a long-term way very early, which can make large demands on your character as well as on your intellect. It's tough enough to cope with your own anxiety; what do you do when that's augmented by your parents'?

At one point in *The Catcher in the Rye*, J.D.Salinger's classic novel exploring adolescence, narrator Holden Caulfield remarks:

Mothers are all slightly insane.

Lest I be accused of sexism, let me extend that observation to fathers too! And at no time is such parental insanity more evident than in the Christmas and Easter holidays of an exam year, featuring regular homilies on the need to revise for hours on end and other alleged wisdom. I'll be addressing the specific matter of revision in Part Three on **Examinations;** what I'll say here is that the *worst* way to do it—and indeed do any kind of work, at whatever stage of your course—is to sit in your room for eight hours a day doggedly

'Mothers are all slightly insane'

'working'. Many parents insist on this, or try to, thinking it's the only way you can improve. In fact, this is very poor practice which not only will not advance you but will probably drive you *backwards*.

The limitations of 'hard work'

In the Preface I implied a distinction between working *hard* and working *well* which is crucial here. Most Western nations are thoroughly familiar with the Protestant Work Ethic. Indeed, I sometimes think that our own time has taken it further, creating an 'Overwork Culture': I know of no educational institution that does not trumpet the virtues of effort and hard work. Now, I'm not saying that this is wrong. Nobody has ever achieved anything without a great deal of industry, and any approach that is lazy or amateurish is doomed. But quantity isn't everything, and if you imagine that you are working 'well' simply because you're spending a long time on it, it is probable that you're deluding yourself. And any parent who takes the same view is merely compounding the problem.

It is, naturally, very difficult to countermand such parental ideas and orders. Your whole family will be aware of how important it is for you to get good results, and there's the additional pressure of the many sacrifices parents make in order to ensure the best possible opportunities for you. Even the fact that they love you—hence their concern— can be a source of pressure as well as warming comfort. But at bottom, as noted already, you've got to trust *your* methods and work-rhythms, nobody else's. Naturally you should listen to parental and teacher advice, but in the end you must obey your own instincts and what you know works.

With all that partly in mind, it is time to take a further look at the way the brain actually works, in contrast to how some parents imagine you should work. If the first such focus seems decidedly negative, that is because one of the secrets of successful study is knowing what *not* to do.

5.
IF YOU GET BORED WITH SOMETHING, THEN STOP

The human brain is no fool. If it gets fed up, there's usually a good reason; and if it gets fed up during study, it's telling you it needs a change. Boredom is a *positive* message. Nobody performs well when bored —a fact that unites cooks, footballers, interior decorators, astronauts and gigolos. So if you feel suddenly bored, two possibilities suggest themselves: either it's the work's fault, or yours. If it is your fault, then *do* something about it—stop day-dreaming, start concentrating properly, and so on. If it's the work's fault, then shelve it, and find something else to do until you can return refreshed to the original task.

As I said on the very first page, there's no point in pretending that study does not involve hard work; and it is inevitable that at times your work will seem joyless and a mere grind. Any area of study, however fascinating and pleasurable in overall terms, will include some dull parts. It is not dangerously exciting, for example, to learn those French verbs which take *être* in the perfect tense rather than *avoir;* but you can't write, or read, 'decent' French without knowing the rules. So it has to be learnt. Similarly, very few pianists faint with delight while playing scales; but without such creative discipline, they are lost, and will be incapable of interpreting Chopin, say, with beauty and authority, because they can't actually play the notes.

Given this, the only recourse is to wait until you're in shape to tackle those necessary tasks. Naturally, if we wait *too* long, everything evaporates; so a certain toughness will be needed. That is true of all disciplines, physical or mental: the secret is to do it when you're best fitted. It's also worth while trying to enjoy it—if not for its own sake, then as a foundation for the genuinely enjoyable things it will enable you to do.

INTERIM SUMMARY

Although I have attempted to make those first five 'tips' increasingly specific, they have all addressed fundamental issues of attitude and approach. It is now time to look in close detail at how to acquire arguably the most important skill an independent student can possess:

Effective time-management.

6.
MANAGE YOUR TIME

An overall strategy

Since I'm talking here about private study, it may seem perverse to refer at once to something as obviously public as the school timetable. But that mundane structure provides several valuable clues as to how best to organize your time away from the classroom and the lecture hall.

If you were to get hold of a standard secondary school timetable from a hundred years ago, it would strike you almost as does an unknown foreign language. There would be no History, no Geography, no

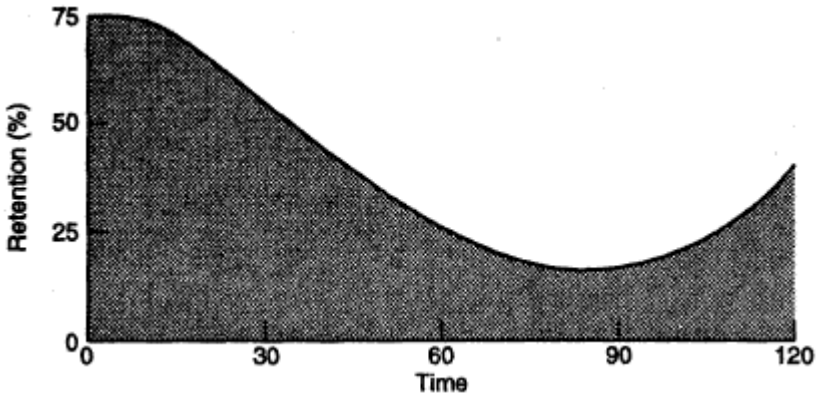


Fig. 3.1 Probable retention/efficiency over an unbroken 2-hour period.

Economics; there would be no English either, for the subject was not taught then as such, and there were no university English Departments until after the First World War. You might find Science in some form, though certainly not itemized as Physics, Chemistry and Biology, and needless to say you would search in vain for Electronics, Computer Science and Information Technology! Modern Languages would probably be there, but the overwhelming emphasis would be on Classics and Mathematics.

While struggling to take in this alien picture, however, your brain might become aware of an almost weirdly familiar item. For although the **curriculum** of a hundred years ago might be unrecognizable, the **length of the lesson won't be:** that has hardly changed at all. Lessons averaged thirty-five to forty minutes in 1900, and it very much looks as if they still will in 2000. Why might that be so?

In the past two decades a lot of research as been done on the brain's ability to retain things. Admirable though these neurological discoveries have been, one or two have merely confirmed what our supposedly more ignorant predecessors already knew from experience rather than tell us anything truly new. Working educationalists have known for ages about 'optimum concentration spans' and the brain's 'cognitive capacity' even if they used different, simpler terms. The school timetable proves it, organized as it has been for over a century on the empirical observation that

The brain's optimum concentration span is 20–35 minutes.

That is not, I admit, a strictly scientific truth, nor is it a *constant,* as we shall be seeing shortly. But at the very least it is an immensely useful rule of thumb that every student should memorize, especially when it comes to organizing an evening's work.

Let us assume you plan to work for about two hours. Let us further assume that you are in good shape for the task—fed and refreshed, alert and reasonably enthusiastic about what you're about to tackle. And let us finally assume that as a good dutiful and industrious student, you then work for two hours at a stretch, with no breaks, changes of task or focus. If you consult Fig. 3.1, you will see in graph form a profile of your likely progress and in-take during that time. The main features of that diagram are obvious enough. Retention is high for about thirty minutes, declines steadily thereafter, and rises significantly towards the end. (Incidentally, in the case of a predominantly written task rather than an absorptive one, 'Efficiency' can be substituted for 'Retention'.)

If we translate that into your likely experience and behaviour during that imagined two-hour stretch, the diagram stands up very well. Fresh and keyed-up, you will find that your energy will last for quite a while; after thirty to forty minutes, however, you will probably start to feel restless and a little tired. Dutifully ignoring such symptoms, you increase your effort and plough on; perhaps you notice—with some dismay—that those feelings of restlessness and fatigue are increasing. Nevertheless, towards the end of the second hour you realize that you'll soon be entitled to take a good rest and, somewhat paradoxically, this fires your brain with new energy and focus. Indeed, the extra 'juice' this supplies may well take you slightly beyond the two-hour mark, leaving you feeling rather pleased with yourself.

But you should not be all *that* pleased; in fact, if you're at all intelligent and eager to do well, you're likely on reflection to feel aggrieved and frankly fed up. For about 50% of your working period—the second and third half-hours —you've been operating at a Retention/Efficiency rate never higher than 40% and sometimes below 25%. That may not be a complete waste, but it's not very satisfactory. It is even less satisfactory when you realize that a good deal of that particular hour's work will have to be done again.

Educational research—on this occasion in conjunction with and mirroring common sense—does however offer some *nice* surprises as well. The interesting, and most encouraging, thing about Fig. 3.1 is that the curve it describes tends to remain roughly the same *whatever the span of the horizontal axis*. Moreover, that last sentence describes what is sometimes referred to as 'a worst possible scenario': from experience—my own and many others'—I would argue that if you divide your work-time into shorter, more 'natural' chunks, there is every chance that the retention curve will describe a more heartening rate of retention. With those things in mind, let us re-design your two hours.

Instead of that dutiful monolithic 120-minute slog, why not divide the time into four sections of twenty-five to thirty minutes, in keeping with those timetable rhythms? Furthermore, why not take a five-minute break at the end of each one? There are very good practical reasons for doing that which I'll go into shortly, but for now just look on it as a minor indulgence!

Your time and performance can now be plotted in the way shown in Fig. 3.2—and, to repeat, in all likelihood that diagram describes the *least* you will achieve, not the most. You will see, I hope, that the *aggregate-retention* you manage with this system is notably higher than it was during the single two-hour session.

Moreover, there are a number of other advantages to this method which are implicit in Fig. 3.2 rather than self-evident.

1. By dividing your time, you increase your sense of *control* over the material which…
2. …in turn gives your confidence a valuable boost.
3. During that five-minute break after each session, your mind will be 'ticking over' with a clear idea of what it's done and what it's learnt. As you make your cup of coffee, take a stroll round the room, put on a new record, or whatever, your mind will automatically review and sift its recent activity *without any conscious effort on your part.* When you restart, sensibly refreshed, there will be added energy for the next half-hour stint.

   Sometimes that restart is characterized by an especially pleasing phenomenon…
4. …As noted, during your five-minute 'turn-off', your brain keeps working automatically. As a result of such unconscious work, something which was troubling you at the half-hour's end may suddenly become clear. Needless to say, such a happy step forward will boost both confidence and energy.

There are two further things to say concerning Fig. 3.2. One is that it underlines a point made towards the end of the previous chapter—that it is *always* worthwhile to work for just half an hour. Although it is

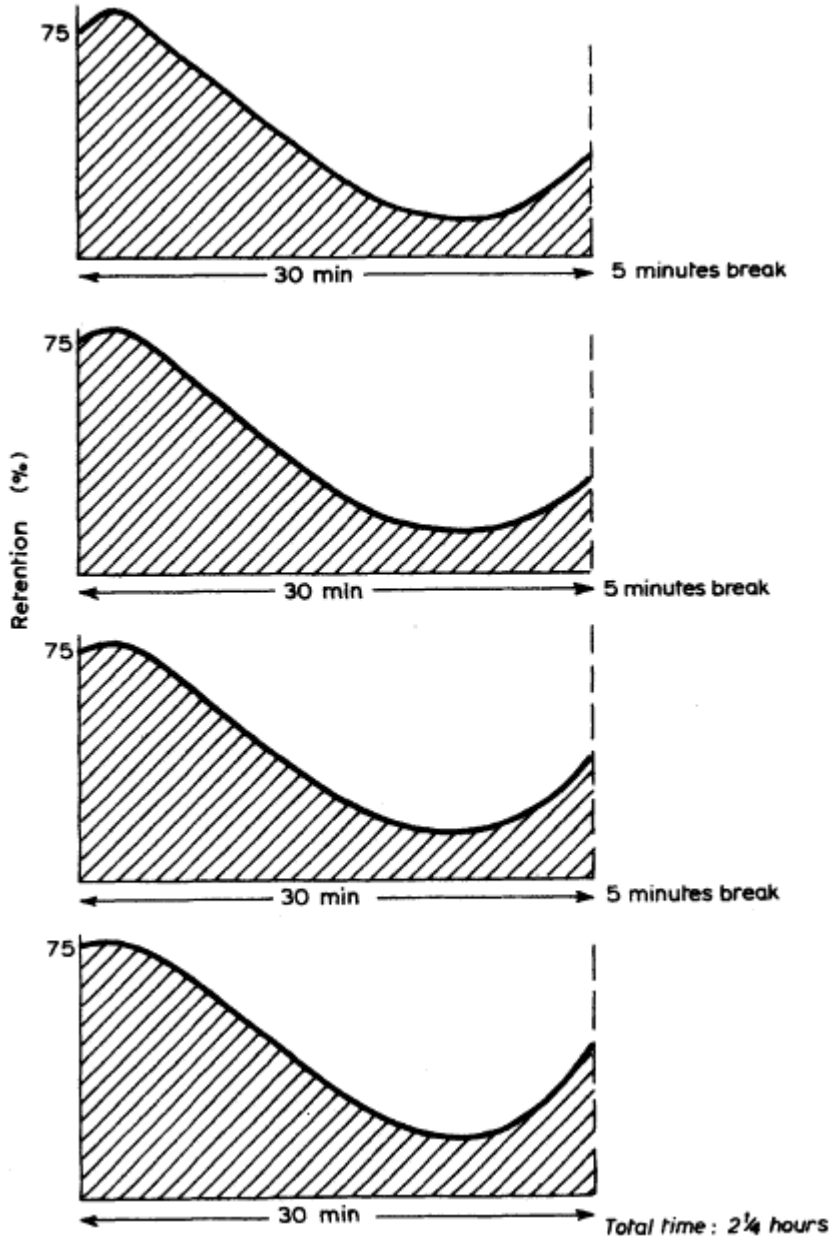


Fig. 3.2 How much the brain can retain after short breaks.

doubtless more convenient to have a longer chunk of time, it is not always available, and it is certainly not essential. It can be very irritating to have to stop working and attend to something else, but such a reaction is an encouraging one, for your annoyance at breaking off suggests that you are enjoying yourself. Ideally we

would all like to be able to work for as long as we *like*—no more, no less; given that this is not always possible, I think it is better to stop while you're enjoying it than to labour on joylessly to 'the bitter end'. One of show business's more celebrated mottoes is 'Always leave them wanting more': the same is true of your study periods.

My final focus in this section is that up-swing of energy towards the end of any working session, as logged on both Figs 3.1 and 3.2. Just to persuade you that it *is* a genuine phenomenon rather than a convenient fiction I've invented, think back to an average school lesson when you were, say, thirteen. As covered above, it doesn't matter how old or young you are now: that lesson lasted thirty-five to forty minutes. Or rather, it was *scheduled* for that period of time, but in reality, as every teacher and school-child knows, the first five minutes were spent getting everyone into place—including the teacher! —and generally settling down.

Then work commenced. We will cheerfully assume that work continued at a fairly even pace for most of the remaining time. It is likely, though, that the class (and possibly the teacher too) started to feel a little jaded at the twenty-five minute mark, only to finish strongly as the prospect of the bell loomed nearer. Often lessons over-ran because of this final upswing of energy; moreover, children who ten minutes before were feeling the strain, or who had simply 'turned off', suddenly find all sorts of things to say and ask about as the teacher prepares to leave the room.

You will of course have noticed that the pattern I've just described is virtually identical to the rhythm of the half-hour study period described earlier. The clue to why this upswing happens so often—and so productively—is to be found in a phrase I've just used, **to finish strongly**. That has an athletic resonance that is wholly appropriate, as I will now demonstrate with an analogy.

This book is published in 1996—an Olympic Year. In the men's 10 000 metres final (which comprises twenty-five 400-metre laps), the athletes will cover the first twenty-four laps at around 67 seconds per lap; maybe those down the field will be a little slower, but this *is* the final, and there are unlikely to be many passengers. **They will then cover the last lap in around 50–52 seconds—a staggering achievement after such a punishing prelude, the more so when one remembers that the World Record for 400 metres (i.e. one lap when fresh) is less than ten seconds fewer, at 43.5. How is this possible?**

Well, they're very fit, of course! Secondly—for the winner and medal-chasers at least—fame and money beckon, and of course the heady prospect of *winning,* which carries its own self-contained triumph and can therefore fire one up to feats that might not normally be possible. But if you watch the event closely, you'll see that the runners who are not in medal contention still manage a startling burst of speed on that last lap. You might argue that they do so out of pride, and I wouldn't disagree. But I think the key reason—for *all* the athletes—is this:

The sooner they breast the tape, the sooner they can rest.

Even the fittest athlete will suffer a good deal during the race—breaking 'the pain barrier' and so on—and for that reason alone, ignoring more glamorous considerations, he will want the whole thing to be over as soon as possible, and treat himself to a long cooling drink and a thorough rest.

Study is rather less dramatic than an Olympic final, but the parallel is none the less close:

Whatever the activity, the prospect of stopping soon is almost always attractive, leading invariably to an increase in energy and concentration.

That enshrines the final reason for breaking your work up into smaller chunks: you will benefit each time from that closing upswing, heightening your retention and your sense of control and progress.

Devise a realistic timetable

Dividing your *time* into manageable chunks is only part of sensible study: you need to plan out the actual *tasks* as well. You can overdo this, naturally: a plan that rigidly accounts for every quarter of an hour is unsatisfactory, for it makes no allowance for discoveries made along the way, or for interesting and productive detours. But you can certainly construct a rough, overall timetable; and indeed you *should* do so.

Since the school timetable is one of the things most sixth-formers and undergraduates are glad to leave behind, I probably need to justify that last remark! Of course it is wonderful to say goodbye to a day of eight separate lessons, and an evening of three designated homeworks. But this agreeable departure brings with it new dangers. Sixth-formers are expected to organize their own work, and undergraduates even more so. One of the nicest consequences of this is that you can have more 'free' time than in the past. Unless you're careful, however, this time will be 'free' in the sense of 'empty'. That extra time in the timetable is part of the working week: it allows you to cover ground, explore topics, and extend your knowledge and technique. If you don't *use* this time, you will soon be badly behind, and unable to profit from the lessons you do receive. So don't despise the school timetable as something that is now beneath you. Instead, cling on to its basic principles like a limpet: they embody the soundest psychological truths.

The previous section suggests that for most students for most of the time, a span of thirty to forty minutes tends to be the most congenial and efficient. It makes a lot of sense, therefore, to go on using the principle of chopping up the day in the fashion you've now formally moved beyond. Work out what you've got to do over the next week, and divide it into chunks you can cope with. It's a good idea to write the tasks down and tick them off as you complete them, thus giving you an immediate record of achievement.

It is also important not to try to do too much, especially at first. I don't want to encourage laziness, but do make sure that the targets you set yourself are realistic. To take an absurd case: it would be insane to read Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (some 900 pages) in two hours. Less comic but no less impossible would be an attempt to master absolutely thirty pages of a closely argued textbook in the same time. You can certainly expect to acquire a healthy sense of the content, its main outlines and arguments; but it will be some time before all the material is there 'on tap' in your established, long-term memory. Total understanding is never immediate.

Like a lot of things, timetables are good servants but bad masters; the same is true for advice on work-rhythms, such as the concentration-span information I've been peddling. Yes, a weekly study timetable will certainly help you, as will the knowledge that you're likely to work best for a period of about half an hour. But those precepts should never govern you willy-nilly. There will be times when all such pre-planning goes out of the window—and they will tend to define two extremes:

(1) the Buzz Factor and (2) the Boredom Factor

The Buzz Factor is the nicest thing that can happen to a student. It occurs when you are so absorbed in your work that you lose all sense of time and all memory of other tasks to be done. In a way, that can cause problems—those other tasks will have to be postponed, and your timetable rescheduled. But if and when this happens, for goodness' sake **go with it:** the feeling of euphoria that carries you into an hour or an hour and a half's non-stop work is both delightful in itself and hugely productive. It may not happen too often,

and when it does it should be totally indulged. As a student of mine said recently after annotating Milton for over two hours without a break:

The yardstick is when work doesn't feel like work, but just something you really want to do.

As the opposite end of the spectrum, **The Boredom Factor** is just as crucial, albeit much less pleasant. I have addressed certain aspects of this in Section 5 above; here I want merely to urge you to be both realistic and mildly creative about it. If something that you've got to study really is boring you—and it will happen sometime, no matter who you are -then *accept* the fact. The first thing to do, as noted already, is to stop; the second, trickier thing is to plan out a special timetable and work-rhythm for the *next* time it's likely to occur. You should have a pretty good idea which tasks please you and which don't; when organizing the latter, it will prove helpful to do two things:

1. If expecting tedium, reduce your normal time-span.

Set yourself a ceiling of fifteen minutes. You may need two or three such periods, but that is much better than trying to do it all in one go in a mood of resentful drudgery.

2. If you can stand it, *start* any work session with the least attractive task on your list.

This is easier said than done: though I know it's a very sensible principle, I do not by any means always obey it myself. But do not follow my erratic example: try it, for it offers two pleasing benefits. First, it is good to get such things out of the way; secondly, it is then very nice to move on to something you enjoy more, and which in these particular circumstances you will probably do very well.

You will find further information and advice on devising your own timetable in Chapter 5 on **Review**. I end this section by suggesting that it is always worthwhile to do some pre-planning, to draw up lists of tasks and possible work-slots to fit them. It is entirely up to you how you do this, how often you adjust or indeed abandon them; to rephrase a principle recorded earlier, there are as many good ways of planning and managing one's work as there are successful students. Conversely, the absence of such scheduling can quickly lead the independent student into a lot of trouble. I will never forget a line uttered by that fine actor Robert Duvall in a (between you and me, pretty dire) film called *The Killer Elite:* I've cleaned it up a touch, but it remains highly instructive.

I believe in the 6P Principle:
Proper Planning Prevents Painfully Poor Performance.

7.
THINK OF YOUR BRAIN AS THE STRONGEST MUSCLE YOU POSSESS

This may be physiologically inaccurate, but it is an excellent metaphor. There are many parallels between the ways in which body and brain work. And there is no doubt that the mind and the muscles are alike in one central respect: they both work better when they're used regularly. When you begin a course, your mind will tire quickly. (This is especially true if, like many adult students, it is a considerable time since you last did any 'academic' work.) There is no need to be ashamed about this: on the contrary, recognize that the symptom is normal and healthy. Just as there are real medical dangers in pushing an unfit body too far, it is

unwise to flog a tired and gasping brain. It's not dangerous in the same way, of course; but it's doubly useless, in that such a brain will achieve very little, and that will depress you and create feelings of inadequacy (which, given the circumstances, are unjustified). However, the more you work, the more active your mind will be, just as your body, as it gets fitter, will be able to take more and more pushing. As I've pointed out, it's awe-inspiring how much the brain can do; so, while sticking to my earlier advice to take rests when you require them, I can also promise you that a fit brain has a stamina and invention that you need never underestimate.

8.
KEEP PHYSICALLY ALERT AS WELL AS MENTALLY AWARE

High on my list of people I'd like to reserve a cabin on the SS *Titanic* for are those posturing goons who talk of being 'in tune with your body', and extol the virtues of macro-biotic tomatoes and organically grown turnips. But a degree of intelligent physical awareness is important for any student. Thomas Aquinas once wrote:

Trust the authority of your senses.

It is excellent advice. We all have times when we feel stupid, sluggish or out-of-sorts. Equally, we can all be suddenly overcome with fatigue, when only ten minutes ago we were buzzing with energy. *Trust* these moments. Learn to recognize when to give yourself a much-needed kick, and also when to take necessary rest. There is no profit in either watching the day go by from the depths of an armchair, or in flogging yourself into some form of collapse; and your body will be aware of these states before your mind is.

Exercise is important too. The Romans coined a great truth when they defined health as *'Mens sane in corpora sano'* ('a healthy mind in a fit body'). If your muscles get slack and unused, eventually your mind will start to copy them. Nothing frantic or even athletic is required, whatever the notorious English Public School Code may say. But some kind of regular physical activity is an invaluable complement to intensive mental work. If you like paying squash, tennis, etc., well and good—provided it is safe for you to do so.* But if your ambitions are somewhat gentler, there are many small ways in which you can exercise. Walk to the corner shop rather than drive; run up the stairs two at a time instead of hobbling laboriously; clench and relax your muscles when stationary; you can even try sit-ups, toe-touching, and press-ups. (Appendix C lists some useful relaxation and everyday fitness exercises.)

Similarly, you can keep your mind in trim during non-study times with exercises that are also fun and relaxing. Crosswords are first class in this respect, as are all forms of puzzle and 'brain-teasers'. Reading a newspaper, listening to quiz shows, playing verbal games, and many other apparently light-hearted activities are equally useful as mental 'work-outs'.

9.
TAKE TIME OUT FOR REST AND RECUPERATION

All work and no play doesn't just make Jack a dull boy: it will make him a lousy student too. If you cast your mind back to the Earnest Student I sketched in the first chapter, you will remember that one of his

*If in any doubt about this, check with your doctor. I would not like to be accused of causing you cardiac arrest—especially in court.

basic flaws was an inability to relax or to regard study as fun. Such a person attempts to be too high-powered and solemnly committed *all the time*. This is neither necessary nor desirable. Nobody can be switched-on and continuously alert for sixteen hours of the day; so accept this as a comforting fact, and build rest into your programme.

We all have favourite ways of 'turning off'. My own is to watch junk television (of which there is a copious supply!). If you find yourself doing this for five hours a day, seven days a week, you are overdoing it! But everyone—especially those who spend a fair time each day concentrating fiercely on academic work—has the right and the need to be an idle moron for a small part of the day. It is of course up to you *what* you do. A delicious lazy soak in a bath may be just right; or a spot of gardening; or a gentle inconsequential stroll. Whatever it is, you'll know what best relaxes you and allows your brain to refresh itself for its next stint. You should both trust this knowledge and act on it.

One curious (but delightful) bonus of such a practice can be the sudden arrival of insights or solutions when you least expect them. The single most illuminating point in my own PhD thesis came to me while 'off-duty', half-asleep in the bath! And many of my friends and students have confirmed how often this kind of out-of-the-blue visitation can happen. You can get inspiration on top of a bus, in a supermarket queue, cleaning your shoes, etc., etc. The reason for this is clear: if you allow your brain proper rest and freedom, it will, even in its apparently idle moments, be sifting and considering the problems, and working for you unconsciously. There is, of course, a time to worry at a problem *deliberately*; but if you let the brain's automatic rhythms take over for a while, they may save you a lot of trouble, as well as allowing you to restore your energy.

10.
NEVER BE AFRAID TO ASK

I am constantly surprised and touched by how anxious many of my students (both secondary and adult) seem to be about 'bothering' me with a question, or request for advice. They don't want to be a nuisance; they don't want to take up my 'valuable' time.

I'm sure I speak for every even half-way decent teacher when I say that being 'bothered' in this way is what we're paid for, and that it is also nearly always a pleasure. Naturally, a certain minimal tact *is* necessary. I wasn't all that polite, for instance, to a student who, following repeated absence at my classes, phoned me at *6.50 am* (not my favourite hour) to say that she was worried about her exams next day and could I help! Most of the time, however, teachers are only too glad to be of help to a keen student. Indeed, one of the qualities a successful student most needs is a willingness and ability to ask good questions: the resulting discussion stimulates teacher and student alike. So if you need help, ask for it. A teacher can do his job only if he knows what you know, and don't know: if you pretend or 'play possum', he will proceed under false assumptions.

The reason why many students *don't* ask is that they're afraid of looking stupid—if not to the teacher, then to their fellow-students.We've all known this feeling, and it is entirely understandable. All I can say is that, in over ten years as a teacher of both children and adults, *I've hardly ever been asked a really stupid question*. I've been asked questions I've only just answered; I've been asked questions that are irrelevant to the matter in hand; and I've been asked to spell out the obvious for nervy and anxious students. But at no time have I ever felt contempt for anyone brave enough to enquire about something they don't know or don't yet grasp; and very often the questions are so good that they open up a line of thought that I haven't previously considered. So don't be afraid to ask: it is only the student who *doesn't* ask when he needs to who is truly stupid.

(These remarks are developed at greater length in Chapter 9, **Teachers and how to use them**.)

11.
KEEP REVIEWING YOUR WORK

I discuss this fully in Chapter 5 on **Review;** but a few quick guidelines are in order now.

If you're reading, make sure you've understood it. Just scanning the words is no good: you must be aware of the structure of the material— i.e. where it starts from, where it's going, how it gets there. Academic reading is intensive; it will require two or three perusals before it is firmly fixed in the mind. Use this fact, and don't imagine you're 'slow' just because you don't pick something up first time. Re-reading will boost your confidence: you'll be able to feel yourself learning and growing.

If you're writing, regularly re-read what you've already done. That will keep your target in view, and also prevent flabby repetition. Also, re-read at the end as if you were an outsider—anyone but the writer. Read critically, looking for flaws and errors. I have no wish to turn you into either a masochist or a pedant; but the more mistakes or shortcomings you can spot before the person who marks it, the better will be your work. You will also get a confidence boost when you see how good most of it is!

You should always save ten minutes at the end of a period of study to mull over the work. This can be done as part of the 'winding down' process. The brain, glad to be resting, will be quite happy to run over the main points you've covered; and this will make your return to the work snappier and more fun.

Lastly, you should regularly look over your past work as the course gathers momentum. It doesn't take long: ten minutes a day is ample. There is a double benefit here, too: you'll recognize at once how much you've learned, and how far you're progressing. And when you come to revise at the end of the course,

your past work will be familiar to you, so that you can revise, rather than having to do the work over again from scratch.

12.
REMIND YOURSELF WHAT YOUR ULTIMATE ACHIEVEMENT WILL BE

No matter how much you enjoy studying or how well you succeed, there are bound to be times when you get depressed or just fed up with it all. If such feelings occur *often* it may be time to ask yourself if you're doing the right course; but the occasional doubt and low moment are inevitable. So don't let these get you down: instead, just look forward to the time when it's over, and when you've got that certificate in your hand.

Sometimes, too, you'll find you get angry—at a low mark, or at some-one's implied judgement that you're not as good as you need to be. Creative rage is a first-class study fuel, so use it. Whether your motive is to 'show them', or prove something to yourself, or (most likely) a mixture of the two, you'll find that some form of gutsy target concentration is an enormous help. There's nothing like the prospect of a finishing tape to spur you on to greater effort, if only because you can have a well-earned, triumphant rest. And remember also that any worthwhile thing that any human has ever achieved took time, determination, and the fierce belief that it was worth it. It is, too; so keep that in mind.

CONCLUSION

A good deal of this chapter may strike you as being no more than applied common sense, and I would agree with you. The trouble is that more often than is comfortable or even comprehensible, common sense — supposedly universal, the only virtue that everyone possesses—is highly *un*common amongst students, from the mediocre to the very brightest. It ought to be obvious, for example, that you know best how you work, or that it's silly to go on working at something that has become jaw-wrenchingly boring. The fact remains that thousands of students pay no attention to these elementary truths, and go on working for too long in a fashion that someone else wants them to or that they've been told to think is 'right'.

With those last two sentences particularly in mind, let me end by saying that I only want you to follow this chapter's advice if it's useful to you. If you *always* work well for three hours non-stop, then please accept my awed congratulations and ignore my remarks about 'manageable chunks of time'. Remember, the two prime requirements for successful study are a sense of enjoyment and an honest sense of yourself. Nobody—least of all me—should bully or pressure you out of either; all I've attempted to do is tell you about some phenomena I've noticed both as a student and as a teacher, and thereby assist you in working more naturally. We now move on to the student's most important—and most mysterious—piece of equipment: the Memory.

MEMORY
4

O memory! Thou fond deceiver!

Oliver Goldsmith

INTRODUCTION

Goldsmith has a point: the memory *can* deceive, and often does. But we also decide ourselves *about* our memory. How often have you heard, or indeed said, something like:

'You are lucky, having a good memory.'

or

'It's not fair: I can't remember half of what I need to.'

Luck has nothing to do with it. If your memory is poor, then it's not 'unfair': it's your fault. Happily, and more to the point, you can do something about it.

Of all the myths that surround Memory, the most damaging is that it is a *gift*. That is quite untrue. Memory is a *skill*; and like any skill its performance depends on application, on practice, and on regular training. Everyone potentially has a first-class memory; and everyone can train their memory, and thereby improve their efficiency.

Another fallacy that should be exploded here and now is the idea that there is a close connection between memory and intelligence. This myth is probably fuelled by the popularity of otherwise harmless and enjoyable programmes such as *Mastermind* and *Brain of Britain,* whose titles suggest mat the ability to remember masses of unrelated facts denotes great intellectual prowess. In fact, all the research conducted so far indicates that memory and intelligence are separate faculties; and if you think about this for a moment, you'll see why. The difference can be dearly expressed by way of two definitions:

Memory: The ability to remember what you know.
Intelligence: The ability to work out what to do when you don't *know* what to do.

In short, memory is to do with recalling and using things you are *certain* of, while intelligence reveals itself most acutely when addressed to things you are *uncertain* of, or ignorant about.

Since your memory is part of *you,* however, some personal traits affect it. Your tastes and temperament will determine the *kinds* of thing you're likely to remember or forget. Some people find it easy to remember numbers but impossible to learn a language; for others, the reverse is true. But by and large the efficiency of your memory is a matter of training and taking care. If you *do* have a particular area where your memory is weak, then admit it, and work at it in the belief that it will get better. As I have stressed from the start, successful study involves being honest with yourself; and that applies to memory as much as to anything else.

SHORT-TERM MEMORY (STM) AND LONG-TERM MEMORY (LTM)

Memory comes in two types: the short-term memory and the long-term memory. STM is a sort of note-pad which handles all the stuff we need to remember for a short time for immediate, imminent, or temporary use; LTM stores all the information we truly *know*. To put it in everyday terms: the STM is like a handbag or briefcase, while the LTM is more like a deep freeze, filled with 'no need to thaw' foods.

Few sane people make a habit of inspecting handbags or briefcases; but picture one for a moment. If you're at all like me, the bag/case you have in mind is pretty full. Most of its contents are useful and needed; but some of them are useless, or rather have ceased to be useful. It's a rare handbag that does not contain a few screwed-up tissues or dead bus-tickets; equally, you would be pushed to find a briefcase that did not house the odd defunct letter or memo.

The STM is a remarkably similar mixture. Most of its load is useful and pertinent; but bits of irrelevant junk always seem to be floating around as well. When, say, you remember that you have to make a phone call at eleven o'clock, ifs strange how that urgent reminder can immediately be followed by the fleeting recall of what you had for dinner last night, or how long it is since you washed your hair!

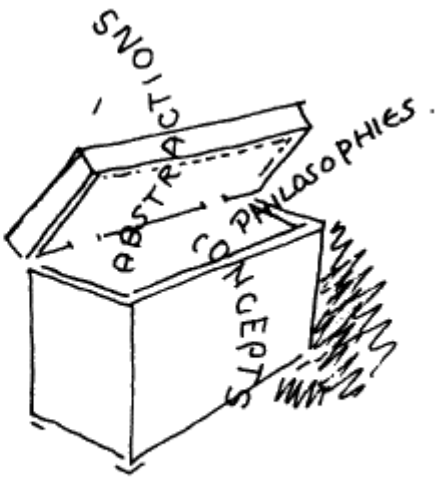
The reason for this is that the STM is neither organized nor fully in charge of its load. There is nothing surprising or amiss about that. Life is too short to organize *everything*; and most people lead the kind of busy lives that render it essential for them to carry in their minds an unrelated assortment of things. For day-to-day matters this is as it should be. I suppose one could devise a system whereby one could remember every single item required on a shopping trip without writing anything down; but why bother? The task, or the specific list, is a one-off thing; so it's better to save time, jettison the search for a fool-proof mental strategem, and simply write the items down on a piece of paper.

However, much of what we do describes a regular, long-term pattern, using information which does not change from day to day. Study is a particularly strong example—which is where the 'deep freeze' idea comes in.

An efficient deep freeze can store food for a long time. You can ignore its contents for months on end if you want to, and then raid it for something which can be cooked at once. The LTM operates in a very similar fashion. When you've *really* learnt something, it takes up a permanent residence in the mind, and is instantly available when you require it -even if you haven't needed the information for years. The LTM is, moreover, superbly supple, and elastic. It does not have to chuck something out in order to make room for new information, but simply stretches itself a little more. There is also a lot of evidence that suggests that the more you store in your LTM, the better it will work—just as a deep freeze works more efficiently if it is kept full.

It is, I think, obvious that successful study depends on the secure transfer of material from the STM to the LTM. It may make sense to make a shopping list for each trek to the supermarket; but it makes very little sense to have to look up, say, the date of the Norman Conquest every time you need to mention it. As your course progresses, you will be adding regularly to your store of knowledge, and to your growing mastery of

Short-term memory is like a handbag: it contains useful everyday things



Long-term memory is like a deep-freeze: it stores information for long periods

the material. Indeed, it is usually essential that you do so. Most academic courses are linear: that is, you usually need to master point A before you can tackle point B, or understand concept C before you can progress to concept D. Since you are working under pressure, and teaching time and study time is restricted, efficient LTM-storage is a major priority for you. How best to do it?

As a way of answering that, get a piece of paper and try the little quiz that follows.

1. Write down your name.
2. Write down your phone number.
3. Write down your post code.
4. Write down your mother's maiden name.
5. Write down your car registration number.
6. Write down the number of your credit card(s).

I would hope that anyone reading this book had no trouble with the first two. I would also imagine that, even if you managed numbers 3–5 pretty quickly, they came to mind less automatically—though I ought to add that far more people know their post code than seemed the case ten years ago. If you got number 6 without needing to look it/up, well done: I'd guess you are in a minority.

However well you did, the exercise is highly revealing. The ones you got right came quickly, probably at once. Those that didn't come quickly probably didn't come at all—unless you looked them up. It is a characteristic of the memory that it works very fast or not at all. If you have to 'rack your brains' for something, the chances are heavily against your finding it at the time. But the even more important point is that whichever ones you got right, you did so because you have been in constant contact with the information.

That fact is fundamental, and matters even more than whether the material concerned is *interesting* or not. Just now I commented on the massive increase in the number of people who know their post code

compared to a decade ago. Assuming I'm right about that, why should it be so? Part of the answer is that while there's nothing exactly riveting about post codes as such, yours is important to you because it's *yours* — a principle I shall extend to academic study in the next section. But arguably the larger part is that we are now *expected* to know our post code, or at any rate are invariably asked to quote it—and it is that **frequent use** that is the key.

Questions 5–6 above also illustrate this. If you have had to quote your car registration or credit card numbers more than two or three times, the chances are high that they've stuck in your memory; if not, they almost certainly will not have done so. For example: I can answer number 5 instantly, because I've had to quote it all too often—to insurance companies, the AA and so on (though not yet the police!). But I could not get even close if asked number 6. That's partly because they consist of sixteen separate digits, yes; but it's also because it so happens that I rarely use them over the phone, and I've never been asked to quote them in any shop.

As with that little quiz, so with study: the more you keep in touch with information, the more likely you are to retain it. And that does not only apply to the learning of fresh material: it is just as important to revisit work regularly once it has been 'done'. First-time learning— which includes the writing of most essays—requires subsequent confirmation, feed-back and back-up. Otherwise, no matter how secure the learning *seems* to be, or no matter how highly praised the essay, you will find that an alarming amount of its information is gone within a week. It takes very little time to re-read your past written work, and not much more to mull over again reading what you've recently completed; it is time unimprovably spent for its value to you will be both rapid and enormous.

I extend this advice in the next chapter, **Review.** For those interested in a more detailed account of the short-term memory and the long-term memory, Peter Russell's *The Brain Book* is notably good, being both comprehensive and very readable: Chapters 6, 7 and 10 are especially useful. Another excellent study, if you can get hold of it, is lan M.L.Hunter's *Memory,* first published in 1957 and revised in 1964.* In it he makes the important observation that the activity of memorizing is dominated by two broad issues—the role of meaning and the role of repetition—and he goes on to quote from the pioneering psychologist William James in a most illuminating way: the italics are mine.

> **Most men have a good memory for facts connected with their own pursuits. The college athlete who remains a dunce at his books will astonish you by his knowledge of men's 'records' in various feats and games, and will be a walking dictionary of sporting statistics. The reason is that he is constantly going over these things in his mind, and comparing and making series of them. *They form for him not so many odd facts, but a concept-system—so they stick.* So the merchant remembers prices, the politicians other politicians' speeches and votes (in a fashion) which amazes outsiders, but which the amount of thinking they bestow on these subjects easily explains.**†

There are dose parallels here to the *Adam Bede* passage discussed earlier.‡ If anything that truly interests you automatically becomes, in James's term 'a concept-system', then as Bartle Massey observes, the next step is to *find* a way of making what you need to remember truly interesting, or at any rate an enjoying and stimulating game. That leads me to the next section, which looks at methods and systems of making things newly fun and memorably connected; there could be few better or encouraging ways of introducing that topic than quoting another remark by William James:

In a system, every fact is connected with every other by some thought-relation. The consequence is that every fact is retained by the combined suggestive power of all the other facts in the system and forgetfulness is well-nigh impossible.*

MEMORY AND DO-IT-YOURSELF VISUAL AIDS

As we've seen, the brain is an awesome and versatile instrument. And there is *never* a time when your brain is not doing several things at once. The phrase 'single-minded' may have a poetic truth in its suggestion of absolute concentration, but it is neurologically impossible.

Imagine yourself sitting in a chair, reading. You are deep in your book, concentrating fiercely: you are, apparently, absorbed in a *single activity*. Yet think of all the different things your brain is doing. As you read, you are aware only of the text itself; but the motor part of the brain is commanding your physical grasp on the book, the movements of your hand as you turn the pages, and probably several unconscious mannerisms. Various other stimuli and information are also being received as you read. The brain may be getting messages from all over your body, to the effect that you're hungry, want a drink, are shortly going to suffer cramp if you continue to sit on your leg, etc. No wonder concentrating seems so difficult!

Such a variety of simultaneous brain-activity could be most distracting. However, since there's no way of stopping your brain doing all these things, why not get the so-called distractions to work *for* you? For instance, all of us find that, as we read, a series of images flits across our mind. These may be connected to the material being read, or they may seem irrelevant. It doesn't matter; they are potentially valuable as spontaneous enforcers. I can illustrate the truth of this with an admittedly rather silly story from my own schooldays.

I was always a poor scientist anyway, but my biggest hassle was chemical symbols: I found it almost impossible to remember even the basic ones, let alone anything sophisticated. One evening (I was about twelve) I was trying to learn twenty of them for a test next day, and having a miserably unsuccessful time of it. Inevitably my mind started wandering as I stared at the page with sullen dutifulness—and suddenly the picture of a very fat woman stuck in a revolving door flashed into my head. Callow, sexist and fattist as I was then, I laughed inanely; but it so happened that as I did so I was looking at the legend 'Potassium: K'. The test duly arrived next morning, and I did not do well. But I did get 'What does K represent?' right: my fat lady came up trumps, flashing back into my head as soon as I heard the question and re-focusing my memory on that part of the textbook. Okay, I got a censorious look from the teacher when I giggled as I wrote the answer down, but that was a small price to pay!

That puerile reminiscence enshrines an important principle. If something makes you laugh while studying, don't use your mirth as an excuse to break off the learning-process: *use* it by fixing the comic image consciously alongside whatever you were reading when it occurred.

To take another, more homely and altogether *un*funny example: I was unable for a long time to remember, when changing a plug, which one of the blue or brown wires was 'live'. I had to look it up or ask someone every time. One day it occurred to me that brown was the colour my hands would end up if I grasped a live wire; and I've never again had to think twice about which is which. A slightly grisly

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* Hunter, I.M.L. (1964) *Memory,* rev. edn. Pelican, London, is the edition used for quotations that appear.

† James, W. (1891) *Principles of Psychology,* Vol. 1, p. 662.

‡See above, 'Using your brain's natural facility', Chapter 2, pp. 19–20.

*James, *Principles of Psychology,* p. 663.

' ... which one of the blue or brown wires was live?'

example, yes, but one where the image was directly relevant to what I was trying to learn. The principle is the same whatever the source of the image: provided you can find a way to link it to the material, it will strengthen and clarify your memory.

The beauty, and the fun, of this technique is that you do it yourself. Auto-suggestion is always powerful, because we are naturally very interested in ourselves; and any process which allows us to be self-indulgent while assisting us to do something worth while can't be bad!

Basically, any kind of picture or image will do, provided it is effective. The most likely to work, however, are those that are one or more of the following:

funny; obscene; dramatic; colourful.

These four are strong because they reflect powerful and intrinsic responses—a principle sometimes called the 'Von Restorff effect', after the distinguished psychologist's discoveries about the workings of the memory. You do not have to work at or force your images. Indeed, you *shouldn't* do so: their strength lies precisely in their spontaneity, and their sudden appearance 'out of nowhere', beyond your conscious control. Once you start *willing* images to arrive, you've ruined the whole procedure, because you're now concentrating on the images rather than on the stuff you're studying. It's quite unnecessary to force them, anyway: just try keeping them away!

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING UNEARNEST

You may feel that these techniques are somewhat childish, and that 'games' of this sort are out of keeping with the serious business of study. If that is your reaction, I would first refer you to the portrait of the Earnest Student (see Chapter 1), and secondly point out that such games are not only useful but utterly natural.

Man, like most animals, is by nature a playful creature, especially when his play involves a degree of invention and creativity. Enormous advances in infant education have taken place over the past twenty years, mainly through psychologists' and teachers' recognition that the child's love of play is itself a form of learning, and that, sensibly harnessed, it can accelerate other forms of learning. In this respect, as in many others, we have much to learn from our own childhood. Wordsworth perhaps put it best when he wrote, 'The child is father to the man.' The patterns of activity we adopt when we are at our most inquisitive and our most natural (i.e. in early childhood) should be revered, not dismissed. Besides, games are *fun;* and the more fun you can derive from your study, the more successfully you will perform. It's worth reiterating, I think, that very few people have ever become masters of their craft by finding it boring and laborious.

MEMORY AND ENVIRONMENT: WHERE WERE YOU THEN?

We have seen, then, how you can use apparently distracting brain activity to work in your favour. But why stop there? Potential distractions abound *outside* your head as well as inside it; and these can be channelled in exactly the same way, so that they work *for* you and not against.

Let's imagine that you are sitting reading, and that you are satisfied with your immediate environment. That is to say, you've got silence if that's what you want, or some background music if you normally work that way, and that no obtrusive or irritating event is taking place elsewhere in the house (kids fighting, arrival of the fire brigade, someone efficiently hoovering in the next room, etc.). Even under such pleasant conditions, you're an unusual person if your eyes unfalteringly remained fixed on your book for a period of forty-five minutes. If you're at all like me, you will from time to time glance around the room, or look briefly out of the window. This is especially if you are thinking as you read (and you should be!). Sometimes, you'll need to consider a point raised by the text, or ponder the significance of the episode you've just read. You may even occasionally shut your eyes while repeating an important idea to yourself in order to fix it more firmly.

At these moments, the brain will be taking in data about its environment, even if your forebrain is not concentrating on such things. We speak of gazing 'unseeingly' at something while we're 'miles away' and not focusing; but in fact some neural trace of what the eyes rest on will remain in the memory. So try to take note of what you stare at when raising your eyes briefly from the book. Such a visual record will help you to recall the material you were reading at the time.

In this way, your fleeting glances act as memory-triggers. Provided there's an elementary sensory memory present, it should be possible to summon up the required intellectual record. For memory depends partly on environment: if, for example, exams were taken in the same room as the stuff was learnt, performance would on average be 10–15% better. So try to create a logical sequence of images, that attend a particular piece of information you need to remember.

Virtually anything can become a sensory aide-memoire or 'trigger'. One student of mine was an inveterate gum-chewer—not always a pretty sight, but useful to him as an aid to concentration. He found that chewing a particular flavour of gum was a remarkably effective trigger - no doubt because he had been chewing it (although let's hope it was a different *piece*!) when first learning the material. Taste, smell, touch; all can be mobilized if you can find a natural and convenient method of bringing them in.

Incidentally, it is fun in this respect that background music can be an advantage. Most of us find that records acquire, over a period of time, a mysterious extra dimension: the grooves not only preserve the actual music, but seem saturated with our memories. The most dramatic instances recall to us some powerful emotion—great joy, unhappiness, fear, or desire; but less intense experiences can also be re-created with remarkable force. I have several records which, when I play them, instantly and potently remind me of a

certain time—a recall that includes who I was with, what time of day it was, and what the weather was like. Often, too, when trying to remember something I need to use in a forthcoming lesson or lecture, I find I can usually remember the music that was playing last time I perused the elusive item. To replay the piece is frequently the only trigger I need.

All stored knowledge is abstract in the precise sense of intangible: your brain is stuffed with valuable information, but you cannot *literally* 'put your finger' on any of it. So it makes very good sense to allow sensory and material things to assist and confirm that knowledge. Proust once declared that 'the past is hidden somewhere outside the realm of the intellect, in material objects which we do not suspect'. The past includes all that we have learnt; and the ability to relate material things to required learning can be invaluable. There is an almost unlimited number of ways in which you can do it. And as with so many things in study, *you* are the best judge. No matter that some private technique you evolve for remembering things would strike others as comic or even barmy: if it works, then stick with it.

CONTEMPLATIVE LEARNING AND INTENSIVE LEARNING

No true learning is ever leisurely, because to learn anything requires you to focus and concentrate on it. (This is as true of practical and physical skills as it is of intellectual ones.) But there is an obvious difference *in kind* between the learning which

1. Leads you to acquire a sound and sensitive understanding of a Shakespeare play

and

2. Characterizes the mastering of a list of German verbs.

The first type I have called *contemplative* learning. By that I mean that your knowledge results from your considered response as a total personality. It does not come from the mere absorption by your brain of the salient facts. This always has to be done, naturally: it's not much use having a sensitive response to *Hamlet* if you're also under the impression that he lives in Belgium and has a mother named Anastasia. On the other hand, you're never going to get very far as a student of literature (English or foreign) if all you do is memorize the text's external facts and as much of the text, word for word, as you can manage. No: contemplative learning depends on mature understanding and personal response. As it happens, this is hardly less true for physics and biology as it is for something apparently 'subjective' like literature. In this area, therefore, memory would seem to be less important than personality and experiencing.

Think about that for a moment, however. 'Personality and experience': what is that if it *isn't* memory? One of the saddest things about amnesiacs is that the loss of their memory causes their personality to disintegrate. Without recourse to stored personal memories, they are as vulnerable and ignorant as small children. They have no guidelines as to how they want to, or should, behave. They become as totally dependent on others as small children are, and even more helplessly 'paralysed' than a wheelchair victim.

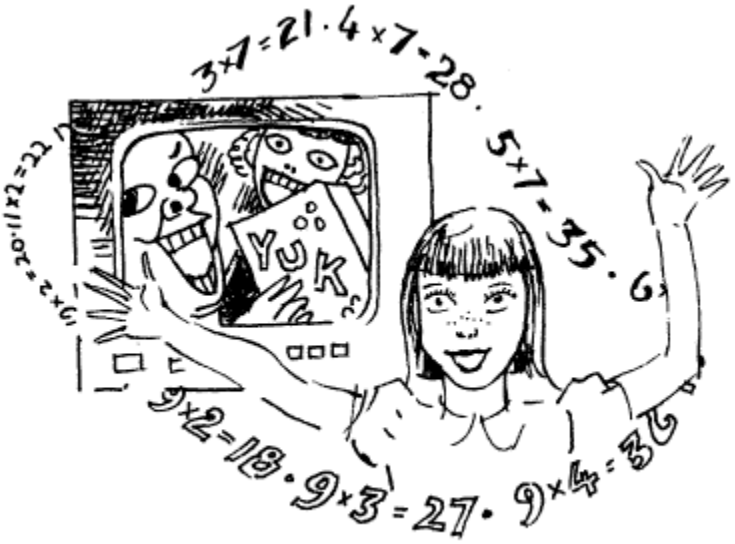
So in fact memory *is* a vital part of contemplative learning, since in some sense you *are* your memory. So you should bring as much of yourself to bear on your studies as you can. You will have lived at least sixteen years: you have experienced literally millions of things. So *use* them. I do *not* mean you should reject as unreal everything you encounter in your studies that has not (yet) happened to you: that would be silly. Neither should you be excessively humble. If something jars on you as wrong or unconvincing (or just inadequate), then *explore* the reaction. You'll probably find that your dissatisfaction is rooted in something

you remember observing, or feeling, or sensing. Such a memory or experience will not, of course, automatically mean that you're 'right'; but it will increase the quality of your thinking and arguing, because you're operating as a whole intelligence rather than as a disembodied brain.

Intensive learning is narrower and fiercer. The central point about it is that it depends on frequency and repetition. The first words you ever spoke were, almost certainly, words you'd heard on hundreds of occasions beforehand. A little later, when you first attended school, I'd bet that among the first things you remember learning were tables—a process that drives most kids into a frenzy of rage and/or boredom while it's going on. But you will probably also admit that when it was over and you had achieved mastery of all your tables, you:

1. Were delighted.
2. Recognized, if only indirectly, that it was due to the repetition that had so bored and infuriated you.
3. Found that the knowledge was automatic from then on.

Well over ten years ago now, my younger daughter was in the midst of a campaign of deep hatred against tables; indeed, her comments featured a number of what I'll call 'unidentified flying adjectives' not normally associated with nine-year-old girls. At around the same time the rest of the family noticed that she knew by heart virtually every TV commercial jingle that appeared, *even though she despised most of them*. Such knowledge was the result of constant exposure: the jingles had registered automatically—which is of



The result of constant exposure: the jingles had registered automatically

course the whole idea. Despite initial resistance, we were able to use a similar 'saturation principle' to accelerate her mastery of tables. We would all, from time to time, fire random questions at her—'four sevens; eight sixes; nine threes' and so on; within a fortnight her campaign had dissolved. Automatic and unshakable mastery of tables took its place.

This idea worked for two reasons. First, it made a working principle out of the theory that some forms of learning have to be saturative; secondly, we all made a *game* out of the process. Not much of one, maybe, but more fun than sitting on her own, trying to do it by rote in a mood of boredom mixed with rage.

In sum: if you have to learn something intensively—i.e. commit it absolutely to memory—get other people to help you by 'testing' you at random and without warning. This semi-playful approach will rob the task of much of its immediate grind, and will also render your study more sociable. You can even make a family game of working out certain mnemonics (see pages 55–6).

MEMORY AND FREQUENCY

I've touched on this already, and more follows in the next chapter. One or two important points need to be made here and now, however. It is generally true that there is a direct link between recall and the number of times the specific thing has been studied or used. This was illustrated by the little quiz on page 43. But it is not *always* true; or rather, the link depends on circumstances at the time.

Let's imagine you've failed to remember something which, for one reason or another, you feel you *should* have remembered. There are three possible reasons why this has happened.

1. You may simply not *care* enough about the item to have logged it firmly. (This is the subject of the next section.)
2. You may not have looked at it or used it often enough for it to have stuck.
3. You may have looked at it and used it thirty times or more, but never with enough of your mind on it for it to be transferred from the STM to the LTM.

It is the third possibility that concerns me here.

We all have those tantalizing moments when the name of something or somebody eludes us, even though we've often heard it. At such times we say, 'the name's on the tip of my tongue'. This charming phrase is not altogether accurate, however.

There are two possible explanations for this phenomenon. One is that the information is stored in the LTM, but can only be partially or insufficiently retrieved. The reason for such a 'block' may be that the memory is being made to try too hard: as I've said, if you have to 'rack your brains' for something, it's unlikely to be produced at that moment. It's better to turn off, and let the information filter through naturally. Sometimes this will take a day or two; at others it may only be a matter of minutes. Of course, when you're under heavy pressure to remember something (as in an exam), it is difficult to relax in this way, if not almost impossible. But it's worth trying—if only because to worry at something in such circumstances is rarely successful in time.

That kind of experience is indeed analogous to having something 'on the tip of one's tongue'. But the second possible cause of such a block is not well summed up by the phrase. There are times when, no matter how frustrated we may feel in being so close to remembering something, we are in fact *nowhere near* to recalling it. We may say, when someone tells us the answer, 'Oh, yes, of *course*!'; but we kid ourselves if we confuse such told familiarity with independent, fixed knowledge of our own. In such cases, the block occurs because we've never taken quite enough trouble to lodge the information securely in our LTM. Maybe, while more or less registering the information at the time, we've not been paying full attention to it. Or perhaps we've allowed it temporary residence in our STM, only to evict it a few hours later in place of something fresh. Or maybe it simply didn't seem to *matter* enough, and we thus allowed it slowly to fade away until it finally vanished.

Pieces of information like this resemble casual acquaintances. We may see them often, but they never become important to our lives. Indeed, they are hardly *noticeable,* and it makes no difference to us whether we see them or not. They may well be interesting and pleasant, and we may sometimes think we'd like to know them better; somehow, though, we never quite get round to it. Other people and other things seem more important: there just doesn't seem to be room for anything else. In the same way, certain kinds of bits of information may flit in and out of our STM half a dozen or more times, without ever becoming permanent. They don't strike us as important or significant enough, especially when something fresher arrives for us to consider.

We can extend the metaphor. Suppose one such casual acquaintance does become a friend. Then everything changes. That person is now important. As with all true friends, there is an intimacy and automatic confidence between you. It may be that months pass between your meetings; but you think of each other often, and when you do meet up again, rapport is instant and profound. The things we know and are confident about are just like close friends: we are sure of them, and are immediately and permanently at ease with them.

How, then, can you help your memory turn 'casual acquaintance' information into 'friendly' knowledge? Well, just think for a moment about the difference between those times when you're re-united with a close friend, and those occasions when you bump into someone you know slightly.

In the former case, you are (I imagine) warm, spontaneous and completely at ease, while the latter finds you slightly bemused and full of cliché. (I find I'm quite capable of saying such fatuous things as 'Oh, it's you' or 'I haven't seen you since the last time we met.') The crucial difference is *self-consciousness,* which is absent in the first case and sharply present in the second. My own feelings, when 'caught on the hop' in such a fashion, almost amount to schizophrenia—it's as if part of me has left my body and is watching me with contemptuous amusement, quietly advising me from time to time that it would be a great idea if I shut up.

If you transfer this kind of behaviour, notable for its prickly awareness of self, from the chance social meeting to the attempt to learn, you will see why some things refuse to lodge in your memory despite the number of times you've noted them. You have never truly *concentrated* on them: they've merely been part of a rag-bag of vague impressions. So if you want something to stick, you've first got to 'glue' your mind to it. Just staring at it time and again is not likely to be very efficient. It *can* work, but it's more probable that the information will skate across the surface and disappear. Writing it down is much better. For a start, more of your brain will be directly involved, because it will have to work your hand as well as absorb the visual material. Make sure, though, that you focus on what you write, otherwise the memory will vanish.

If you can, make a game out of the information. It's easier to remember a historical date if you can find a way to make the figure mean something else as well Let's take the year of Charles II's ascent of the throne as an example—the Restoration of 1660. You might take '16' and link it with 'Sweet', and re-name '60' as 'Hour' (the number of minutes in an hour). You've now created your own puzzle code, 'sweet hour', which is easily remembered because you invented it and instantly decodable for the same reason. As with nearly all memory aids, it doesn't matter what you use or how you use it: effectiveness, for you and you alone, is the only test. You are trying to work out some way of personalizing the information, of making it *yours*. For as soon as you've made it interesting, you will *want* to remember it. It's no longer a casual visitor, but someone you've invited in.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between friends and minor acquaintances is how much you *care* about each; and that brings me neatly to my text topic.

MEMORY AND THOUGHTFULNESS: HOW MUCH DO YOU CARE?

Hands up all those who have never come out with a remark like this:

I'm sorry about your birthday card/my homework/that bill: I forgot.

Just as I thought: none of you! 'I forgot' is a classic social excuse, and we all use it at some time or another. In nine cases out of ten, it is accepted –mainly because we know we are all guilty of it. To be unforgiving and lordly about a particular instance seems hypocritical. The fact remains, nevertheless, that the excuse is nonsense; or, to put it another way, the words 'I forgot' are a kind of shorthand for

I couldn't be bothered/didn't care enough/was too lazy to remember.

I don't advise you to point this out too forcefully next time you hear it said: people can lose a lot of friends that way! But I *do* advise you to take it very much to heart in terms of your study and the efficient training of your memory.

If you have a normal brain, you are capable of retaining a quite staggering amounts of information. To do this you must, however, *care* enough about each item to hold on to it. For the memory to house something, it has to matter to you: if you don't give a damn one way or another, your memory won't either. For don't forget: your memory is a *skill,* one of the brain's remarkable tools. It is not a mysterious entity given to you, and therefore somehow independent of you. It will be as good (or bad) as you care to make it.

I've stressed throughout this chapter the need to redesign information, so that it becomes more personal. (That's also why, incidentally, Chapter 3 included a section entitled 'Learn to be selfish'.) Such practice offers two interrelated benefits.

1. The material becomes more accessible, more 'friendly', and therefore easier to care about.
2. The very fact that you *are* thinking, and thinking creatively, is itself a way of deepening your response and understanding.

It is no accident that we speak of sensitive, caring people as 'thoughtful'. In precisely the same way, the more you think, the more you will come to care about the information you're studying, and the more likely you are to retain it as a result. It is also no accident that people who *do* have bad memories are rather dreary and aloof. They haven't cared enough about too many things, and thus they've little that interests them and even less to offer others.

MNEMONICS: THE VALUE OF DO-IT-YOURSELF

Mnemonics—creative aids to memory—have a long and distinguished pedigree. The Ancient Greeks were fascinated by them—Aristotle writes at some length on the subject in his *De Insomnis* and *De Anima*—and they were no less absorbing to medieval and Renaissance scholars. Nevertheless, this section will be relatively short, for I am not going to offer you a selection of existing mnemonics and analogous devices;* all I want to do is establish a principle.

The reason for this is not laziness, nor am I daunted by the competition! It is that I am extremely sceptical about many of the mnemonics that students are encouraged to use. They are seldom of much help; furthermore, far from easing one's workload, they can actually increase it. Mnemonics are only valuable in

so far as they save time and guarantee clarity of learning, and that means, usually, that they have to come from within rather be imposed from without. To put it baldly:

The successful mnemonic is one you invent for yourself.

That may be somewhat overstated, but I believe in it as a working principle. To return to Bartle Massey's lecture in *Adam Bede* that I quoted in full in Chapter 2, there is nobody so uncreative that s/he can't invent games, puzzles, rhymes or just jokes to assist learning and progress. Quite apart from the practical benefit you will derive, you'll get pleasure from the fact you have created something. That is always gratifying, and the consequent sense of well-being will also bolster your confidence.

It's time for an example. At least 90% of my students find difficulty at some time or another in spelling the word 'necessary'. It takes a lot of them years to stop wondering if it's two 'c's and one 's', or two of each, or one 'r' or two, or whatever. A pupil of mine once put forward this mnemonic as an aid:

Never Eat Chips: Eat Salad Sandwiches And Remain Young

I thought this excellent, and likely to work; hence, up to a point, its inclusion here. But the larger point is that while it helped some members of the class, it clearly didn't solve the problem for the majority, who went on writing 'neccesary' or 'neccesarry' and all the rest of it. They were neither lazy nor stupid: the mnemonic simply didn't register with them.

However, when I then advised them to devise their *own* sentences based on the same principle, it was much better. At any rate, they started to write 'necessary' correctly!

In the same way, one of the reasons road safety's Green Cross Code is now a thing of the past is that while some children found it easy and natural to remember, too many others found it muddling—and therefore dangerous. To repeat and expand:

Mnemonics are as individual as people.

Sometimes a genuinely universal one is coined that touches all of us– for example the spelling rhyme 'i before e, except after c'.* On the whole, however, mnemonics are best approached as a form of private game; your inventions will register quickly, and they'll be a lot of fun to make up, too.

Going further, we can perhaps see why a given person's memory aids are often ineffective to other people no matter how imaginative and clever they may seem on the surface. Mnemonics are idiosyncratic things: they have a distinct character, which is an expression of the originator's personality. It is a matter of pure chance whether the personality of a ready-made mnemonic will match yours; if it doesn't you'll find the pattern or code hard to grasp. As Ian M.L.Hunter says at the conclusion of his own discussion of mnemonic systems:

Improvement (cannot) be guaranteed by the mere giving of 'rules' for learning. The person must come to understand such rules, not as verbal formulae but in terms of his learning activities; and he can only do this by applying these rules in practice.[†]

*If you are interested in these, consult the Bibliography at the end of the book, which tells you which books offer detailed information on the topic.

'Applying these rules in practice' will be all the more profitable when you've made them up yourself, when those 'verbal formulae' are your own.

It might nevertheless be useful for me to list again a few basic guidelines about the kind of techniques that are most likely to work. First and foremost:

Keep your mnemonics as simple as you possibly can.

In addition, remember that the brain will latch on to ideas most firmly if they are:

1. **Funny**
2. **Obscene/vulgar**
3. **Colourful**
4. **Dramatic**
5. **Physical**
6. **Logical** (It doesn't matter if the logic is clear only to you: after all, it's your mnemonic!)
7. **Bold and sharp**
8. **Connected with something that interests or attracts you.**

The more of these you can work into your devisings, the stronger your mnemonics will be.

MEMORY-BLOCKS

Nearly all of this chapter has, I hope, been positive, albeit toughmindedly so at times. You can do a great deal to improve your memory provided you're prepared to recognize that it is a skill, not a gift or an art, and that as such it needs to be *worked*. Frequency of contact is probably the key consideration, but it also helps enormously if you care about what you want to remember, or can at least manufacture a way of doing so.

Nevertheless, rare is the person who does not suffer at some stage from 'memory-block'—things that one cannot remember, or find it very difficult to do so. For example:

Some very good drivers who have otherwise extremely retentive minds could not possibly think of being a London cabbie, simply because they're hopeless at remembering even the street names in their own neighbourhood, let alone those of the entire London A-Z that comprise what cabbies fondly, and with justifiable pride, call 'The Knowledge'.

It seems to make no difference how hard these people try, or how often they're embarrassed by and about it (and no one likes looking an idiot!) —it just won't happen for them. Is there nothing you can do about such 'memory blind spots'?

In Part Three on **Examinations** I shall be suggesting that the first essential step if one suddenly gets stuck or blank-brained in an exam is to say, 'I am stuck', to accept the situation and give oneself a couple of minutes to relax into it rather than panic. In the same way, your first duty is to admit 'I'm blocked' and

---

*Even this one is flawed, however, for the different reason that it's not always *true*—as witness words like 'weird', 'deign' and 'seize'!

†Hunter, *Memory,* p. 310.

accept the situation rather than worry at it. If none of the advice and devices outlined above have provided a solution, you might try one or other of the following.

1. Recite the information to be learned onto a tape, then play it back as often as you can stand. Once you've got over the usual ghastliness of hearing your voice as it sounds to others, it may be that the fact that it *is* your voice will render the material more immediate and learner-friendly.
2. Try to establish (or manufacture) connections between the things to be learnt. It is invariably easier to remember material that is 'grouped' rather than single.
3. Divide the material into smaller sections—single items if need be (point 2 notwithstanding) —and work on them fiercely but briefly. Return to them as often as you can bear: it won't be pleasant, but you may get a result!
4. Write it out for yourself in note form (see also Chapter 7). The act of writing engages more of the brain than just reading, and—analogous to the voice point in (1) above—the sight of the information in your own hand rather than impersonal typescript may help.

If none of these succeeds, there are just two things left.

5. Hope that the block will one day simply clear itself, as it were of its own volition.
6. See what sheer stinking *vanity* will do!

Point 6 is less facetious than you might think. A surprising amount of excellent work is fuelled by either vanity or rage or both, and if you decide you're determined not to let this stuff get the better of you, the chances are better than even that it won't.

Finally: if absolutely nothing I've suggested works, and if you find too that you have more than the odd memory-block in any given subject, it may be that you're somehow temperamentally unsuited to that subject. Some students do come to decide that this is the case, and it's better to know it early, so that you can change to something more in line with your talents and mental strengths. But I would hope that only a few of you will need seriously to consider such a step.

MEMORIES ARE MADE OF THIS

As a little bit of fun before we wind up this chapter, here is a form of memory test. In Fig. 4.1, page 60, there is a list of words. Get a piece of paper and a pen; and then, either read the words through to yourself, once, or get someone to read them to you at dictation speed. Do that NOW and then return to this page when you've finished. NB *Do not try to cheat! It's pointless anyway; and this is more of a game with educational connections than a test*.

Finished? Right:

1. Write down as many words, *in their original order,* as you can.
2. Write down any words that were repeated.
3. Write down any words that were linked.
4. Write down any other words you can remember.

It doesn't matter how you got on, really; but let me make a few guesses. I would imagine few of you got beyond four words in the correct original order, and none of you more than seven. (If you *did* get eight or

' ... determined not to let the stuff get the better of you'

more, write to me immediately!) You probably got most of the repeated words; and you also in all likelihood got the four Big Cats and most if not all the five numbers. As for the remainder, I'd bet that a lot of you got 'Julius Caesar', and a few other words.

As I say, your performance doesn't matter very much; the test is a playful examination of the principles I've outlined.

In question (1), you probably started well and finished well. This illustrates the learning curve on page 28, confirming that in most study periods or tasks, the brain retains more of each end than of the middle.

If you did reasonably well on question (2), that endorses the theory that the more often you encounter or use information, the more likely you are to remember it.

A similar principle to (2) lies behind (3). If you *connect* various items to each other, you stand a much-improved chance of retaining *all of* them, because of the connection.

In question (4) *random* selection is in charge. What you remembered depended more on your personality, your mood, and whatever private associations certain words may carry for you than on anything 'objective'. It has been suggested that anything incongruous or outstanding ('Julius Caesar' in this case) is usually remembered;* but in my experience this is not sufficiently frequent or consistent to merit special consideration. It would appear that *repetition* and *connection* are the truly reliable memory–enforcers, as Fig. 4.2 illustrates.

As a postscript, try out this test on your friends and family, and see how they get on. And if their performance is significantly at variance with what I've suggested, please write and tell me—I'd genuinely like to know. After all, experience is always more telling than theory: that's why educational research continues to be done!

before	of
moving have	have solid
lion	leopard
shall	while
the	nine
motor	the
on	two
grass	jaguar
one	sleep
at	when
tiger	brave
the	four
Julius Caesar	of
case	room
three	

Fig. 4.1

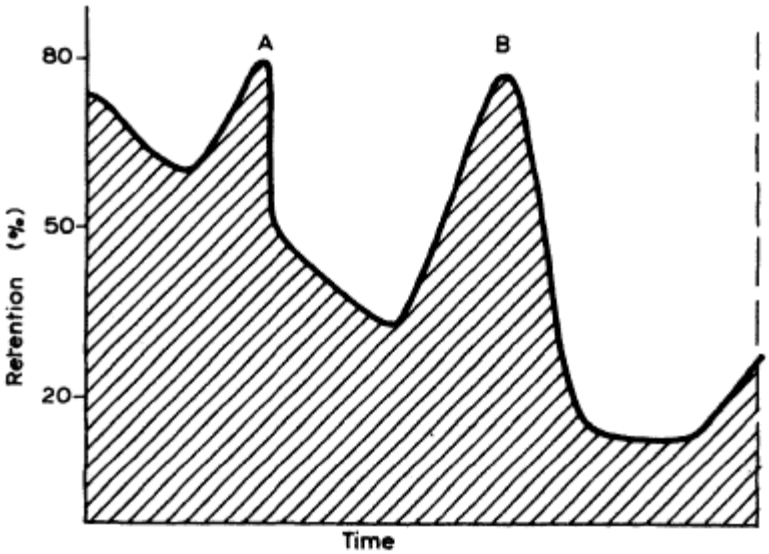


Fig. 4.2 How much the brain can retain. Notice the steady decline, as remarked in Fig. 3.1. Notice also, however, the sudden changes when the material has been repeated (A) and linked (B).

SUMMARY

The memory is perhaps the most extraordinary of all the many wonderful properties of your brain. If you want to pursue your knowledge of its make-up and function, then all the titles listed under 'Memory' in the Bibliography should interest and enlighten you. My own elementary survey has sought to provide a *foundation* of knowledge about its workings, based on the following principles:

1. Your memory is *your* responsibility, nobody else's. It is entirely within your scope to improve it. If your memory is poor and remains poor, it's because you can't be bothered to make it any better.
2. We all have a short-term memory and a long-term memory; and most study skills are designed to shift as much from the former to the latter as possible.
3. The 'intellectual' or academic memory is not an isolated structure: the more images and prompts you can bring in from the sensory memory, the better.
4. Memory-games, especially DIY mnemonics, are excellent aids. They are fun, and harness your personality to your memory, so that *all* of you is focused on the business of recall.
5. If you want to remember things, you've got to *care* about them.
6. There is something compellingly mysterious about memory. It has fascinated scholars for centuries, and there is still much we do not know about it. For your purposes as a student, though, it's best to adopt a sturdy, no-nonsense attitude to it. And as with any skill, a judicious mixture of hard work, play, and sheer *use* will make an enormous difference. If you sincerely want to remember things, it's remarkable what you can do.

The next chapter is closely related to this one. We've seen something of the memory's basic structure and behaviour; we have an idea of why we remember some things but forget others. Now it's time to see how we can keep knowledge fresh and available when we are adding each week to our total store of information.

*See, for example, Tony Buzan's *Use Your Head,* pp. 49–51. The graph he includes on his p. 51 plots a 90% recall for incongruous/outstanding items. My tests, conducted with 1000+pupils of all ages and both sexes, suggests that a figure below 50% is nearer the norm.

REVIEW
5

And if thou wilt, remember;
And if thou wilt, forget.

Christina Rossetti

INTRODUCTION

We have seen that your memory is your own responsibility. Its success depends in large part on two things: how much you want to remember things and how often you focus on them It's worth repeating that forgetfulness is rarely accidental. People forget things either because they have no real interest in them, or because they do not make enough effort to remember them. As Christina Rossetti suggests, it's entirely up to you.

Let me dispose of one common fallacy. A 'photographic memory' is exceptionally rare. You may have seen espionage films in which Agent X or Counterspy Z has only to look briefly at a document, close and open his eyes like a camera shutter, and imprint the material permanently on his brain. Amusing; but reality is less easy. It takes work, not magic, to commit something to memory, and even when the information is securely lodged there, you still need to use it if it is not eventually to disappear. However, don't be put off by that apparently forbidding observation. The work required will not take much time, although adequate concentration is needed.

REVIEW: BASIC PRINCIPLES

The previous chapter's simple quiz unremarkably suggested that we have no trouble remembering our name, our address, our phone number, and a host of other personal details. The reason is basic enough: they concern ourselves, and all of us are naturally and deeply interested in ourselves. But such interest in itself cannot be the only principle governing memory: there has to be a bit more to it than that. See how you get on with *this* quiz.

Write down

1. Your National Insurance number.
2. Your *previous* phone number.
3. The name of your MP.

4. The name of your Euro-MP.
5. The phone number of your doctor and/or dentist.
6. Your timetable/work-schedule *last* year?

It's possible that you remember some of these without having to look them up, but I'd be very surprised if *all five* come automatically to mind. Numbers 1, 3, 4 and 5 are important, certainly (depending on your view of MPs!), but it's unlikely you need to quote or use them very often. Numbers 2 and 6, on the other hand, *were* frequently used and significant, but are now defunct, and thus irrelevant.
'Well, so what?' you might be asking. 'What has my phone number of five years ago got to do with my current study and all the stuff I'm expected to remember at the end of my course?' Just this: that if you want to log something in your LTM, the key to success is *frequency* even more than *interest*. You can be fascinated and moved by something you learn in Week 2 of your course, but unless you look at it again, several times, in the weeks that follow, the chances are that by Week 25 it won't mean very much. The fact is that

The likelihood of remembering something is in direct proportion to the number of times it is used or studied.

That holds good for short-, medium- and long-term review, and here is an exemplary anecdote to illustrate it.

THE BENEFITS OF INTERMEDIATE REVIEW

Most readers of this book will, I assume, be studying for a post-GCSE course; however, cast your mind back to earlier school days if you can stand it, and revisit the days of French vocabulary tests.

1. It is Monday evening. You have a French test tomorrow—20 questions based on about 100 words to be learnt for tonight's homework. You work fiercely at it, and end the evening pretty confident.
2. Next morning, you have a quick consolidatory look, and if you're fortunate you manage a further five-minute one just before the test occurs.
3. You do well; on you go to the next section of work, to be similarly tested next Tuesday.
4. Unfortunately, your French teacher is a sneaky devil. When next Tuesday arrives, the test covers all that previous work, not the new stuff at all.
5. Like everyone else you feel hard done by, moan about 'unfairness', and get a poor score. You may cheer up a bit on discovering that others have done even worse than you; you may even end the lesson in a good mood, vying with your friends to dream up the nastiest phrase to sum up your devious cruel teacher!

But your teacher may have done what s/he did not to catch you out but to prove a point. Please look at Fig. 5.1. As with my graphs in earlier chapters, this one is a metaphor rather than scientifically based on strict data; none the less, it expresses a profound working truth. Even when your brain and memory are at their most efficient (between the years of 15 and 21), it is highly probable that if you take no further look at material learnt for a specific task at point x, a steep decline in recall will occur over eight days. Impressive at the time of the test (Monday), it has halved by Thursday and halved again by the following Tuesday.

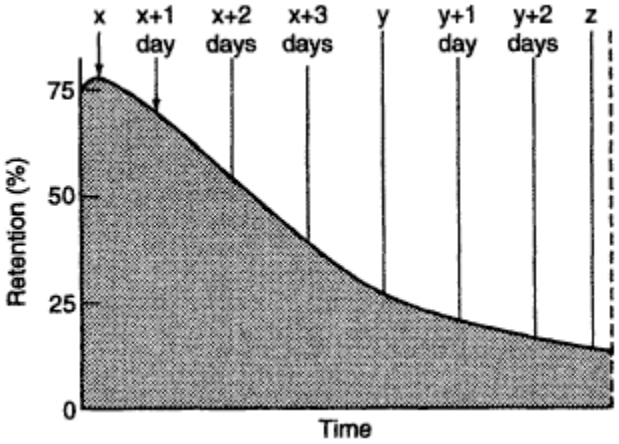


Fig. 5.1 Retention curve if work is studied at point x and not looked at again.

There is nothing extraordinary or shameful about this. During your middle-school years, up to 16+ examinations, a staggering amount of information and data competes for your attention, across perhaps nine or ten academic subjects and many other things too. You simply cannot retain it all first time around anyway; furthermore, as the week progresses, more recent material demands retention, perhaps for a Science test on Thursday and a History one the next day. Under pressure, the STM allows that carefully learnt French vocabulary to fade away: the space is urgently needed. But although that is understandable, it is not 'good business', and you need to do something about it. That something is defined by the acronym

RAYL

RAYL is my own variant of the tax system PAYE (Pay As You Earn) and denotes

Review As You Learn

RAYL is an immensely important principle, one that you should fix centrally in your mind from the outset of your course. If you regularly look over your past work, your retention should describe the pattern shown in Fig. 5.2. In other words, if you look at the work again at points y (Thursday) and z (the following Tuesday), you are likely to restore your knowledge to its original level of 80%. You may even go above that figure, now remembering things you did not get right in the test. Even if that 'bonus' does not occur, it is still a major improvement on the levels in Fig. 5.1 of 40% and 20% respectively.

For those of you who might be a little sceptical about my 'metaphorical graphs', I am happy to say that there *is* some significant scientific evidence that endorses all I've said. It is provided by the work of Herman Ebbinghaus (1850–1909), who conducted some important experiments on memorizing in the 1880s. The most telling for our purposes is one based on the learning and review of eight lists of his own devising.

These lists in fact comprised nonsense syllables—for obvious reasons, harder to learn than any 'systematic' material and therefore a most stringent test. Ebbinghaus read each list aloud at a steady rate, and continued the readings until he was able to give two errorless recitals of the entire list. He computed the total number of readings required to memorize perfectly all eight lists as the 'learning time'. After a lapse of from twenty minutes to one month, the same set of lists was re-learned in exactly the same way as before,

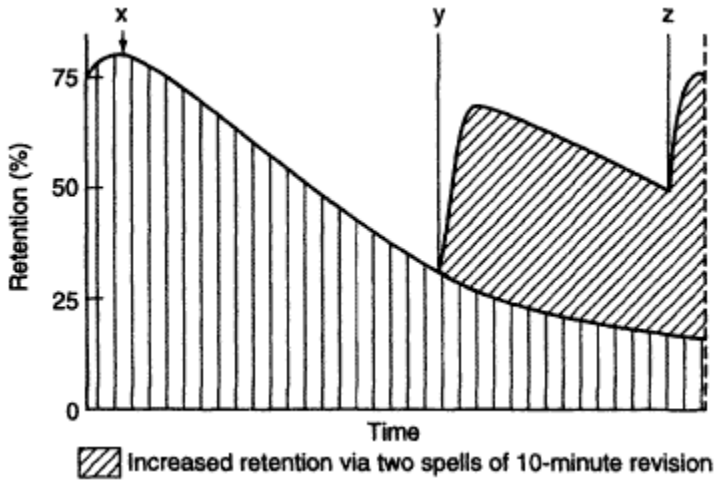


Fig. 5.2 Retention curve if work is studied at points x, y and z.

Time Since Learning	20 min	1 h	9 h	24 h	2 days	6 days	31 days
Average Saving Score	58%	44%	36%	34%	28%	25%	21%

Fig. 5.3 Memory reinforcement through repetition.

and he duly computed the 'relearning time'. By comparing the two times, he arrived at a measure of the retained effects of the original memorizing. For example, if the original learning required 1000 seconds, and if re-learning took 600 seconds, then the saving of effort was 400 seconds, or 40% of the original time. This 40% he termed the 'saving score'.

In this experiment he used seven different intervals between original learning and re-learning, shown in Fig. 5.3.* The steady decline in the 'saving score' might mislead you, as it did me at first. Far from being depressing, it is highly cheering, because what those decreasing percentages actually show is a **decline in *forgetfulness*.** The very high 'saving score' after twenty minutes makes absolute sense: when something is completely new to you, it is difficult to remember even half of it straightaway. (Similarly, as we shall see in the next chapter, it is almost impossible to absorb more than 40% of any text on your first reading.) Thereafter, Fig. 5.3 almost irresistibly suggests that the more you review your learning, the more you cumulatively remember.

Ebbinghaus was careful not to make excessively precise claims: that's why he logged the '*Average* Saving Score'. Such patterns of learning and memorizing can never be exactly computed: they will vary according to your temperament and condition, your liking or otherwise for the subject studied, and your natural aptitude in it. Whatever those circumstances, however, I can guarantee that such re-visits will consolidate and thus secure your knowledge much more reliably than if you leave it to chance, and to only one perusal.

The nicest thing about **RAYL** is that it does not—**should not**—take very long: we are talking of

as little as ten minutes a day.

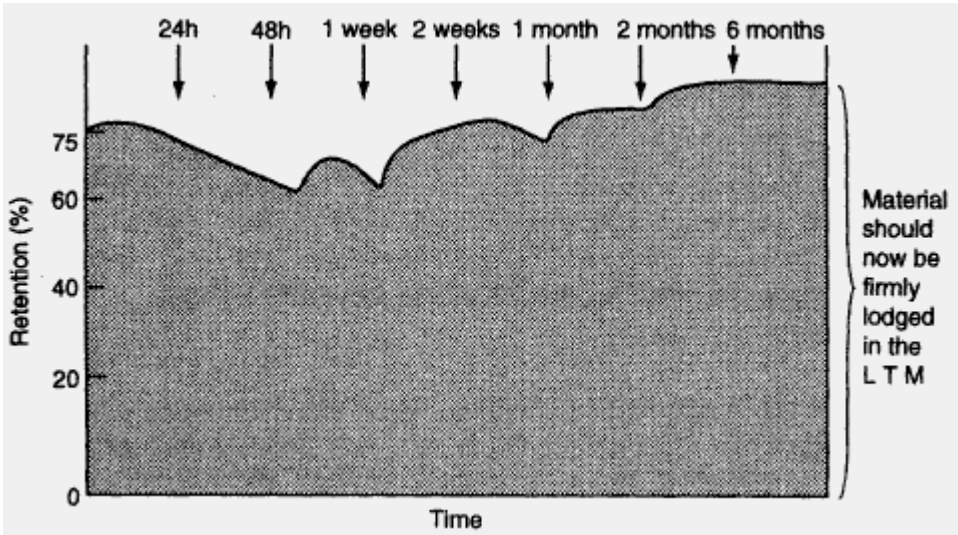


Fig 5.4 The benefits of regular review.

All you are doing is to refresh your memory of things you learnt very recently and with which it is therefore readily familiar. Provided you concentrate properly for those ten minutes, such review can be done at the end of an evening's work or at any fallow time. Indeed, such a practice is an ideal way of 'winding down' at the close of a work session. The brain does not 'turn off' fully and at once: it will welcome a gentle mulling over of user-friendly material.

As Ebbinghaus's experiment implies, this principle can be extended to cover a period of months, not just a week or so. In fact

regular review throughout a course is one key to success.

If you look regularly at your past work, your retention should describe a pattern as outlined in Fig. 5.4. By the time you come to your sixth return to the material, it should be part of your LTM; in other words, you *really* know it, and it is as accessible and intimate a knowledge as all those personal details which automatically come to mind.

Note: The advice in the last few paragraphs is expanded in the section below: **Taking the misery out of revision.**

FEED-BACK

The principle of review becomes even more central when your work runs to more than elementary word-learning and other such basic matters. Any advanced—i.e. 16+ —course has areas which are less matters of *fact* than matters of *interpretation*. This is more obviously the case in subjects like Literature and History

*For this table, and the account of Ebbinghaus's work that it illustrates, I am indebted to Ian M.L.Hunter, *Memory,* pp. 126–8.

Teachers are not gods

than in Science and Maths; whatever your subject, however, an advanced course requires you to *think* as well as absorb information. To put it another way: whereas in earlier years you could succeed by behaving like a diligent sponge, soaking up information in what was essentially a one-way process, your relationship with both the material you study and the teachers guiding you should be a two-way affair, a genuine **dialogue**—and that pre-supposes **feed-back**.

Later there is a chapter on how to make the best use of teachers. At this stage I would simply like to say this:

Your teacher is not God, no matter how clever, expert and knowledgeable s/he is or seems to be.

The sooner you stop being in awe of your teachers and regard them instead as wise guides, the better it will be for your study.

Since an example is more telling than any amount of generalizing, let us assume you have completed a long essay on the Causes of the Civil War (1642). Your next task is to consider Charles II's reign (1660–1685); so you start the preparatory reading, allowing the recent essay to recede.

In the meantime, the first essay is marked, and returned to you, with at least two or three comments in the margins and at the end, and probably considerably more. Some of these annotations will be criticisms or

factual corrections; but the majority will be suggestions, talking points, questions, and ideas for your further consideration. Since, however, you are now fully engaged in other work on Charles II's reign, you may be tempted to do no more than glance at these remarks, concentrating on the mark and any actual mistakes you've made. The *biggest* mistake you can make, however, is to do just that. If you don't *use* your teacher's comments, you are losing up to 50% of the value of doing that essay in the first place. For remember:

Actually *doing* a piece of work is only half the job: equally vital is what you do with it afterwards.

Unless your teachers are both lazy and inefficient, they will be only too pleased to discuss their suggestions and comments with you. But it is just as valuable to think them through on your own, using their ideas — and any new ones you may have had in consequence—as a springboard. Whether you discuss these with them or with yourself, such a dialogue is essential, providing three distinct and major gains.

1. Reviewing your recent work will help establish it more clearly in your mind, aiding eventual revision.
2. Your *understanding* of what you've done, and the area of study it covers, will improve considerably. This will increase both the quality of your knowledge and your confidence.
3. Your next task will benefit. Most aspects of a course are organically linked: to return to the example cited, a thorough understanding of the causes of the Civil War will almost certainly assist you in appraising the reign of the monarch who ruled less than twenty years later.

COURSES ARE LINEAR, MINDS ARE NOT

The human mind is a miraculous construct, but it is not always logical. Or rather, its logic, its patterns, and its connections do not follow a straightforward A to B to C…path. This enables us to achieve all kinds of things that are noble, exciting, beautiful, or witty; but it does occasionally make studying difficult, because most academic courses *do* describe an implacably logical, linear pattern. It is not my place here to debate the desirability that places such stress on a particular *kind* of thinking at the expense of other kinds: rightly or wrongly, we operate in an academic world where student and teacher alike must adjust to the demands of a linear course.And regular review is one of the best ways of tailoring your mind to those demands. The more you become familiar with your past work, the better are your chances of grasping and enjoying present and future tasks. For regular review helps you to *build* a linear response within your mind, and thus gradually makes thinking easier, or at least more congenial. Your mind will continue also to work in its wonderful, non-linear ways; but you will have *added* a skill, even a dimension, to it, and thus made it even fitter for the job you have to do during the course.

EDITING AND ADDING

One of the benefits of a linear course is that you can see, fairly clearly, how much progress you're making. If you think of your course as a mountain—and many students do, initially at any rate! —then your months of study resemble climbing that mountain. At any given point, you can look down and see how much you've covered, and look up at what remains to be done. Often, seeing what you've already achieved instils fresh energy and confidence to attack the remainder. Students who are in touch with their past work find that a similar rhythm characterizes their study.

So it is both sensible and natural to use your present state of knowledge to edit or up-date your past work. Review is not *merely* a question of perusing your past work and learning it more thoroughly and deeply:

there is a more creative side to the process. For instance, when you look back over past essays, you may find it amusing to see what you wrote. Sometimes you will be embarrassed by what you read, but this is a good experience, not a humiliating one. Far more than suggesting how dumb you once were, it shows how far you have come and how much better equipped you now are.

As well as this encouraging sense of your progress, there will be things you've learnt and read since doing those early essays which will alter your perceptions in a very concrete way. So go back over your essays and annotate them *yourself*. This will deepen and freshen your knowledge, and also sponsor the kind of friendly self-criticism that toughens the mind—a quality essential to every successful student.

Finally, a word about editing in the narrow sense of 'reduction'. Early in your course, it makes complete sense to 'explore' topics in a somewhat wordy or loosely structured fashion. Any first essay is like any first reading: it will not be very efficient, there will be gaps in understanding, and style and structure may be awkward. This is both normal and valuable— it allows you scope to develop your argument and your understanding as the weeks and months go by. But when you *do* achieve understanding, it's an excellent idea to go over your past work looking for 'flab'—the sentences and paragraphs that don't really say anything but merely mark time while you get ready to make your next point of substance.*

Such a filtering process is not only stimulating in itself: it will greatly assist you in developing exam technique, and it will make final revision more agreeable. Which brings us neatly to the next section.

TAKING THE MISERY OUT OF REVISION

I address revision extensively in Part Three, but it is worth a section here, if only because it underlines the value of Review As You Learn **(RAYL)** as a policy. For the word 'revision' is virtually synonymous with 'review': both denote the re-perusal of material that is familiar. Ideally, revision should be somewhat analogous to using a cassette-player. When you insert a tape, the machine automatically reads the magnetic signals and recodes them into music, the spoken word, or whatever. If you've worked sensibly and successfully during the course, past ideas, information, methods and skills should flood back into your mind in a comparably reliable way.

For a great many students, however, 'revision' is a sad and terrifying misnomer. About six weeks before the exam, they return to all their work of the past year or more, and make the appalling discovery that hardly any of it seems even remotely familiar. Their 'revision period' is no such thing: it is a frenzied and exhausting time attempting to learn again *from scratch*. Maybe that's why so many examinees look so dreadful when they arrive at the exam hall—pasty and drained, with bloodshot eyes and trembling hands. It's hardly surprising: *anyone* would look awful after trying to do upwards of a year's work in less than two months.

If you follow the advice in this chapter, you should never be in that position. When you come to revise, you'll find that cassette-player principle operating hearteningly well. Of course you may discover that you've changed your mind about some of the things you wrote or thought earlier, or have since discovered new facts or angles that recolour previous work. This is good: it means you are consolidating your knowledge in a healthily critical fashion that makes a cogent and efficient exam performance much more likely.

Don't laugh, but revision should be *enjoyed*. It ought to be pleasant to dispense with classes in order to work on your own—no matter how well you have got on with your teachers. If you've kept in regular touch

*The matter of the 'exploratory essay' and subsequent editing is revisited at greater length in Chapter 8.

with your work over the months, there shouldn't be any need for you to work while battling with anxiety. You can practise answering past exam questions; you can test yourself or work with a friend; you can concoct little games that sharpen the memory and fully establish the major points you'll want to make in the exam; and, perhaps most important of all, you can

find out in your own time and with no immediate external pressure which areas of your syllabus you *like* most.

Virtually all advanced exams allow you to choose which questions you do, and it is always wise to pick the topics that you find most congenial. This is as true for Maths and Physics as it is for Politics or English Literature: informed enthusiasm is a pleasing quality at all times, and nowhere more so than in an exam paper.

Above all, do not attempt to work *all the time* during the revision period. If you've reviewed your work regularly, it's unnecessary to adopt such a miserable regime. It is better to have some fun and some rest as well as working. After all, the exams will make major demands on your physical and mental stamina as well as your knowledge: it makes no sense to arrive at the starting-blocks exhausted and fed up. The poet and playwright Ben Jonson expressed this principle unimprovably:

Ease and relaxation are profitable to all studies. The mind is like a bow, the stronger by being unbent.

SUMMARY

At the end of his chapter on Ebbinghaus's work that I made use of earlier, Ian M.L.Hunter cites four principles or conditions that facilitate learning:

Motivation; Material; Repetition; Maintenance*

Motivation is largely self-explanatory, although Hunter's remarks on it endorse my earlier point about manufacturing interest in a topic if necessary:

Integrate the task into activities which are already interesting.

Material is essentially an extension of that last principle—the need to arrange the stuff to be learnt in ways which clarify and emphasize whatever characteristics are to be memorized. This bears out my earlier remarks about linking, sequencing and the *organic* nature of most study. **Repetition** is also self-explanatory by now, I hope. And by **Maintenance** Hunter denotes everything I have said about regular review—at first frequent, and then at progressively longer intervals.

Hunter's conclusion confirms my observation at the beginning of the previous chapter—that there is nothing miraculous about an efficient memory. If you *want* to remember things, that is half the battle; the other half is taking regular and careful looks back at what you've done. This makes your perception of it wider and more detailed; furthermore, the increasing degree of *dialogue* between the work and yourself transforms it from a distant, perhaps forbidding stranger to an easy acquaintance. Best of all, it shows you that your study is organically *yours*. It is something that grows and functions as part of you, not some external construct imposed upon you, and that also helps you to enjoy yourself more. Finally, it doesn't take

much time. Ten minutes a day is ample, and the benefits of such brief efforts are hard to exaggerate. Now that's what I call good time-management!

*Hunter, *Memory,* pp. 141–2.

PART TWO

SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

So far in this book I have dealt with the fundamental aspects of study. The first five chapters have focused on approach and basic fact: how the mind works, finding the right attitude and working method, trusting your own instincts, and so on. By concentrating on how to start, how to adopt a working rhythm that is natural and pleasant, and how to keep in touch with your past work, I have tried to give you a sense of the *overall shape* of study. This feeling is essential to real efficiency and success. I hope by now you have an idea of how good your mind can be, and how much you are capable of. Above all, I hope I have convinced you that a sense of fun is not only possible but desirable: whatever your reasons for doing the course, you will do much better if you enjoy yourself. A proper sense of vanity is conducive to all successful study!

It is now time to look in detail at specific skills. The next chapters offer advice on techniques that are, unfortunately, rarely taught in schools or colleges. I would guess that few of you have received any systematic advice on how to take notes, how to plan essays, how to read quickly and efficiently, or even how best to prepare yourself for exams. But remember that, as with everything in this book, my ideas are advice, not orders. They are designed to help you, to give you something to think about and experiment with. They are *not* tablets of stone, so if you find that some of them don't work for you, don't worry: *use* that discovery, and find something else that does. Remember:

You are in charge.

EYES RIGHT: EFFECTIVE READING
6

> Sir, do you read books *through*?
>
> *Samuel Johnson*

Samuel Johnson devoted his life to books, learning and words; it is therefore hardly likely that he intended the above remark to encourage mere dabbling in his own books or anyone else's. Quite the reverse: his incredulous question was inspired by the knowledge that if a book is at all worth while, it will both need and stimulate several visits.

It needs to be stressed at once that he was talking—as am I—about 'serious' reading rather than 'casual' reading for pleasure. To start at point A and go through to point Z is a perfectly viable way to read a good thriller or a holiday novel; one could argue that such works can *only* be read that way, partly because one rarely feels the need or desire to return to them. But the reading you do as part of your course is intensive and central—it is material mat you have deeply to absorb, and learn. In those circumstances to rely solely on that 'A to Z' method is rarely effective, chiefly because:

> **If a course book is worth reading, it's worth reading twice; moreover, if you want to get something substantial out of it, it *must* be read at *least* twice, and probably a lot more.**

Your criterion is *mastery,* or at the very least intelligent digestion of a book's contents, in terms of both its main arguments and its details. That cannot be achieved at one go—not even in the case of brilliant students reading something they're instinctively and pleasurably drawn to. Indeed, this guiding principle has, I believe, the status of fact:

> **On *any* first reading, your chances of digesting more than 40% are slim, regardless of the amount of time you spend on it.**

I shall return to that observation shortly. First, however, we need to be clear *exactly* what is meant here by 'read'. So let us begin by considering a few popular misconceptions about reading, especially those that have a bearing on 'slow readers'.

SIX MISCONCEPTIONS

Misconception 1: 'It is essential to read every word'

Though not entirely untrue, this can all too easily become a recipe for painfully inefficient and dispiriting progress.

Like a number of ideas that are unhelpful to advanced study, the notion is a hangover from our primary school days. Please do not think that I am casting scorn on those ideas as such: they are right for the people they serve—*young children acquiring completely new skills*. A child learning to read must focus fully on each individual word: how else can s/he build a vocabulary and develop a functional sense of grammar?

But once you are into your teens, with a vocabulary that runs into five figures and a by-now automatic grasp of how sentences work, it makes no sense at all to abide by practices which are out of date for you. In the case of reading, this wouldn't matter if such methods were still useful, but they aren't. Consider, for example, this sentence:

The man in the wine-splattered raincoat tripped over the sleeping dog and crashed against the dustbins.

No word is unfamiliar, and no vocabulary problem exists. It is not a *difficult* sentence: it describes two simple actions, and, though quite dramatic, makes no excessive demands on either our imagination or a sense of logic.

However, if you are someone who 'reads every word', you're going to find that sentence fairly laborious: after all, it contains seventeen separate words. Now think of using such a method to read a thirty-page chapter, bearing in mind that most books average about four hundred words a page! That is a daunting task: all those separate words—*tens of thousands* of them per half-hour session—will not only slow you up appallingly but also force you to work doubly hard reconstituting them into meaningful grammatical constructs.

If like most people you've received no instruction in reading since the age of eight, you may be growing somewhat puzzled. The key to what I'm talking about is

an understanding of the way the eye works.

To set up that enquiry, and to demonstrate why 'reading every word' is a poor method, let us consider another misconception.

Misconception 2: 'Fast reading is unnatural/bad for the eyes'

The human eye is an astonishing instrument, but it must *focus* in order to translate the image for the brain. To focus, it has to come to rest or fix on an object: it cannot track a moving object unless it is able to focus on each stage of movement. You can demonstrate this for yourself via a simple game with a couple of friends.

Get them to focus on your index finger, which you should at first hold in front of their faces at a comfortable distance. Then ask them to go on focusing as you move it slowly to one side and then the other, and *watch their eye-movement*. You will see that it is possible for them to 'track' your finger movement only if they move their eyes at the same rate, constantly adjusting in order to maintain focus.

Word on a page are of course static; but, put together in the form of sentences and paragraphs, they occupy a breadth of space which requires the eye to move in order to absorb them all. The laws of its focusing powers, just described, mean that the eye must keep stopping, however briefly, to take in each separate static construct. More comforting is the fact that it has an extremely impressive *rate* of focusing. All human beings are capable of focusing on *four things per second.*

That means, if you 'read every word', you can take in four words per second. But that is the least you can do, not the most: there is no reason why each of those four foci per second cannot take in several words at a time. With nothing more gimmicky than alert concentration and a sense of how sentences are actually written, you can make your reading not only faster but much more efficient.

The forthcoming section addresses in detail *how* to bring that about; first, let's nail for ever the myth that fast reading damages the eyes, which is as worthless as the related old-wives-drivel about the harmful ocular effect of watching too much television. (That may damage your mind with its plastic corn, but your eyes will be okay!) The eye is, first and foremost, a muscle: like all muscles, it is the better for being used often and used efficiently. Speed-reading cannot increase your rate of focus beyond that optimum of four things per second; it can, however, greatly increase your *breadth* of focus, without putting any additional strain on the eyes whatever. Indeed, because it makes reading more enjoyable and more satisfying, it could be said to *reduce* eye-strain—if only because you can finish so much quicker and thus give your eyes an earlier rest.

Misconception 3: 'Very fast reading speeds are impossible'

It is said that the late President Kennedy could read state documents and official memoranda (items not noted for the elegance or easiness of their prose) at a speed of 1200 words per minute. Most people—including the author of a book on reading—have pooh-poohed this as impossible, and concluded that such a spurious claim was the invention of Kennedy's image-building team.

Well, 1200 wpm (words per minute) is a lot, I agree; but there is no reason to dismiss it as fantasy. I know several people whose reading speed is at least 1000 wpm and many others who have trained themselves to go far beyond the 500 wpm mark that is popularly assumed to be the absolute 'ceiling'. How do they manage it?

Remember that sentence I gave you?

> **The man in the wine-splattered raincoat tripped over the sleeping dog and crashed against the dustbins.**

Anyone determined to 'read every word' will, in effect, re-punctuate the sentence as follows:

> **The. man. in. the. wine. splattered. raincoat. tripped. over. the. sleeping. dog. and. crashed. against. the. dustbins.**

That looks ridiculous, of course. But it's precisely what you're doing if you focus separately on each individual word—a method that is, I regret to say, exactly that of the toddler grappling with

> **The. cat. sat. on. the. mat.**

Such a parallel is all the more humiliating when you remember that, unlike the toddler, you now possess a sophisticated sense of grammar. In other words, you know that sentences consist of words that build on each other and make sense as *groups* or *sets*. For that is all that grammar is, finally—nothing more (nor less) than a system that enables and promotes clear understanding.

Not only is this impressively faster: it is also more intelligent. By reading concepts or intelligible groups of words rather than mere isolated nouns, verbs, adjectives and so on, you are immediately in tune with the writing's basic design and the logic of the writer's thoughts. Thus you will get the point of the writing much more quickly: in addition to the increase in speed with which you cover the text *spatially,* you are greatly accelerating your *understanding*.

To sum up: very fast reading speeds are not impossible. You can do wonders to your own speed once you learn to read in 'sets': indeed, you can increase it sixfold:

1. You will cover the print at—conservatively—*three times* the rate available to you if 'reading every word'.
2. You will then double that speed by virtue of a much-improved *conceptual* grasp of the writing's direction.

To be sure, there will be times when the structure and vocabulary you encounter will be much more complex than the example I have used, and this will inevitably slow your rate down. Even at its least successful, however, I can promise you that the method I've outlined will make a dramatic difference. There is no reason why you should ever be a 'slow reader' again, no need to 'read every word' in a non-literate, plodding fashion. Speed reading is within everyone's capabilities; as an automatic corollary, so is speedier understanding. And for any casual reader, let alone the serious one, that is always the chief goal.

Misconception 4: 'Skip-reading is lazy and dishonest'

It depresses me how often I meet this attitude: it smacks of sterile Puritanism, and also displays a basic ignorance of how people learn. Provided it is not to be the only method you adopt, and provided that you do not imagine you can achieve full understanding by it, 'skip-reading' is a sensible and productive practice for any student who has a large reading load. Its charm and effectiveness are twofold:

1. It enables a useful preliminary reconnaissance of new material.
2. It supplies a welcome break from the kind of concentration required during more 'orthodox' or severe reading activity.

'Skip-reading' is a vague term that can mean all things to all men and all women. My use of it is fairly elastic, covering everything from a ten-minute flick through a 300-page volume to the more measured practice of ignoring the odd chapter. In short, I mean any kind of coverage that departs from the A to Z, read-right-through method.

The value of skip-reading is that it allows you to acquaint yourself quickly with aspects of a book and/or its essential territory. Under no circumstances should it be undertaken as a *substitute* for 'full' reading; as an *accompaniment* to it, however, it can prove very valuable as a consolidatory exercise or a launching one.

I stressed at the outset that any serious reading is going to have to be done at least twice. It makes sense, therefore, to make your first look at the material a brief and general one. If the volume/chapter/article has an introduction and/or interim summaries, read those first, as well as casting your eye over the rest of the

Only a Puritan thinks skip-reading is wrong

material. This will help you establish from the start a sense of what the stuff is about. In turn, that will make your eventual 'full' reading more knowledgeable, and thus more confident and alert.

Naturally you don't *have* to do this. I find it works for me: perhaps it suits my temperament, or maybe it's just that I've always done it, and the habit is now an efficient one. I can also say that it's helped a lot of my students. But if you don't *want* to skip-read, preferring to get the laboriousness out of the way early on, that's fine: it's no part of my intention to impose unsuitable or disagreeable techniques on you. As I've emphasized from the very first page of this book, you are in charge, and what best pleases you will be your likeliest route to success. But do not despise skip-reading, or, even worse, cultivate a sense of guilt or moral disapproval over it. It is no more shameful than it is useless; and if you find it helpful, then go ahead and do it.

Misconception 5: 'I'd like to read more but don't have time'

I'm afraid that such a remark is, in at least 95% of cases, pure drivel. Nearly all of us *always* have time to read more. If we don't do so, it's because we can't be bothered, or (more kindly) because we're too tired or sluggish to feel capable of taking on something as demanding as a book. This is normal and not in the least shameful, but it is an *excuse,* and as such is always suspect.

There are, it is true, some people who genuinely can't read as much or as often as they'd like to. The point is, though, that they are not students! Or, if they are, they must do something about such a time-problem. Any advanced study demands a lot of reading—be it Science, Humanities, Languages or more practical courses such as Education Diplomas or Architecture. All the prospectuses I've ever read make this abundantly clear from the start, and if students find that their reading load is getting difficult to cope with, there are only two possible reasons.* Either

1. they're reading unnaturally slowly;

or

' ... they're reading unnaturally slowly'

2. they're doing too many other things.

Any attempt to put the blame for your non-reading on your 'impossibly busy life' really won't do. If you're advised to read things for your course and you don't do so, it's *your* fault. 'I haven't had the time' is a classic euphemism for laziness.

Very few teachers or lecturers will give you a bad time if you trot out this stale piffle, because, frankly, they see no reason why they should chase you to do work you've taken on voluntarily. It's your problem, not theirs, and if you advance the absurd claim that you're so vitally occupied that you'd need a twenty-eight-hour day to accomplish all you've been advised to, you can't expect more than weary grimace-grin in response!

Misconception 6: 'Slow reading facilitates memory'

In a way I've already covered this in my look at the 'reading every word' syndrome. But the fallacy needs separate examination—partly because it seems so reasonable and wise that many can be seduced by it.

We've seen, in the chapter on **Memory,** that the brain's natural (and therefore most efficient) span covers between twenty and thirty-five minutes. We have also seen that recall is usually instant or else not forthcoming at all. In view of this, it is hardly likely that a slow-moving attempt to commit things to memory is going to be more successful than one which is faster and more energetic. But we do not have to rely on such general logic: it can be demonstrated in a clear and concrete way.

Find two pieces of writing, about the same length. They should, ideally, be pieces you haven't read before, although something you've vaguely looked at once will suffice. Preferably, your two pieces should either be about the same subject, or else about two subjects that you feel equally comfortable with (or equally uncomfortable!). If you like, two separate pages or sections of this book will do very well. Then:

1. Read the first as slowly as is natural for you. Don't read it *more than once;* but don't go on to the next sentence until you're confident that you've understood the previous one.
2. Take a few minutes' break.

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*Discounting, that is, the possibility that they're doing the wrong course!

3. Now read the second piece *as fast you can while retaining an intelligent sense of it*. Look it over again, *once* and *very quickly*.
4. Take another few minutes' break.
5. Finally, get a piece of paper and write down all you can remember about Passage 1, and then about Passage 2. (If you prefer, get a friend/member of your family to 'test' you on each passage.)

I would be very surprised if there is much difference between your two performances; moreover, I wouldn't be surprised if you did slightly better on Passage 2 than Passage 1. Most of all, I'd be amazed if the five minutes you spent on Passage 1 resulted in you remembering *five times as much of it* as you did of Passage 2, which you read in a minute. For, to remind you of an earlier observation:

> **On *any* first reading, your chances of digesting more than 40% are slim, regardless of the amount of time you spend on it.**

If the material is at all stimulating, your mind needs some time and some room to come to terms with it. (This is one reason, incidentally, why a 'photographic memory' is an illusory concept.) You can *imagine* you've understood a sentence; but, by the time you've read three or four more sentences, it is likely that, although you retain an *impression* of that sentence that is enough to enable you to understand the subsequent ones, your 'absolute recall' of it will already be merely partial. You will, with slow methodical reading, acquire a sense of the overall shape of the material, plus some individual points and ideas. But you can achieve *that* kind of grasp with the much faster method I've outlined; so why waste time and energy? You're going to have to read all your study material again anyway, however slowly you cover it the first time: doesn't it seem sensible to deal with the first stage as efficiently (i.e. quickly) as you can?

I wouldn't be writing this book, let alone this chapter, if I were unsympathetic to 'slow' readers. What I do want to banish is the idea that there is anything virtuous or intrinsically profitable about slow reading. As I hope I've demonstrated in principle, it is relatively easy to increase your reading speed. What stops people from trying is that they feel either suspicious of fast reading or cosily orthodox about the funereal rate they adopt, or both. Once you've escaped that trap, you are ready to try experimenting with specific speed-reading techniques, three of which we turn to now.

SPEED-READING TECHNIQUE 1: 'DIGITAL TRACKING'

This method has been well known for some time, and it is quite straightforward, although riot everyone will find it easy. What you do is this:

1. Take your index finger—it will probably help if the nail has not been bitten down to the quick! —and place it directly under the first word of the passage you are about to read.
2. Then read as fast as is comfortable, using the tip of your finger as a 'tracker'—as if it were underlining everything as you read.
3. Continue until you feel your concentration ebbing. Take a short rest, and then go on in the same way, takings rests as and when you wish.

The idea here is to intensify your focus and thereby your speed. Digital tracking increases your attention by physically targeting it, just as underlining or italicizing words when writing draws attention to their importance and (presumably) makes them more memorable.

Fig. 6.2 The 'S-plan'.

Many people have found this technique a great help, and it is certainly worth trying. I nevertheless have two reservations about it.

1. It can be extremely tiring—just as underlining whole chunks of prose soon becomes arduous. It requires considerable discipline—no bad thing in itself, of course—which can quickly take its toll. That is why my above description mentions the need to rest as soon as you feel the need.
2. Some people—myself included—find such finger-tracing irksome and distracting. For a start, you have to be digitally accurate, otherwise you simply cover up the lines rather than highlight them! More fundamentally, the physical act of tracking can cloud the cerebrum— that part of the brain that decodes signals and makes sense of (among other things) words. In short, the additional motor-activity that tracking involves can blur focus rather than assist it.

No single speed-reading technique will work for everybody. If the above is the answer for you, excellent. If not, try this next, which was recommended to me by a very bright Malaysian student I met a few years ago.

SPEED-READING TECHNIQUE 2: 'THE S-PLAN'

I admit in advance that at first sight this one seems seriously crazy! But try it: I can report that many have found it a remarkably effective method, although I ought to stress that it is best used during the first reading of material to be learnt. In addition, it is entirely unsuitable for the reading of novels, or indeed any kind of creative literature.

What you do is very simple—although, again, that does not mean it is easy! You fix your eye on the top right-hand corner of the page, and then allow your eye to sweep down the page in the rough form of the letter S (Fig. 6.1). I'll be surprised if you don't get the giggles the first couple of times you try this—I certainly did! But once you've settled down, you should find that a surprising amount of what you take in makes a lot of sense.

Let's assume that you're reading a closely argued article, or a chapter from an academic textbook. As your eye describes its snake-like 'S' pattern, a number of words or concepts are likely to come repeatedly into focus. If this happens—and on average it does so eight times out of ten—the probability is that those instances are **key words,*** central to the concerns and arguments at issue. Thus you stand a good chance of

picking up a working idea of the territory and its main features— which is all you can sensibly hope for on *any* first reading. The advantage here is that it will have taken you about a quarter of the time a rapid 'full' read takes, with very similar levels of retention and overall awareness.

As I've just implied, there will be pages that are rendered mere gibberish by such a method—maybe up to 20%. But the 'positive' figure of 80% is not to be sneered at; in addition, as you get more experienced, you can widen the 'band' that the S incorporates, thus increasing the likelihood of hitting upon rapidly intelligible material.

The final 'plus' of this technique is that it's *fun*—hence those initial giggles. And as I've been advocating from the very beginning, anything in study that increases your sense of enjoyment is going to increase your chances of success.

SPEED-READING TECHNIQUE 3: PALMER'S 6-POINT PROGRAMME

This has nothing to do with the '6P Principle' I outlined earlier (see above, p. 34). Instead it is a system which, at its most successful, enables you to read a passage six times much more efficiently and also actually quicker than characterizes one A–Z reading. As with the S-plan outlined above, it is not suitable for any kind of creative literature; some advice on how to speed-read such works can be found in Appendix B. Unlike the S-plan, however, it is useful at any time—the first reading, the second, and all subsequent ones right up to final revision. It is, I hope, tailor-made for mastering textbooks, discursive essays, articles and all forms of coursework.

The programme is based on, or approximates, that delightful and apparently casual activity known as 'browsing'. If we pick up a book that looks interesting—in a bookshop, a library, a friend's house—the following behaviour-pattern occurs:

> **Just about the only thing we *don't* do is start at page 1 and read from there. Instead, we read the blurbs on the back and inside covers; we look at the index; we flick through the pages once or twice, often stopping if a picture or diagram catches our eye.**

My programme extends that natural approach into a system.

Let us assume you have to read 30 pages of closely argued analysis (the subject matter is more or less immaterial). You:

1. **Read the headings, sub-headings and (where appropriate) chapter titles.**
2. **Read the introduction, the conclusion and any interim summaries there may be.**
3. **Read/peruse any graphs, illustrations, diagrams and tables.**

That will take *five minutes* at most. And in response to possible questions such as 'So what?' or 'Why bother?':

> **Those five minutes provide an immediate sense of the overall shape and focus of the material, sketching out the terrain you must later cover in detail.**

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*See the next chapter on **Note-taking** for more on this concept.

The text is no longer alien: you are ready to do some *real* reading—some-thing that is not actually true when and as you pick up the stuff for the first time. Then:

4. **Read the *first* and *last* sentences of each paragraph.**
5. **Fill in the remaining gaps: that is, read it through now in the 'normal' A–Z fashion.**
6. **Review and clear problems.**

Let's look at all six points in proper detail.

As noted, strands 1–3 make a virtue and a system out of everyday 'browsing' behaviour, making the initial reconnaissance less random and better focused. After these few minutes, you have acquired a grasp of the author's preoccupations, the direction of the argument, and the broad issues dealt with. You are now ready—and sensibly equipped—to dig deeper.

Point 4 is the oddest and most controversial. Some students have rebelled at it at first, arguing that 'fiddling around' with paragraphs in such a fashion actually *wastes* time, and is an irritating distraction. This *can* be the case, I agree; but, much more often, I have found it enormously useful. For if you overcome its initial strangeness, the practice offers two benefits: it is a fine concentration exercise, and it also feeds you a great deal of information at considerable speed.

How? Get hold of a paragraph. (Any will do, provided it's adequately written.) Read it through in an 'orthodox' way. If the writer has any idea what he's doing, you will see that it follows a logical, even *predictable,* pattern. A paragraph, after all, is an argument in miniature: it introduces a topic, explores it, and then draws a conclusion. So one can assume that if one reads the beginning and end of such a paragraph, it should be possible to make at least an 'educated guess' at the content and direction of the material in between.

That's how the 'fourth strand' of the programme works. Provided you concentrate hard, and are not tempted to scan anything but those first and last sentences, your mind will *automatically* be drawing inferences and filling in the gaps for itself. So you can flit from paragraph to paragraph at high speed, while your brain estimates the likely nature of what you're missing out.

Of course, there will be times when those 'educated guesses' are inaccurate. At this stage in your reading, you are only getting to know the material, not mastering it, and it's inevitable that you will sometimes fail to take account of a point that appears in the middle. But even that is a help: the surprise you will feel at the subsequent discovery shows *how far you've progressed already*. For, even before arriving at point 5, where you read the text 'normally', you are now reading it *critically*. That is, you are reading with certain expectations, a sense of where the writer is going and the 'stops' s/he will be visiting along the way. Encountering an unscheduled (='unguessed') stop will be beneficial either way: the writer's detour may be fruitful, or it may be unjustified. Whatever the case, your understanding of the material will have been considerably increased.

I should add, finally, that this technique cannot always be used—for the simple reason that some authors produce paragraphs that only have two sentences altogether! Stinginess of this kind is not necessarily bad writing: I've seen several excellent science textbooks that use such a method to aid clarity. Usually, though, good professionals authors organize their paragraphs in a standard fashion, and that means you should be able to pursue point 4 without undue trouble.

Point 5, as already outlined, restores you at last to the normal A–Z method of reading. But there's a big difference from those times when you have adopted that procedure from the very start. Now you have a strong sense of what you're about to read. This not only means that you will cover the ground much faster: it also means that the various points and ideas will register much more definitely. Furthermore, there's an important by-product: you will enjoy the 'full read' much more. Your confidence will be higher because

' ... things are getting rather foggy'

you know what the stuff's about, and you will also find it pleasant to have a *dialogue* with the text rather than have to plough submissively through it.

Point 6 is a kind of 'mopping-up operation'. The first five readings should ensure an impressive rate of absorption, but there will be gaps, especially if this is the first session you've had on the material. Now you should read it through again (A-Z style), actively looking for anything you've missed altogether or remain somewhat hazy about.

Using this method, you will spend *less* time than you would on a once-through 'standard' read. You will still need to return to the material again at some stage, probably more than once; but you will have given yourself an efficient start that will make all future reading more agreeable.

I cannot claim that this system works for everyone, although I can say that it has proved a considerable help to over half the students I've given it to over the years. As implied earlier, some people find point 4 more trouble than it's worth, and prefer to 'double up' point 5—i.e. read the whole thing through twice in an orthodox fashion. However, even when it proves less than fully successful, or even a failure, one benefit almost invariably accrues—a belief that speed-reading is possible, and that a personally suitable technique can be found somewhere or invented some way. As with everything else, you are in charge: if you *want* to read faster, you will eventually hit upon a productive way of doing so.

As a final incentive, let's take a look at an experience that often characterizes the first reading of a textbook chapter. If you're an 'orthodox' or 'normal' reader, I'll be very surprised if you don't recognize this little scenario.

> **You pick up the book, find the chapter at issue and start reading. All may be well for a while; but by the time you're into the second page, things are getting rather foggy. You struggle on, reach the end of the page—and then, suddenly you realize about half-way down your third page that you've hardly taken in a thing. Not only have you lost your way: you can't even remember what territory you're in or what the map suggested.**

Familiar, is it? Well, be comforted: it happens to every reader sooner or later, and quite frequently too if we're not careful. But it is a dispiriting and energy-sapping phenomenon that is trebly annoying:

1. You've utterly wasted the first five or ten minutes of your study session—all the more galling in that such a time should find you at your freshest and most alert.
2. You will have to do it again—which almost feels like a punishment for 'bad work'.
3. You will feel stupid and inefficient—hardly conducive to the confidence that underscores successful study.

Point 3 in this list is an over-severe reaction: such an irritating episode does *not* prove that you're a slow-witted dolt. It is the *system* that is at fault, not your brain: the only stupid thing you've done is adopt such a method in the first place. Much better to use any of the 'skimming' methods outlined earlier, using those first ten minutes to acquaint yourself with the general shape and outstanding features of the material. You will benefit twice over—by making an efficient and confidence-boosting start, and by avoiding all the 'negative waves' that I've just diagnosed!

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN: THE PLEASURES AND VALUE OF SLOWNESS

I have stressed speed a good deal in this book, and shall continue to do so. But that doesn't mean that I consider it to be a virtue *in and of itself;* nor does it imply that I think slowness is *always* a disadvantageous and inefficient quality. In emphasizing the benefits of speed, I have been chiefly concerned with two principles: one, that in many areas of study, quick and efficient work is invariably as useful as plodding, consciously 'solemn' study, and leaves you more time for other work and other things; and two, that it is quite false to believe, as many new or returning students tend to, that there is anything necessarily virtuous about taking a long time over a task. In short, I want to strip study of its Puritan implications, and to show that quick reading, quick thinking and quick writing are likely to make study much more fun, and more successful to boot.

Fast writing and thinking is the product of three things: healthy pressure, confidence and command of the subject (all constituents of a sensibly set exam and a well-prepared examinee). But whoever you are, such a state takes time to acquire. It makes no sense to attempt a speedily efficient *performance* (which is, essentially, what an exam answer of any kind is) before you've reached a position of all-round competence following careful thought, gradual discovery, and clear marshalling of ideas. It is during this time that slow writing is both inevitable and valuable. This is the time when it is worth taking ten minutes to think of the right word, or a quarter of an hour polishing a sentence so that it is exact and authoritative; for, once you've settled happily on an idea or phrase, it will stick with you, and be instantly available when you *do* have to perform at speed. For the quality of a good mind working at speed (the mark of an expert, whatever his field) is *earned,* built up in stages and founded on the kind of committed care that will involve a slow and deliberate period somewhere along the line.

But there are times when speed is not what you want or require. There is, for example, enormous pleasure to be had from slowly savouring something, and this is as true of reading as it is of more obviously physical pleasures like eating good food or sipping excellent wine. The six-point programme outlined above will, I am sure, help you to cope more enjoyably and commandingly with your reading load; but there'll be times when you want almost to *luxuriate* in someone's writing. This can apply to the science or maths student just as much as the arts one. I am a decidedly ignorant man when it comes to science; but I have always loved reading the precise and graceful prose of Descartes (who was a great mathematician before he thereby developed into a major philosopher) and the late Dr Bronowski; and I always take a long time over their

work. This is partly because of my lack of talent in their subjects; and it's also because I *enjoy* the gentler rhythm with which their ideas work on me.

The whole point, in fact, about cultivating quick reading is that it then allows you more time for luxuriant, truly masterful and absorptive reading. From the start I've stressed that if a book's worth reading, it's worth reading twice or more; and sooner or later you will want, and need, to get fully and intricately into the book in question. Such a process can never be 'quick' in any real sense: indeed, there are many books which can take a lifetime fully to grasp and appreciate. (See Appendix B, where I talk of my experience with the endlessly rich novel *Anna Karenina*.) So it's not really, in the end, of question of 'slow reading *versus* speed-reading': it's not *either/or* but *both/and*. The sensible and alert student recognizes the value of both methods, and comes to know almost instinctively which one is most suitable for any given occasion.

Similar principles apply to slow writing. In the subsequent chapter on examinations, you will note that I don't have much patience with the argument that exams penalize slow writers, and that I argue that, by and large, good minds work fast when they have to, and minds that cannot do so are indifferent. I am convinced this is true; but that does not mean that there is *never* a time when slow, painstaking writing is valuable, and indeed superior.

I develop these remarks on writing in Chapter 8. All I want to emphasize as a postscript to this section is that both speed and slowness are good servants but tyrannical masters. There is no virtue in being a slow reader, and indeed it becomes a vice if the reader is smug and lazy about it. Conversely, speed *as such* will degenerate into mere superficiality unless it is properly harnessed to a specific aim and technique. To be able to get the gist of a 1000-word article in two minutes is a valuable and beneficial skill; so is the profound and multi-layered understanding of a poem or a maths theorem, which cannot be achieved quickly. Both are vital and beautiful; and if I've stressed speed more than slowness during this chapter, that's only because, in my experience, far more students suffer from the problems of getting behind in their reading load than from the slap-dash, shallow appraisal that comes from inadequately devised or unwise quick-reading techniques.

Talking of slap-dash, shallow, ill-devised and unwise techniques leads me to a matter that I wish I'd covered in more depth in the original edition, even if it was less of a problem then than it has since become.

A STUDY AID TIRADE

As I hope I've convinced you, speed-reading is a time-saving and corner-cutting technique both valuable and 'legitimate'. On no account should it *replace* the full absorptive reading that any serious text deserves and requires, but it does make that eventual stage more effective and enjoyable. In sharp contrast, the Study Aid is, by and large, a treacherous and cynical exemplar of all that is worst about pre-packaged marketing and the commercialization of education.

Both as a phenomenon and as a conglomeration—there are now *thousands* of the things—Study Aids insult teachers/lecturers and students alike. Aggressive in tone and garish in design, their popularity hinges on two assumptions:

- **Teachers—at primary, secondary and tertiary level—cannot be trusted to 'deliver the goods' any more, especially in these qualification-dependent times.**
- **Equally, students themselves cannot trust their own efforts and their own minds.**

Sad to say, a sizeable proportion of the student population—and/or their concerned parents and relatives—seems to agree; it's even sadder because, whether intentional or not (and I know what *I* think), the very term

'Study Aids' has become a misnomer. Increasingly they are pushed not as 'aids' so much as *elixirs*. **'You need us: you know it makes sense'** is their arrogant claim, in keeping with their publishers' all-but-explicit signal that our entire education service is stretched beyond competence and in urgent need of paramedical support. Given this hard-sell marketing, it's perhaps not surprising that many students go beyond regarding them as a necessary or desirable crutch and revere them as life-support machines. Not just limited or plodding students either: some of the brightest fall prey. I've even known one or two who seem to think that the Study Aid is a more definitive text than the primary material itself, positively biblical in its authority.

This would be bad enough if the publications at issue were of high quality. The worse news is mat

Most of them are mediocre at best and downright awful at worst.

We're a long, long way from classic school textbooks here, let alone works of real scholarship and genuine academic vigour—all of which are essential helpmeets to the serious student. The majority are potboilers: that is, books written mainly or solely for money. There's nothing immoral in that, naturally; however, there's as much difference between such hack-stuff and works of devoted scholarly insight as there is between Mills & Boon and the Brontë sisters. Here's a true story to illustrate that, and to draw attention to how the Study Aids syndrome can infect the intelligent but pressured student.

A Lower Sixth-former chose to write on Philip Larkin for his first official coursework essay. (That is, it was a 'counting' piece, one that would form part of his overall A-Level assessment.) Bright and enthusiastic about Larkin though he was, he apparently couldn't trust his own ideas, his own prose, his own choice of poems or his response to them. Instead

He copied out, virtually word for word, an essay on Larkin that he'd found in a Study Aid.

When it came to be marked, the colleague assigned to the task recognized the essay and its source. It was amongst the better fare that Study Aids tend to produce, but that did not make any difference, of course: the assignment was declared 'void', the student felt humiliated, and a great deal of time—his in particular—had been used up to no decent effect whatever.

Distressing and wasteful—except that he *re*-did the essay later (his own this time!) and all four of us who eventually marked/read it agreed that

It was better than the original 'cribbed' version.

It wasn't as stylish in some ways, maybe: after all, the student was only seventeen and still learning, not a middle-aged critic who'd been churning out such stuff for ages. But it was fresh, sharp and above all *his*—a direct and incisive response to poems that had captured his imagination and intellect.

That experience strengthened my conviction that the ever-increasing presence of 'cheap 'n' easy' Study Aids in every bookshop in the land not only sneers at students' greatest assets—their brain and their individual personality: the benefits they seem to offer are siren-like in their treachery. If you trust a Study Aid more than your own mind working in partnership with your teachers, you are at serious risk of jettisoning several treasures for a piece of junk. At least you'll know—eventually— how Aladdin felt.

That is not the only disservice Study Aids inflict upon the incautious student. They are additionally and doubly poisonous:

- **Study Aids encourage the lazy belief that to read, say, a plot summary, a series of explanatory notes and a miscellany of critical insights is a productive substitute for reading the actual text.**

I've chosen a literary instance there, but the point holds good for any subject, where to succeed you must acquire mastery of whatever principles and issues are involved. You won't—can't—do that if you surrender control to a piece of Lowest Common Denominator merchandise: that's like expecting a road map to show you how to drive.

- **Secondly, Study Aids are *themselves* lazy more often than not— amateurish and sloppy collages that at best plough a drearily orthodox furrow, and at worst are simply *wrong*.**

Naturally, there are exceptions: one or two publishing houses/lines can be fully exonerated from all the above charges. But in my experience— and I've looked at a lot of Study Aids, and not just English Language and Literature ones either—most of these publications are as dull and tawdry as they are potentially contagious.

STUDY AIDS: A CONCLUSION

Some of you may have found some or all of my above remarks too virulent; in that case, I urge you take note of this point if nothing else:

> **Even at their most distinguished, Study Aids can be no more than that—i.e. a helpful back-up, a *servant*.**

Once they replace the *primary* material as a source of response, knowledge and insight, the student is in big trouble—the more so as relying on such secondary works automatically hurls any idea of 'pleasure' out of the window. I have yet to meet anyone who bought such a volume with the concept of enjoyment in mind, and as I've stressed throughout, funless study is unlikely to be very successful.

Finally: you can probably appreciate how depressed I was, on a recent visit to my old university, Cambridge, to find that in one of the town's major bookstores the largest single section in the entire building was the one devoted to Study Aids—things which any decent GCSE student, let alone an undergraduate, should in every way have outgrown. And just in case the thought has occurred or is occurring to you—no, don't let *this* book govern you either! Use it where it helps and illuminates, but never let it hi-jack or even dilute your greatest strength—you.

SUMMARY: SPEED-READING AND PREJUDICE

A great many people are suspicious of speed-reading theories: I was myself for quite some time. My dislike sprang from those gimmicky and fatuous advertisements that still leer at us from newspapers, whose hard-sell cannot long disguise the inadequacy of the techniques advocated. It wasn't until I read some sensible and honest work on the subject that I was persuaded that *anyone* can learn to read fast and efficiently; and as a summary I'd like to list the main reasons why.

1. Surprisingly, moral prejudice has a lot to do with people's suspicions. They regard reading as a serious, even 'holy' activity, and they therefore resist the idea that it can or should be made easier. That attitude

has a certain naive charm, but finally it is just silly. If you take books seriously, you surely want to get as much out of them as you can, and in view of that, to imagine that there is one 'correct' way of reading is no more sensible than to fancy that there is a 'correct' way of working. It's just you and the book: nobody else and nothing else count.

2. Speed-reading is physically good for you, whatever old wives may say. The more vigorously and efficiently you use your eyes, the fitter they will be. They will get much more tired if they plod laboriously through a text that the brain finds opaque and joyless.
3. The notion that speed and glibness are somehow synonymous is damaging and false. Ponderous people are rarely bright or interesting: might it not be that their dull superficiality is the *result* of their slowness, rather than the paradox is seems?
4. The brain and the memory work awesomely fast; they also work best for comparatively short periods of time. The more you can do during that time, the more likely you are to retain it. Time and again, our experience shows that it is *not* necessarily the people who take the longest over a task who do it best, but those who approach it with energy, enjoyment and a brisk clarity of purpose.
5. Serious reading of any kind is a gradual process, in the sense that full understanding can never be immediate. Speed-reading acknowledges this more sensibly than the narrowly dogged approach. Anything worth while requires several readings before it can be mastered: the decision to make most of them as rapid and pleasant as possible is not a dishonest short-cut but a properly intelligent way of bringing that moment forward.
6. There is nothing virtuous about being a slow reader; more important, there is nothing *natural* about it either. Slow readers are slow because they lack sufficient understanding both of the material itself and of how eye and brain work best, because they've been poorly trained, because they are imprisoned by certain silly myths, or through a mixture of all those things. If you *want* to read faster, you can; and I can promise you that you'll enjoy the activity more.

POSTSCRIPT 1996

In the first edition this chapter included a sentence which I have omitted till now:

Slow reading is like a headache: not only does it have a clear cause, but it can be easily cured.

I still think that is true in principle, but I would now have to quarrel with the words 'headache' and 'easily'. If my own students are any guide, the ailment is rather more serious, and consequently harder to put right. The last thing I or (I hope) any other teacher ever wants to do is trot out a 'Things weren't like that in my day' old-fogey litany; nevertheless, I find the speed at which today's youngsters read deeply alarming—and by 'youngsters' I mean all those who don't yet have Mature Student status.

While revising the text of this book, I happened to give an Upper Sixth set a 600-word article to read in class. No ordinary set, either: these were Oxford candidates preparing for that university's extremely rigorous General Paper—and half were successful. Even so, it took them *at least twenty minutes* to read a piece I was expecting them to master in half the time. For the passage wasn't difficult: it was well-written and densely argued, but was taken from a national newspaper rather than anything as esoteric as a scientific treatise or scholarly dissertation. When we were eventually able to discuss the piece, the students were characteristically cogent and full of insight; the fact remains that we covered a lot less ground than I had planned, solely because I'd assumed in them a speed of absorption double that which they could actually manage.

' ... culture puts a colossal premium on sound-bites ... highlights, on pre-packaged summaries'

Now that could be a one-off anecdote. The students could have been unusually tired; they might all have found the piece deeply boring and/or hard to concentrate upon; my expectations may have been unreasonable. But I don't think it was a one-off at all—otherwise I wouldn't have bothered to tell the story!

I would stop short of suggesting that there is a 'reading crisis' in our schools and colleges and amongst our young people, but I do think that reading habits and accomplishment have changed fairly radically during the past thirty years or so. I have noticed for some time that students (in scientific or technical subjects no less than in Humanities ones) experience immense difficulty in coping with anything that cannot be read at a sitting—be it large novels, extensive works of theory, polemic and analysis, or indeed substantial surveys of any kind. And in the main I'm talking about notably bright young people who are also committed to their work and enjoy analysing, with considerable insight, the kind of texts just cited. Yet more than a few will take over a year to complete* the reading of a set text such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch*—a work originally published in monthly episodes that a large audience positively gobbled up. Furthermore, while those readers were self-evidently enthusiastic, on the whole they were a lot less clever and/or academically trained than the students I teach. So what has happened?

A student of mine, discussing precisely that '*Middlemarch* problem', offered as an explanation the fact that he and his peers inhabit 'a fast-forward culture'. It's not just that there now exists a host of forms of entertainment and instruction that were unavailable in 1871, whose citizens had only books: our culture puts a colossal premium on sound-bites, on memorable or graphic snippets, on highlights—and on pre-packaged summaries/Study Aids, about which I've just been fulminating. Reductiveness rules, because of two media assumptions: there isn't time to devote more than four minutes to any topic, no matter how important or complex; and people don't want to concentrate on anything for more than such a period anyway. If I'm right about the latter, it is of course deeply insulting; what is even more disturbing is that it's beginning to acquire the status of a self-fulfilling prophecy. On radio and television, and increasingly in newspapers and periodicals, so *little* is dwelt on for any length of time that the idea of such extended concentration on a single topic or unit of material becomes alien to the student, or at the very least highly problematic.

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*In the interests of realism I ought to say that I use the verb 'complete' in a somewhat elastic, generous sense!

I have not added this Postscript to rail at the ghastliness of the modern world: that would not only be self-indulgent but stupid. Students know many things and have many skills that my own generation did not; nor do I have any doubt that they are just as clever as we were, and just as industrious. The fact remains that, Information Technology, E-mail and the computer revolution notwithstanding, books will go on being the centre of nearly all courses of study for the foreseeable future. As I write, much is being made of Information Super-Highways' and the likelihood that they will soon render libraries, study centres and even books themselves mere archaisms. For any number of reasons, that is nonsense, and dangerous nonsense too if it cons today's students into the belief that reading doesn't matter any more. On the contrary, efficient and discerning reading is arguably a more crucial skill than ever before—a fact that plenty of young people may well find daunting, since they appear to have an even slower 'orthodox' reading speed than pertained some twenty years ago, when I first became interested in speed-reading. As a result, I would now argue, even more fiercely than I attempted in that first edition, that

> **You will almost certainly need a speed-reading technique that suits you if you going even to *cope* with your reading load, let alone achieve anything approaching mastery.**

For, increasingly, the problem is not just slow reading in any traditional sense: it is a matter of extensive reading being an unfamiliar, almost unnatural activity. That isn't a 'headache': that's a serious disability, even a disease. I hope the ideas and techniques I've covered go at least some way to helping you find a cure.

CREATIVE DOODLING: NOTE-TAKING FOR FUN AND PROFIT
7

> Notes are often necessary, but they are necessary evils.
>
> *Samuel Johnson*

Very few students, I find, have ever been given early, systematic advice on how to take notes. Some manage to develop a technique that is sound and helpful; but the majority are less fortunate. As a result, their approach to note-taking describes one of two equally unsatisfactory alternatives: the 'grudging' or the 'evangelist'. See if you recognize yourself in either of these portraits.

THE GRUDGING NOTE-TAKERS

These students regard note-taking as a pain. They'd go along with Johnson's remarks, except to find him far too tolerant in calling the practice 'necessary'. They buckle down to it eventually, but they neither enjoy it nor find any value of stimulus in what is always and only a mechanical chore. In addition, their method and format are identical to any 'class notes' their teachers may dictate—cautiously and clearly spaced, written in formally correct English, and taking a long, joyless time to complete.

THE EVANGELIST NOTE-TAKERS

For these students, note-taking is the magic elixir. They are convinced that all they need do is write everything down, and it will through simple alchemy become fixed knowledge. Their reverence is further demonstrated by their view of the printed word, and of the spoken word of teachers: they are the academic equivalent of the Eucharist, profoundly present as soon as experienced, an automatic and immediate source of strength and wondrous new knowledge.

Such enthusiasm is so uncritical that it becomes self-cancelling at best and a serious impediment at worst. A normal student who encounters a joke while reading will laugh; the 'evangelist' will instead write

'Humour' in the margin. Such solemn mania can reach alarming proportions, as demonstrated by this anecdote of a colleague:

> **'I went into the Lower Sixth this morning and said, "Hello." Three of them sneered at me, four of them said "Hello" back, and the other five wrote it down in case they missed anything.'**

The Evangelist and Grudging Note-Takers

An exaggeration, naturally; but most students, and nearly all teachers, will recognize its essential authenticity.

This reverential approach is doubly inefficient, too:

If you attempt to note down *everything,* how can you possibly *listen* properly?

There is a fair chance that as you write a note, you will be deaf to a remark or point that is more important—and such damage will be repeated and cumulative.

Both 'types' waste nearly all the time they devote to note-taking. Grudgers do it under protest, thus deriving little value; evangelists, over-active and lacking all discrimination, end up with a garbled, non-understood record of the book or the lesson. And both methods fail because no thought has gone into the vital question of *why* we take notes. It is that issue I look at first.

METHODS AND PRACTICE (I): BASIC STRATEGIES AND METHODS

The primary thing to emphasize is:

All notes that are not accompanied by solid understanding are useless.

Unless you have a reasonable idea of what the stuff you're studying *means,* how can you make useful, intelligible notes on it?* Yet time after time students will, at the start of a lecture, a lesson, or a TV programme, at once launch themselves into a frenzy of scribbling—long before the focus of the argument has been established.

Such a frantic approach is understandable up to a point. One's aural memory can be very short-lived, especially when listening to something as condensed as a lecture and one is invariably anxious to trap an idea before it evaporates. Even so, it is much more sensible just to

listen for a while without simultaneously attempting to record.

Trying to do two highly intensive things early on can be distracting and unproductive; better to get into the topic first and thus feel comfortable with it when you do start to take notes. All but the most abjectly bad lectures and classes usually ease into their topic in a complementary fashion, announcing their main concerns in advance and repeating each one as and when it is arrived at. So take in the main topics at the beginning, and write only when you reach them later.

The next point to be made is if anything even more vital.

> **Notes are for *you,* nobody else. They are triggers and aids for your private use, and have no status whatever as public documents.**

I stress this so forcefully because a lot of students imagine, when taking notes, that they must present them as if they were going to be *marked*. This is ridiculous. *Your* notes should not in any way be confused with the *class* notes your teachers dictate.

- **Your notes are both part of your thinking and a reflection of it, done as part of the preparation for a piece of work or as a record and reminder of your reading and research.**
- **Class notes, though of course valuable, are quite different. The result of months or years of study and teaching, they are as formal as the textbooks you study, and a significant part of your course material.**

This means, among other things, that if you want to make your own *private* notes on them, you should feel encouraged to do so—it is an excellent idea.

Now to **methods**. The taking of rough notes is as individual a matter as any other working method: as always, the only criterion is whether it is successful. You will recall what I said in Chapter 3 about working to music, and the many so-called 'distractions' which students often feel they must deny themselves while working.* The same is true of note-taking. There is no 'right' way, other than what works for you.

So do your notes *in any way you like*. If it helps you to do them in alternative green and purple biro, *do* them like that; if you like weaving patterns or funny shapes with them, go ahead; and if it helps and amuses you to do them in a kind of secret code that you can understand easily, that's fine too. The more you can make taking notes a natural and pleasurable exercise, the more vigorously they will assist your study. That is why this chapter is called 'Creative Doodling': if you can make note-take as automatic and 'un-work-like' as the doodles you do when on the phone or listening in class, you'll soon find that you are adding to your knowledge and skills while remaining relaxed and all-but-unaware of 'working'.

For anyone still unsure about what other methods can be adopted in lieu of formal, 'public' notes, and for those 'grudging' and 'evangelist' types in particular, I now look at some specific techniques.

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*'Intelligible' simply denotes something you will understand when you return to the notes in an hour/day/week.

*Now might be a good time to reveal that most of this book was written to the strains of Oscar Peterson, Stan Getz, Duke Ellington, and other jazz musicians. They relax and inspire me: what better mood could mere be in which to work?!

'... if you like weaving patterns or funny shapes'

METHODS AND PRACTICE (II): KEY WORDS

It is a useful metaphor to consider a book, or even a chapter, as a living body. Its basic structure in analogous to a skeleton, and its major points to the vital organs. Other things, which give the work its distinctiveness, are like the flesh and the idiosyncratic features which make us all different from each other.

'Key word noting' is best explained with that metaphor in mind. It aims to isolate the skeleton and the major organs of an argument/ episode by focusing on those words or phrases which are clearly central. And I do mean 'clearly'. With a little practice, it ought to be fairly easy for you to register the main drift of a piece of writing, and to see which words and concepts are the vital ones. The added strength of this technique is that it should also be *very fast*—not only saving you time but giving you early, controlling access to the material and so boosting your confidence.

Let us look at an example. I would imagine that most of you are vaguely familiar with Christ's parable of the Sower, but in any event please read the slighted edited version that follows below. I would say that the story hinges on just seven key words or concepts. See if you can boil it down in that way, and then check with my list.

The parable of the Sower

1. A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it.
2. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture.
3. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it.
4. And the other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold…
5. And his disciples asked him, saying, What might this parable be?
6. …[And Jesus answered] The seed is the word of God.
7. Those by the way side are those that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved.
8. They on the rock are they which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe and in the time of temptation fall away.

9. And that which fell among thorns are they which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with the cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection.
10. But that on the good ground are they which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.

St Luke's Gospel, Chapter 8, vv. 5–15; A.V. 1611 (edited)

KEY WORDS

seed
- fowls
- rock
- thorns
- good-ground
- Sower/God

Those seven form a skeleton of the parable.They should be all you need to put together a comprehensive and chronologically accurate version of the story itself and its allegorical meaning.
If, however, you'd feel a little easier with a skeleton that has been a little more fleshed out, you could add to it as follows:

	Seed/The Word of God
fowls	seed is devoured/the Word is stolen by Satan
thorns	seed chokes/the Word is snared
rock	no depth for the roots/the Word cannot 'sink in'
good-ground	seed takes hold/the Word is fruitfully absorbed
Sower/God	spreads the seed/God spreads the Word

All the other details can be recalled if you have either of the above lists as your base. The only other thing you need to produce an authoritative paraphrase of the tale is the ability to write adequate sentences. Incidentally the listing of key words in this way is also an admirable method for essay-planning, as we'll see in the next chapter.

That first example was an easy one, because the story is so familiar. But the principle holds good for more complex, less comfortable material. I am now going to give you three distinct paragraphs, whose gist I think you can pick up remarkably quickly, using the 'key word' method outlined.

Developing key word noting skills

Passage 1

Here is George Orwell writing about the recent (1946) decline in the use of the English language. Pick out the 'key words'—write them down, or just ring them on the page. You should not have to read the passage more than twice, and the exercise should take *three minutes at the most*.

> It is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and slovenly because our thoughts are foolish; but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English is full of bad habits which spread by imitation, and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think more clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration.
>
> Adapted from 'Politics and the English Language'*

The secret of the 'key word' method is *not to have too many*. This can be quite tricky to stick to, for if the writing is good, the prose will be muscular, wasting few words in 'flab'. That means that many words will be doing a fair bit of work, which can make the task of deciding on their immediate relative importance quite hard. Anyway, here's my list—see how it compares with yours.

decline
- **language**
- **political-and-economic causes**
- **slovenliness**
- **foolish thoughts**
- **habits**
- **imitation**
- **reversible**
- **think clearly**

There are just nine concepts here, involving fourteen words. Plenty of Orwell's argument is absent, including the excellent analogy of the man who drinks. But if those words were underlined, ringed, or written down as I have done, they would form a pretty sound skeleton of the passage. Put another way, they provide nine reliable 'triggers' that soon detonate understanding and retention of the passage as a whole.

Passage 2

This passage is harder, I think—mainly because the author defines his central concern, 'totalitarianism', in a way that is far removed from our normal understanding of the word. So be on your guard; and remember that at this stage it doesn't matter whether you agree with him or not— just try to get the shape of his argument. Again, read it through twice, quite quickly, and choose the 'key words' or key *concepts*.

> Totalitarianism has slipped into America with no specific political face. There are liberals who are totalitarian, and conservatives, radicals, rightists, fanatics, hordes of the well-adjusted. Totalitarianism has come to America with no concentration camps and no need for them, no political parties and no desire for new parties, no, totalitarianism has slipped into the body cells and psyche of each of us. It

*Orwell, G. (1946) 'Politics and the English Language', in *Inside the Whale,* Penguin Books, London, pp. 143–57.

> has been transported, modified, codified, and inserted into each one of us by way of the popular arts, the social crafts, the political crafts, and the corporate techniques. It resides in the taste of frozen food, the odour of tranquilisers, the planned obsolescence of automobiles, the lack of workmanship in the mass; it is heard in the jargon of educators; it lives in the boredom of a good mind, in the sexual excess of lovers who love each other into apathy. And it proliferates in that new architecture that rests like an incubus upon the American landscape. The essence of totalitarianism is that it beheads. It beheads individuality, variety, dissent, romantic faith, it blinds vision, deadens instinct, it obliterates the past. Totalitarianism is a cancer within the body of history, and (as such) obliterates distinctions.
>
> Adapted from 'Totalitarianism', by Norman Mailer*

The trouble with *this* passage is not only is it densely written, as was Orwell's, but that most of it is *example or illustration*. These may be fascinating, but they are not 'key concepts', as anyone schooled in that old-fashioned exercise of precis will remember. Again, compare your list with mine:

totalitarianism
- **America**
- **no-political-face**
- **incubus**
- **beheads**
- **cancer**
- **body-of-history**
- **obliterates-distinctions**

You will see that all my choices come from either the beginning or the end of the passage. There are two separate reasons for this .

1. The brain/memory tends to work that way in a piece of *intensive* work of this kind—as we've observed. (See above, pp. 29 and 50–1.)
2. The author's argument happens in this instance to be *designed* in such a fashion. The middle section develops, illustrates and explores an arresting opening statement, which is then summarized or confirmed in a number of dramatic definitions.

You may be surprised at the inclusion of *'incubus'* —and to be honest, I nearly missed it when preparing the exercise. But, if one thinks for a moment—and this exercise *depends* on one thinking while reading and noting—it is a vital word in the passage, from a number of angles. It evokes sorcery, something insidious, something invisible—all of them ideas that absolutely match the author's theory that totalitarianism has taken major root in America without many being aware of it. It also, of course, suggests something satanic and destructive, which thus establishes in addition the author's prime *value judgement*.

My other choices are, I think, more straightforward. Together, they offer a bald but comprehensible 'map' of the tone and topics of the argument. And again, each word or concept can be seen as a 'trigger' — a means of recalling and organizing the direction and overall focus of the passage.

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*Mailer, N. (1964) 'Totalitarianism', in *The Presidential Papers,* Deutsch, London, pp. 181–6.

Passage 3

This is the hardest of the lot. The subject matter is difficult, and the writing—while admirably condensed and crisp—is sufficiently technical to seem opaque at first sight to even the most intelligent reader. Again, see how you fare reading it twice—though you may find you need to take it a little more slowly this time! The subject on this occasion is Economics—specifically, developments in trade between East and West.

> In a time when the Eastern economic systems have retrograded into deepening crisis, barter-based cooperation, through licensing, buy-back, counter-purchase, co-production, joint association by partnership contract and joint ventures, is a life-saver. It may be the means of propping up the discredited elitists of the Eastern ruling class, composed of the Party, the bureaucracy and the KGB. To provide supportive Western technology without opening up Eastern systems to the variations of capital market forces certainly provides a breathing space, at least for the moment. Clearly the ruling caste itself has few anxieties about the possible consequences. They expect the capitalists to sell them the rope which may eventually hang them.
>
> If cooperation, or economic detente, serves the aims of Eastern economic development without encroaching too harshly upon their flexible ideological barrage, the counter-ideologists of the West find the new arrangements equally easy to accommodate. For the monopoly capitalists or multinationals, detente has never been about avoiding nuclear war, nor about promoting constructive 'convergencies' between the best socialist and democratic features of both systems. Least of all has it been about injecting liberalism, human rights, and the market economy into the Communist countries. The motivation is entirely financial and secular: accumulating more profits and cash-flow by exploiting workers in the East in order better to exploit workers in the West. The business of big business is to make profits. The rulers of the East are making it their business to help them.
>
> Adapted from 'The Ideological Facade', by Charles Levinson*

Tough, isn't it? It may comfort you to know that, even after typing that passage slowly and carefully, I still find it very hard going. Nevertheless, I would say that the key words announce themselves clearly enough:

cooperation
life-saver
Eastern ruling class
few anxieties
capitalists/sell/rope/hang
economic detente
motivation
financial
exploiting
profits
(Eastern) help

You'll note that I've cheated a little in the fifth and last choices. The former combines four separate words from one sentence, and the latter supplies an important clarifying adjective. Maybe you cheated a bit too — if so, good for you!

'Cheating' is in fact a silly word to use here. There are no *rules* about this method, and therefore cheating doesn't come into it. The idea is to note the controlling ideas and words so that they are as helpful as

It's unlikely you'll ever have to read anything more difficult

possible for *you*. You may even have spent longer than I suggested getting to grips with the passage: indeed, the exercise may this time have taken you a full (and arduous) fifteen minutes. That doesn't matter at all; and if you think fifteen minutes is a long time to spend on a relatively short (243 words) passage, then consider the following egoboosting points:

1. You've acquired at least a working knowledge of the main strands of a complex, difficult argument.
2. You've progressed to this stage from absolute bewilderment in a very *short* time. From ignorance to familiarity in a quarter of an hour is good going!
3. It is unlikely you'll ever have to read anything *more* difficult than this throughout your course; and the chances are that you will not encounter anything *as* difficult.

The truth is that if you stay alert, think while you read and note, and do not try to master everything right away, the technique of 'key word' noting rapidly promotes both knowledge and confidence.

This method also works well for note-taking in lectures, although you should not expect to isolate only the important key words in the lecture hall. There it is obviously better to write too many rather than too few. Whatever your strategy, you will have to look at the notes again in the evening to establish the real key words and concepts, and to even the notes out. Some points will need to be fleshed out, others condensed. Either way, much more of the lecture will 'come back to you' if you have a solid skeleton to build on, rather than something that may be all flesh and no bones.

Timing and duration

Key word noting is a highly intensive activity. You'll be only too well aware of that fact if you've just tried to do all three of the above paragraphs at one go. Indeed, one of the reasons why the last one was so tough was precisely because it was the *last*: you may have got the hang of the exercise by then, but it was probably cancelled out by the fatigue your brain was beginning to feel.

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*Levinson, C. (1979) 'The Ideological Facade', in *Vodka-Cola,* Gordon & Cremonesi, pp. 19–20.

This is entirely normal, and as it should be. Early on in this book we noted that, regardless of intelligence-level of the activity undertaken, the brain performs best for about twenty to thirty-five minutes at a time. When the activity is as intensive as key word noting, it's to be expected that the brain will want to settle for the *lower* end of that span rather than the upper. So don't try to do too much in one session; and try to be in a relaxed and comfortable frame of mind when tackling the practice. Key word noting is a form of mental sprinting. The brain is asked to do a lot of work very fast; and, like a physical sprinter, it will perform best if it's nicely 'warmed up' and aware that it will be able to stop soon.

METHODS AND PRACTICE (III): INVENTING CODES AND SHORT-HAND

I've already stressed that your private notes are for you alone. So it is both sensible and stimulating to adopt any method of abbreviation that suits you.

There are, of course, several established short-hand systems— Pitman's is probably the most famous. If you've been trained in one of these, that's fine. But if you haven't, you can construct your own with a little basic ingenuity. As with the advice I gave in the section on mnemonics, I believe it is better if I *don't* give you much illustration or offer you my own methods—not because I'm possessive about them, but because there's no reason to suppose that because they suit me they will suit *you*. However, by way of ignition:

1. Use contractions and single-letter abbreviations wherever possible. In an *essay* it looks both ugly and lazy to refer to, say, Shakespeare's *Henry Fourth Part Two as H4ii*; but in your private notes such a form is admirable, being both clear and quick.
2. More ambitiously, try to work out a rapid number-reference system, where each digit represents a particular book/chapter/paragraph/whatever. This is particularly useful, because in addition to highlighting specific areas of work, it organizes and clarifies your brain's 'filing system' generally.
3. As with mnemonics, the more you can make a *game* out of time-saving and mind-clarifying methods, the better.
4. I emphasized recently the potential value of 'doodling'. If you doodle naturally and unconsciously (and most of us do), you may find it worth while to *harness* such a practice to *conscious, concentrated work*. No matter if the alleged 'pattern' looks gibberish to everyone else: *you're* the only judge that matters. And if you can both have some fun doing this and record things of value, you'll find that the sense of doing 'conscious, concentrated work' fades rapidly, leaving you the most agreeable feeling of doodling for fun and profit.

Any method that gets you out of the rut of linear, carefully logical response should at least be tried; and I'll be surprised if you don't find it valuable. By broadening your approach, such methods broaden your thinking —with the frequent result that you hit upon ideas and a level of understanding that would have remained closed to you under a more 'formal' or allegedly 'correct' method.

INTERIM CONCLUSION: NOTE-TAKING AT DIFFERENT STAGES

In a moment we move on to the chapter's last section, on **Précis.** Before we do, however, I want finally to emphasize that note-taking is a constant, *fluid* process. Creative note-taking, that is, for your own benefit— can and should happen at any and all stages of a piece of work. It is worth listing those stages, for many students do not use them all.

1. During initial reading (but probably best omitted during the introduction of a *lecture*).
2. During confirmatory and developmental second reading, and during the rest of the lecture.
3. Before writing the essay.
4. *After* writing the essay/attending the lecture. A vital one, this, and one which even conscientious students too often omit.
5. At any subsequent stage where review of existing notes prompts a new, further thought.
6. During final revision, as both a clarifying aid and an ego-boosting demonstration that you *do,* after all, know/remember quite a lot!

None of these need take much time—especially (2), (5) and (6). They should, in fact, take precisely as much time, and be done in precisely the form, that you like. Clearly, when using the key word method, your job will be easier on (2) and (6) than on (1), since on those occasions the spotting of the key words will be confirmatory rather than identifying.

Good note-taking is a hugely valuable skill for any student. Good note-taking combines the recording of useful information with alert thinking. Provided these two criteria are met, it doesn't matter a jot how you do them, what they look like, or what use you put them to in the end. Some of your notes will become redundant before the end of your course: this is *not* proof of wasted time, but instead the clearest and happiest indication that you've grown beyond them—a process in which they played a vital, albeit temporary part. For, to return to the two 'types' I sketched at the start, you should not 'grudge' the time spent taking notes, nor assume an attitude of 'reverence' about the activity. If you approach note-taking as a task solely for your benefit, you won't ever grudge the time, especially if you liberate yourself enough to employ methods which are lively and amusing. And if you remain alert and genuinely *thoughtful,* reverence won't be possible: you'll be discriminating and questioning as you note, and will thus move forward in your study far more commandingly. Notes *are* 'necessary', yes; but, thanks to methods and knowledge that Dr Johnson did not have available to him, there is no need to share his view of them as 'evils'. Nor, indeed, is there any excuse for doing so.

METHODS AND PRACTICE (IV): THE VIRTUES OF PRÉCIS

To switch from the skills of note-taking to those involved in préciswriting might strike some readers as a notable—if not excessive— example of 'lateral thinking'. I have included this section (new to this second edition) for two reasons.

1. Précis is an immensely valuable skill anyway, for reasons I list in a moment. And while you may not need that facility in a direct way as a student, you will almost certainly need it when you move on into a profession.
2. To précis adequately, let alone well, you need an eye for 'key words' and all the other qualities that go to make up an effective note-taker. Therefore, to practise précis exercises is a creative and richly consolidating way of sharpening your noting skills.

Not to put too fine a point on it,

Précis tests and exercises every aspect of linguistic competence

To write an accomplished précis you need to have mastered eight major skills.

1.
Good comprehension

To reduce a long document to its essentials requires a sound understanding of its every point and sentence. This is often more demanding [and therefore more reliable as a gauge] than any standard comprehension exercise.

2.
Good prose composition

A précis should be crisp and easy to read. To achieve such at-a-glance clarity you need a muscular style, where everything is pertinent and works efficiently.

3.
Discerning judgement

The prime task of précis writing is to distinguish what is really important from what is merely interesting or decorative. Regularly to achieve that requires sensitivity and discrimination.

4.
An authoritative vocabulary

Although you must never invent **material** when fashioning a précis, it is entirely in order to recast ideas in your own words. In fact this is often essential, enabling you to cut down a structure of say 15 words to 5 or 6. To do that you need a vocabulary both broad and precise, supple and vigorous.

5.
Literary feel

Contrary to certain prejudices, there is nothing ‘airy-fairy’ about good literature. Indeed, the best literature is always formidably exact; no matter how large or complex their goals, great writers are masters of nuance and precision. All good précis writers have something of such qualities; the chances are they acquired them through literary study.

6.
A fierce eye for flab

Précis is a ruthless business! In most academic précis tasks, you are given an exact and mandatory word limit; in a very real sense, every word counts. And even if you are not constrained by such numerical targets, you still need to be vulture-like in your ability to tear at sentences and reduce them to their bare bones. As no doubt you have realized, this is closely analogous to the key word noting system discussed earlier in this chapter.

'Vulture-like in your ability to ...'

7.
Sound logic

No matter how ruthlessly abridged, a précis has to make sense in its own right. This calls upon clarity of thinking and alertness to the distinct stages of an argument.

8.
Accurate mechanical and grammatical English

This hardly requires a comment! Every task involving the use of English needs to be mechanically correct. None more so than précis, nevertheless: you can sabotage all the above strengths if you misspell, punctuate badly and perpetrate poor or clumsy grammar. Besides, if those things do disfigure your work, it's overwhelmingly probable that you will possess few if any of the seven skills just outlined, because each one depends on a sound knowledge of how language works and how it should be used.

And for the purposes of this chapter, we can add:

9.
Note-taking acumen

If you are adept at 'gutting' an argument (i.e. reducing it to its skeletal essentials), you will already have a sound basis for précis. Conversely, as suggested above, the ruthless reduction that précis demands should quickly improve your eye for key detail, which of course will increase your efficiency when taking notes.

PRÉCIS: CRITERIA AND PROCEDURE

Précis is as much an art as a science: success depends more on practice and 'feel' than upon the learning of fixed principles, valuable though the latter can be. So it is best to start with a comfortable rehearsal.

Example 1

The passage that follows is pleasantly written. Yet while few would accuse it of flabbiness—it is already quite concise—it can nevertheless be further reduced.

> Gardeners are very frequently asked by persons interested in the cultivation of ornamental trees and shrubs to indicate to them some of the distinctive characters which mark off the common cypress from its near relative, the American *arbor-vitae*. These are two of the most widely grown ornamental conifers in the British Isles, and there is hardly a garden or a park of any size in which one or other is not present.
>
> It is not an easy matter under ordinary circumstances to indicate to the layman the differences that exist between these two species.

Phrase by phrase, our 'slimming down' operation might go:

1. **Gardeners are very frequently asked… '**Very' does no real work and can safely be omitted. Perhaps, too, the simpler 'often' might replace 'frequently'.
2. **By persons interested in the cultivation of ornamental trees and** shrubs…fair enough—except that gardeners are unlikely to be asked anything by persons not thus interested! So if economy is the main criterion, the whole phrase can be jettisoned.
3. **To indicate to them some of the distinctive characters which mark off the common cypress from its near relative, the American *arbor-vitae*…** 'To them' has to go anyway, because we've omitted Phrase 2. Everything else that precedes 'the common cypress' can be rendered by the infinitive 'to distinguish between'; in addition the term 'its near relative' can go, as it's a mere supplementary descriptor.

The amended phrase thus reads: **To distinguish between the common cypress and the American *arbor-vitae.***

4. **These are two of the most widely grown ornamental conifers in the British Isles…** The first two words can be omitted, provided a comma is placed after the preceding *'arbor-vitae'* instead of a full stop. In addition 'widely grown' can be replaced by the single word 'popular'.
5. **There is hardly a garden or park of any size in which one or other is not present…**'Of any size' is weak; 'or other' is similarly inessential. And if you are feeling really ruthless—and I propose to be! —you could argue that this whole sentence is more or less implied by the word 'popular' that I've just suggested. So we can rid of all of it.
6. **It is not an easy matter under ordinary circumstances to indicate to the layman the differences that exist between the two species.** Because Phrase 5 has disappeared completely, you can render this simply by 'This is not easy.'

The full précis thus reads:

Gardeners are often asked to distinguish between the common cypress and the American *arbor-vitae,* two of the most popular ornamental shrubs in the British Isles. This is not easy.

An original total of 93 words has become 30. To be sure, some elegance, subtlety and sheer information have been sacrificed; but the new version is a clear expression of the salient 'bones' of the passage, and that is what any précis seeks to achieve.

That was relatively easy—mainly because the original was well written. The sentences flowed clearly, building an 'argument' that was undemanding to follow; to dismantle them in the interests of additional economy was thus a straightforward business. The next sample is altogether different.

Example 2

This is the first paragraph (*first,* mark you!) of *An Essay on Liberation* (1969) by Herbert Marcuse. Here that process of 'disentangling' is not for the faint-hearted—you will have to work really hard just to understand what the main argument might be. Try to decide what the key phrases are: that should lead you to the cornerstones of the argument.

> In the affluent society, capitalism comes into its own. The two main-springs of its dynamic—the escalation of commodity production and productive exploitation—join and permeate all dimensions of private and public existence. The available material and intellectual resources (the potential of liberation) have so much outgrown the established institutions that only the systematic increase in waste, destruction and management keeps the system going. The opposition which escapes suppression by the police, the courts, the representatives of the people, and the people themselves, finds expression in the diffused rebellion among the youth and the intelligentsia, and in the daily struggle of the persecuted minorities. The armed class struggle is waged outside: by the wretched of the earth who fight the affluent monster.

The writing is jargonesque and top-heavily abstract; that makes it very difficult to identify those 'key phrases', because one is rarely sure what they actually mean! However, after (at least) two careful readings, I came up with:

1. **affluent society** An old 'buzz' term, now stale, that refers to any industrialized nation, the writer's prime focus.
2. **capitalism; commodity production and productive exploitation** Capitalism is his main target; the other two phrases mean, roughly, 'the manufacture of goods' and 'the ruthless consumption of labour and resources'.
3. **all dimensions of public and private existence** Stresses that capitalism dominates our lives in every way.
4. **available resources/have outgrown institutions** To be candid, I still don't really know what this means: the entire sentence is an opaque mess. The suggestion seems to be that capitalism makes very poor use of the potential at its disposal, mainly because (as is implied later) its governments wish to retain power.
5. **increase in waste/destruction/management keeps system going** See my comments for Phrase 4! The idea (I think) is that the status quo preserves itself by purely negative methods, leading to…
6. **opposition/suppression/diffused rebellion**…direct or indirect suppression. Opposition is either tyrannically put down by state machinery or ignored because it is ineffectual.

7. **struggle: wretched of the earth versus affluent monster** The one vibrant moment in the whole piece, graphically reducing the conflict to its ultimate alternatives.

That took me a long time, both to think out and to type, which annoyed me. Nobody minds fruitful hard work: what irritated me here was that the original seems **designed** to confuse or intimidate. However, any précis writer will eventually encounter similarly poor originals, and at least that laborious 'gutting' gives us a clearer sense of what the passage is centrally about.

The next task is to 'translate' those key phrases into fluent and comprehensible English.

Phrases 1–3 present no real problem. I suggest:

Capitalism, the systematic consumer of all resources, dominates affluent society at every level.

One could omit 'all' and 'at every level'; I've included them in an attempt to retain the categorical tone of the original.

Phrases 4, 5 and 6 are murderously difficult, as already noted! The core of their argument seems to be that capitalism is by turns inefficient, deliberately destructive and tyrannical, and that its primary concern is to keep the system going for the benefit of 'the haves'. So I suggest:

Fundamentally wasteful and tyrannical, it enlarges the range and intensity of its influence, destroying or emasculating most potential rebels.

This takes considerable liberties, maybe; but I do not think it distorts the original's thrust or tone, and it covers all the main ideas.

Phrase 7 is blissfully easy in comparison. It makes sense to retain the powerful 'the wretched of the earth'; 'the affluent monster' is perhaps also worth preserving. However, I suggest replacing the full stop after 'rebels' with a comma, and continuing: …'leaving only the wretched of the earth to fight it.'

I've sacrificed 'affluent monster' in the interests of a simple and punchy structure, but it can be reinstated if that is your taste.

The complete précis thus reads:

Capitalism, the systematic consumer of all resources, dominates affluent society at every level. Fundamentally wasteful and tyrannical, it enlarges the range and intensity of its influence, destroying or emasculating most potential rebels, leaving only the wretched of the earth to fight it.

That is 42 words; the original had 120.

With those two differing examples under our belt, we can begin to identify some of the guidelines that inform précis writing.

1.
Read the original very carefully

If it needs two readings, give it two. You should not start your attempt at reduction until you're confident that you've grasped the main points and thrust of the argument.

'... until you're confident that you've grasped the main points and thrust of the argument'

2.
Once you're ready to begin, isolate the key phrases

It's up to you how you do this: you can use highlighter pens, a separate sheet of rough paper, any method you like. However, I do not recommend the savage crossing out of everything you think you can omit, for two reasons. First, it makes your 'text' look a right mess, which will not assist clear thinking. Secondly, you may delete a phrase that you subsequently decide is important, and reinstating it in your working version will both waste time and be tricky anyway.

3.
Start your first draft of continuous prose

We'll assume that your 'skeleton' is sound—that you've identified and assembled the requisite 'bones'. But even a précis needs some flesh— ideally, enough to make it attractive in its own right. What else from the original should you keep or efficiently paraphrase?

Well, knowing what to omit is more than half the answer:

(a) *Omit all examples, illustrations and quotations*

This is often less easy than it might sound, because such material may well be very interesting and thus memorable. However, it must be done: such things *illuminate* the argument rather than *define* it. They are *secondary,* and if you're reducing a piece to a third of its length (or even less), you can only afford to include *primary* material. That's one of the reasons why it's essential to have grasped the governing thrust of the argument before you pick up your pen.

(b) Be prepared to strike out all adjectives and adverbs

I say 'Be prepared to strike out' rather than simply 'Strike out' because some 'qualifiers' will be necessary. If you look back at the two examples analysed above, you'll see that the adjectives and adverbs

that remain really pull their weight: they are definitive, not decorative. However, if you rigorously 'interrogate' all such words as to their true value, you should find that most of them do not have a good enough case.

(c) Never repeat material, even if the original does

Be totally ruthless about this. The only concession you might make to an obsession with a particular point is to isolate it in a paragraph of its own, or make it into the précis's title.

4.
In general, write in shortish, crisp sentences

Such a style may at times strike you as rigid and bare, and if you can construct longer sentences that are muscular and precise, go ahead. But remember that you are producing a skeleton of the original, and skeletons *are* rigid and bare! Keeping your sentences short will also promote clarity, allowing you to keep a regular check on where your argument is going, and whether each word is doing some real work.

5.
Try to use your own words wherever possible

In truth, this is *not* always going to be possible: most passages will include some terminology or phrasing that must remain or simply cannot be improved upon. But look to paraphrase where you can: sometimes neat wording on your part will render an idea in six words that it took the original a dozen to achieve. Besides, if you stick slavishly to what you've 'gutted' from the original, it is likely that such a residue will be stilted, tending to creak rather than flow.

Now for three important 'don'ts':

6.
Never invent material

Whatever you put down, especially when it's in your own words, make absolutely sure that your material exists in the original, or is at the very least strongly implied in it.

7.
Never pass an opinion or judgement on the original

Your job is that of a disinterested scribe and nothing else. Your opinion is irrelevant: furthermore, expressing it will waste words that should be devoted to central points. Even if the argument you're dealing with enrages you, keep out of it!*

8.
Never bring the author's name into your text

Précis takes authorship for granted. If you really believe that who wrote the piece is of fundamental importance, then find a way to mention it in your title; do not allow it to clutter up your reduced version.

Skeleton of the original

There are two views about what to do if your original is in the first person. Some authorities say that a précis should always be written in the third person, and that the original must be recast accordingly. Others argue that clarity is the chief criterion, not formalism, and that if the précis will read better in the first person, then use it. I incline to the latter view, but either is tenable. Practice, experience and 'feel' will guide you best: do what seems most comfortable, provided the resultant version is clear and apt.

Finally, three guidelines concerning shape and length.

9.
Should a précis be paragraphed?

It depends on the length of the finished précis.

Anything under 100 words should be presented as a single paragraph, unless there is a major switch of topic or focus therein.

For reductions of 100–200 words, a single paragraph will often still be appropriate; but be prepared to divide into two or even three, according to the material's range and your sense of the reader's comfort.

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*This 'negative requirement' is quite *different* from good note-taking practice, indeed in sharp contrast to it. When taking normal notes, logging an opinion can be a helpful, even vital addition, increasing both your memory of the material and your control over it.

Any final version that goes noticeably over 200 words should have at least two and probably three paragraphs; four to six if it climbs to 450 and above. If the précis is any good, it will make for fiercely concentrated reading: a single chunk of prose of 200+ words is distinctly 'user-unfriendly'.

10.
If you're instructed to cite the number of words you've used, do so—and don't guess or lie about it!

People who set academic précis tasks do so very carefully. When they stipulate a word target or word limit, they are not sadistically adding a further difficulty: on the contrary, they're trying to help you, for they will already have worked out that the job can best be done in the figure they cite. So keep a regular check as you go on the number of words you've used—it will sharpen your performance.

If you're too lazy to do that, don't compound the folly by making a vague guess or, even worse, inventing a number that 'looks good'. The chances are it will look terrible: your assessor will not need to count the words to know that you're lying. One rapidly develops a 'feel' for a version that is too short or too long, and you are most unlikely to get away with any such chicanery!

(a)
If given no such target or limit, what should you aim for?

The fraction most often mentioned in précis work is **one-third**. In the two examples explored above, I ended up reducing both originals to that length, and you'll shortly see that four of the six exercises I've included ask you to do the same.

To précis 5000 words on a single sheet of A4 isn't easy

Sometimes, however, you will be asked simply to reduce a document, a report, even an entire volume to the shortest effective summary possible. This may sound forbidding in the extreme, and I won't pretend if s

a doddle! Nevertheless, to be required to précis say 5000 words on a single sheet of A4 has the advantage of *simplicity,* even if it isn't easy. Such a brief means that you can—indeed *must*—be utterly ruthless, and allows you to ignore everything apart from the most basic 'bones'. Winston Churchill used to insist that any document submitted for his perusal was prefaced by just such a single sheet outlining the entire case, and this was an admirable discipline, both for him as reader and for the writer.

PRÉCIS EXERCISES

Five passages follow. They are arranged in an ascending order of length and also of difficulty.

Take your time: a rushed précis is invariably poor. Don't start noting or writing until you're sure you've grasped the main gist of the original. You will find my suggested versions in Appendix D.*

Exercise A

Reduce this 28-word sentence to 5 words

If we look carefully into this matter, gentlemen, we cannot fail to see that the action of the Government has been justified in every particular by the event.

Exercise B

Reduce this extract of 72 words to 25

His plan, which was clearly very ingenious, was to throw a weighted rope over a branch of a tree not twenty feet from his window, to jump out with the other end attached to his waist, and, trusting to the friction of the rope, to be lowered safely the sixty or so feet to the ground. This desperate plan he put into execution, and by means of it effected his escape.

Exercise C

(i) **Summarize this argument in no more than 140 words**
(ii) **Summarize this argument in a sentence of about 20 words**

As reported in last week's *Times Educational Supplement,* a movement against inter-school fixtures has been gathering momentum for some time in the school sports world and its proponents have mustered some convincing-looking arguments.

Now I am not against the individual sporting activities which have begun to make inroads against the traditional team games— squash, badminton, trampolining. There is a place for them. But they must always be subordinate to the major team games for moral and philosophical reasons to which the 'away with fixtures' lobby has paid insufficient attention.

I was not educated at public school. Nevertheless I think some of their ideas are more than ever necessary now in our state schools.

*If you're a glutton for punishment, you will find further, even more demanding passages in my *Write in Style* (1993), E & FN Spon, London, pp. 216–24.

Team sports inculcate discipline in an individual; first of all, of course, this is imposed by a teacher in charge but it gradually leads to self discipline, responding to the demands of the game, cooperating with team mates and never better exemplified than by a scrum half and a fly half working harmoniously together. It is accompanied by the discipline of the two or three hours training after school in cold and rain.

I can point to lads in my school, a mixed comprehensive, who would have been in the hands of the police now had it not been for the moral uplift they gained from playing in a team. And I am not just talking about a school side. We run three rugby sides from the first-year boys alone and that is in addition to other sports such as hockey and cross country.

The other value team sports impart is pride. In today's largerscale schools, many on split sites, there's no feeling of being part of that corporate body: the school. A team gives the school a name in which all members of that body can take pride. To understand what I mean, the scoffers would have had to see the 300–400 pupils and parents who turned up to wave goodbye to our rugby party setting off for a month's tour of Australasia in 1981.

Moreover, the pride generates a response in the local community. Some of our home fixtures attract gates of over 1,000. More importantly shop owners and businessmen identify with the teams and respond generously when approached for help.

The effect on the staff is nothing but beneficial. At my school, the sport has never been regarded as an extension of the PE department. Up to 20 regularly help with school sides, some nowhere near the touchline but doing posters or helping with refreshments. The discipline of the field is carried over into other areas of school life and relationships between pupils and staff are qualitatively better.

To finish on the plane of argument from which too many of the opposing camp never rise: material cost. A rugby team needs one ball, price £20, and the players only a pair of boots apiece when they go along to the local club—and that matters when unemployment is rife. But when you start encouraging squash and golf it costs far more to continue after school than rugby. Is this really a 'broad curriculum provision'?

Written by Ray French in 1985

Benefits of team games

Exercise D

Reduce this piece (c. 800 words) to about 275 words

This is by nature of an obituary: not for a person but for a Test career cut off in its prime. For in effect that is what will have happened once Mike Gatting plonks his bulk into a seat on a South African Airways plane today. In opting to tour South Africa this winter and next, he and his fellow rebels will rule themselves out of Test cricket until the spring of 1998. In June this year Gatting will be 33, no age for a quality batsman. But 41? That is a different matter. It is a pound to a pickle sandwich that the best Middlesex batsman since Compton will never again wear the lions and crown of England.

For one who has followed and admired his career since he rolled noisily into the Middlesex dressing room to begin his career in 1975, it is desperately sad. For there has been no one, in my experience, who has valued playing for his country more. He weeps at patriotic music and at great deeds by other British sportspeople. He is a very proud man.

He is also a pretty good player, a high-quality butcher who deals in biffs and bludgeons rather than the wand—although he can be surprisingly delicate at times. When the Test bio-rhythms were right he could be devastating, as for instance in Faisalabad when for little more than an hour he harnessed a blazing temper to score 79 breathtakingly brutal runs to reduce the Pakistan attack on ineptness after others had struggled.

It took him 52 goes to make a century for his country—from Karachi in 1978 to Bombay in 1984. The longer he went without that hundred, the harder mentally it was to achieve. When he finally carved the runs through extra cover that took him to three figures, it as like casting off chains. Even the English press contingent recognized it for what it was, and in an unprecedented gesture rose and applauded. The irony of that will not be lost on him today.

Rarely has he stinted since. But the past couple of years have been painful to watch, as the cheerful, beaming barrel of a lad has become a sad grey-beard, old and weary before his time. The pinnacle of his career had come when he marched his troops magnificently round Australia, cleaning up trophies wherever they went. His downfall was swift and systematic. Within the Australian triumph had been the first evidence of the breakdown of discipline in the English camp, and it was to cost them dear. Not only did the team performances become poor, but petulance was rife—led, it has to be said, by the captain.

Later, in Faisalabad, following that defiant innings and in one of the most notorious sporting incidents of the decade, he confronted the umpire Shakoor Rana when he should not have done so, as he knows and admits. Garting's stand, and his virtual condoning through his own actions of the team's behaviour on the tour of New Zealand which followed, might justifiably have cost him his job, and had it done so he might, curiously, have not been doing what he is today. Instead they sacked him for the tabloid exposure of an alleged affair with a barmaid which the Test and County Cricket Board thought unbecoming in an England captain.

Since then Gatting has become increasingly disillusioned with the way Test cricket has been run. A broken thumb, loss of form and the death of his much-loved mother-in-law added to the troubles last summer; yet to the last he has maintained that he did not really want the South African trip, that England would always be more important. Even after he had accepted a touring contract he could have been talked out of it, and he approached the authorities to see how the land lay. All he wanted, it seems, was a little love. But none, apparently, was forthcoming, and so off he goes.

It would be good to think that in years to come it will be for his cricket that Gatting is remembered: for the dismissive power of his strokeplay; for the wide-brimmed old sunhat and his waltzing yards down the pitch to smack some hapless spinner over long-off, or winding up to crunch square a seamer who has strayed just a fraction off line. Sadly, it is more likely that he will be remembered as a rebel, a pawn, as someone who confessed to not knowing much about apartheid when he did not really mean that. He allowed himself to be dragged into another game beyond his scope.

Mike Gatting, who by the spring of next year will be a reported £200,000 richer, does not need and would certainly never seek or expect my sympathy. But that is exactly what he has today.

Mike Selvey, writing in *The Guardian,* Thursday, 18 January 1990

Exercise E

Reduce this piece (c. 800 words) to 100 words

Watching the Planet Peeled Alive

Did you know that a B-52 bomber could carry 108 500 Ib bombs? By the end of the Vietnam war, these sinister bat-like machines had created most of the 26 million craters which perforated the landscape. More bombs were dropped in Vietnam than were used in the Second World War.

While these were being delivered, something called Operation Ranch Hand was systematically carpeting South Vietnam with 72 million litres of Agent Orange defoliant, ossifying two million hectares (a hectare is about two and a half acres) of forest and mangrove swamp in a well-organized pattern which suggested a form of intensive farming run by the devil.

'Help prevent a forest,' went the slogan among the Ranch Hand crews. Farmers previously friendly to the Americans flocked to the Vietcong in droves, since their allies had wiped out their livelihoods while blundering around like a man trying to kill cock-roaches with a combine-harvester.

All these statistics, and many more, emerged from J.Edward Milner's documentary, *Vietnam—After the Fire* (True Stories, C4). Over two hours, the film surveyed the state in which Vietnam was left when the Americans withdrew in 1975, and examined the progress of the Vietnamese in trying to reassemble their economy and ecology.

If the country had been nuked, the problems could hardly have been greater. This cool audit of war was in its way even more eloquent of the self-stoking distemper of the US military and political establishments than any number of *Apocalypse Naws* or *Hamburger Hills.* We've all seen enough corpses by now, but there's something about the sight of a lump of the planet being systematically peeled alive which is worse than merely ugly. You have to be both rigorous and dedicated to obliterate an entire triple-canopied rain forest, plus its population of rare or unknown species.

Perhaps the future reaction of Green voters even began to dawn on Richard Nixon, the electorate's flexible friend, because when he read a scientific report on the effects of military action on the Vietnamese environment, he immediately stopped the Agent Orange operations. Still, enough of the suff had been laid to lumber Vietnam with a continuing legacy of deformed and deranged children (there was a cringe-provoking shot of two-headed babies in jars), and women from the worst-hit areas are prone to an assortment of cancers. When the North Vietnamese made a film during the war claiming that Agent Orange contained dioxin, which is causing most of the damage, they were of course dismissed as cynical propagandists.

The Vietnamese who were interviewed displayed a kind of stoic incomprehension. One dioxin victim wished the people who'd done it would look after her and her family, otherwise, she thought, she might be better off dead. A woman who'd just had a stillborn baby had no idea what the war had been about. General Giap himself pointed out that the Vietnamese had no quarrel with the American people, only the US military.

Professor Vo Quy, a biologist, explained the knock-on effects of the devastation. When you wipe out the mangrove swaps in the Mekong Delta, you lose the marine life which feeds the locals and you leave the coast open to the eroding effects of sea and weather. When you defoliate and bulldoze tracts of rain forest, you wipe our wildlife, you contaminate the soil which is only fit for the useless but indestructible 'American grass', you lose the timber supplies the country depends on, and again the land is exposed to erosion and slippage.

The Vietnamese are now painfully replanting, rebuilding, digging canals by hand, and even trying to grow new rain forest from scratch. Kids play with toy American fighters made out of Heineken cans, and the Ranch Hand aircraft which were left behind have been melted down to make steel rods. Hope springs eternal, even in purgatory.

Adam Sweeting in his television column in *The Guardian,*
Friday, 4 November 1988.

Postscript

The next chapter has a section entitled **Energizing Patterns** which describes techniques that are also useful for note-taking. Consult pages 147–50.

CRUNCH-TIME: ESSAY PLANNING AND WRITING
8

> When the day of judgement comes, we shall not be asked what we have read, but what we have done.
>
> *Thomas à Kempis*

8.1
FUNDAMENTAL SKILLS AND CONSIDERATIONS

The above quotation is rather melodramatic, however seriously you take your study! Nevertheless, all proportion being kept, its doom-laden message corresponds to the feeling many students experience when they come to write an essay. It's a moment they dread: they are about to put their work and knowledge on the line, and such exposure cannot be put off any longer.

I am very sympathetic to this feeling—the more so since, to our shame, teachers rarely offer any systematic and fear-allaying advice on the matter. In trying to provide some such help, I'd like to stress one important point at once:

> **Just as there are different stages in and kinds of note-taking, there are various *types* of essay, each with their own purpose and value.**

In any course you will write a good many essays. (Scientists, it is true, do fewer than other disciplines; but even their essay requirements is not negligible.) It should be self-evident that they will not all be of the same kind. It would be absurd to expect to produce the same kind of essay at the *beginning* of a course as those which you do at the *end*—including the exam. I'm not just talking about a difference in *quality,* but of *type*. Obviously, if your later essays *aren't* better, more assured, tighter and more knowledgeable than your efforts at the beginning, then something is wrong! No: I have in mind the need to tailor your essay to what you most need it to do *at that particular stage of your study*—a 'horses for courses' approach if you like.

Let's specify an example and look at it in detail. Imagine you've been set your first essay of the year. You've covered the work in class and in private; you've read a good deal of material; you've made various notes; and you've allowed time for the ideas to filter through and become tolerably familiar. Now you've got to write about it.

The essential first question to ask yourself is, 'Why?', or more precisely, 'What am I doing this essay *for*?'

Now, a number of answers may occur to you, serious and facetious alike:

1. Because teachers need some evidence that you have done the work.
2. Because teachers need some evidence that *they've* done the work with, on and for you, and that they're not being paid under false pretences.
3. Because you need to find out just how much of the aforesaid work you really do know and understand.
4. Because we are not brought into life for pleasure alone.
5. Because until you commit yourself to some kind of 'test' on what you've studied, it will be difficult to go on serenely to anything new.
6. Because it's a uniquely profound and naked way of digging into a subject. As someone once said, 'How can I know what I think until I've seen what I say?'

Of these, 4 is a joke (that's the idea, anyway), and 2 is no more than half-serious—although you'd be surprised how many teachers do feel under such pressure from time to time. Points 1 and 3 are I think reasonably obvious.

Points 5 and 6 are rarely thought of by anyone, especially 6. Yet it is perhaps the most important and valuable—above all at the *start* of a course, but also right up to the time when your chief task is to hone and polish all your past work preparatory to the final exam or submission. For that reason it deserves a section to itself, and at once.

THE 'EXPLORATORY ESSAY'

For at least half any given course, essays are not so much a finished product as *part of the learning process*. Indeed, I would say that essays (or analogous written assignments) are perhaps the *central* constituent of that process; so wherever possible I would encourage you to look on those early and middle assignments as 'exploratory essays'. The virtues of such an approach are worth listing: …

1. If your main aim is to 'find out' through writing the essay, you will feel under far less pressure to arrange your material in an exact display—which is something you probably won't be able to do yet anyway.
2. As a result, the *substance* of the essay will engage you much more than the *format*. This is exactly as it should be for most of the course. Eventually you will want and need to pay equal attention to both; but you can't achieve good style and structure until you're sure of what you want to say, and to establish *that* takes a good deal of time.
3. It encourages you to take risks. This is a creative and invariably profitable experience. Obviously, you have to be *sensible* about this: a wild-but-deliberate dive into a perverse or irrelevant argument is foolishly wasteful. But if you pursue your ideas in an honest and interested way, it won't matter that some of them don't convince, reach a dead end, or turn out to be 'red herrings'. At least you'll *know and understand* that they are not of value, and why they're not; and others *will* be highly productive, embody insights and discoveries that the 'safer', restricted approach could never happen upon.
4. Inevitably, you will include more material than is necessary. At this stage, that is an admirable fault, if indeed it is a fault at all. The further thinking and editing that flows from such work will help you to keep in close touch with your work, which as we've seen from Chapter 5 is an essential component of successful study.
5. Some of such an essay's value will reside *in* its faults rather than *in spite of them*—an apparent paradox is best understood by considering the concept of **constructive criticism**.

I know some people who in effect consider that term more or less synonymous with 'unblemished praise'—where **criticism** means *appraisal* and **constructive** relates chiefly to the building of ego! And in truth there are some occasions when that is the essay-marker's task—and very nice they are too, for student and teacher alike. But the term has another, more muscular application: it consists of telling the student where s/he has gone wrong or somewhat awry. Such criticism is never easy to take, but if absorbed humbly, it allows you to *construct* something better in the future. It is part of the building process that lies at the heart of any good teacher-learner partnership.

The key point here is that you cannot construct something out of nothing. One can do a good deal to help improve material logged on a page that has some flaws; one can do very little about material that needs to be there and is wholly absent, apart from point that fact out and advise the student to fill the gap. That isn't constructive in any but the most rudimentary, informative way; but—as I've occasionally had to remind students of mine— nobody can be very constructive when faced with a void.

So it is far easier for a teacher to help students if they've written too much, or if some of what they've done is off-key or unconvincing, than if they've written too little or missed out important matters. In the former instance, one enjoys in effect a detailed and positive 'dialogue' with the student, who is able to make immediate and productive strides forward. In the latter instance, no such dialogue is possible: only two recourses are available to the teacher. The soft option is to identify what is missing and more or less leave it at that; the snag is that:

> **One does not know whether the student understands why it's important or whether s/he will cover the necessary additions afterwards.**

The tougher route is to say simply, 'Do it again'. Such a suggestion is always depressing and often very annoying, but it is inescapably sound, if only because

> **It is always easier—whether immediately or at some time in the future—to *edit* work that is too long, partially unsuccessful or at times flabby than it is to *flesh out* work that is too thin. Almost invariably, the latter exercise evolves into a complete re-write, starting from scratch.**

In short: the exploratory essay allows you to use your teacher in a rich and constructive way; to settle for a bare minimum in such tasks is always an unwise waste.

ESSAY PLANNING

It may strike you as odd that I have just finished looking in detail at a particular *kind* of essay before saying anything about basic essay technique and, especially, planning. I have done so in order also to emphasize that it is no use trying to plan an essay without first establishing what you're writing it *for*. The 'exploratory essay', both in its virtues and its problems, demonstrates admirably where your priorities should lie, and how your planning logic should operate.

> **The question 'Why?' should be the first word on any and every essay plan.**

With that firmly in mind, let us now look at a 'model' used by many students when planning—sometimes, I fear, on teacher-advice—and consider its limitations.

Ask yourself *why* every time you write an essay

Planning: How not to do it

Tell most students to construct an essay plan on a 'neutral' (applicable to all disciplines) topic such as 'Argue For Or Against Exams', and they are likely to come up with something resembling this model:

FOR
(1) Introduction.
(2) Exams as a necessary test.
(3) Exams as outside, 'objective' assessment. Standardization.
(4) Exams as an opportunity to shine under pressure.
(5) Conclusion.

Of—perhaps more likely in view of most students' opinions! —some-thing like this:

AGAINST
(1) Introduction.
(2) Exams as unfair pressure.
(3) Unjustified and/or distorting emphasis on speed.
(4) Hostility of examiners.
(5) Conclusion.

There are some good ideas in both these plans, and no doubt you could think of a number of others. (In case you can't, I go into the entire controversy in Chapter 13.) But neither plan is much use as a way of igniting or fuelling the essay itself. The middle sections look fine, but what about those bald words **Introduction** and **Conclusion**? What help are they? Do they show you how to introduce your argument, or give you any idea of what they're going to say?

No, they don't, do they? And yet it is with the introduction that you hope to grab your readers' attention; conversely, your conclusion will presumably be the final thrust that clinches their respect. There are no grounds for assuming that either will transpire out of the above plan. No thought has been given to how you

will secure initial interest or effect final persuasion—and that in turn will diminish the impact and value of the sturdier middle sections.

I've seen a lot of plans like these: most of them preface essays that, while often interesting and talented, have no real structure. They do not, in short, 'mirror' the alleged Plan at all; furthermore, they invariably begin with a couple of vacuous sentences that merely 'mark time' in a frustrating way. Sometimes it will be half a page or more before a point of any substance is made: all the previous material will have been not for the reader's benefit but the *writer's*—a way of 'winding oneself up' into an argument just as one 'winds oneself up' into a long throw of a ball.

In such essays the conclusion is equally vapid. Rather than summing up the argument or, better still, producing its most telling point as an exhilarating exit, it merely repeats points already made, often in exactly the same words. Thus the reader starts and ends with a yawn—not a happy state of affairs!

Don't plan your essays like this. A good performance can only emerge from such a scheme if you're absolutely sure what you're going to say in every detail: if you're *that* authoritative, you don't need a plan of any sort! Instead

Bring you planning into line with the way essays actually get conceived and written.

It is to such 'virtual reality' that I turn now.

ESSAY WRITING: HOW AND WHERE TO START

When you sit down to write an essay, you are by now (I hope) armed with the answer 'Why am I doing this task?'; in addition, you've usually got some idea about what you want to say and where you want to get to. You should be aware of such a general 'core' of material even if you're embarking on an 'exploratory essay' as defined above. (If you're not thus aware, it's almost certain that you're not yet ready to start writing: you need to do some further preliminary reading or thinking.) In view of this, it makes perfect albeit paradoxical sense to say:

The best place to start an essay is in *the middle,* or even, if you're sure enough of your material and argument, at *the end.*

Of course, you won't present the essay in this form when you hand it in: that would be ludicrous. But an essay is a complex piece of work: while writing you have to focus on the title, marshal ideas, arrange them attractively, attempt to write crisp, pleasing English, and remain constantly alert to the threads of your argument, remembering what you've said and where you're heading. This adds up to a tough task, especially early in a course. So it is wise to begin where you are at your strongest —in the middle. When you've got some points down on paper, and the shape of your argument begins to unfold, *then* you can start thinking about your eventual introduction.

This method is what a 'rough draft' *ought* to be like—a kind of 'scissors-and-paste' job, comprising various sections and sentences which can be properly arranged once they are written down. You can inspect the material at leisure, 'shuffle' it, strengthen it, and begin to tie it together. At all costs you should try to avoid the commonest type of 'rough draft' that students do—that is, writing the essay in an 'orthodox' way in pencil or biro, and then copying out a 'neat', almost-word-for-word version to hand in. This is *virtually useless,* combining two dismal qualities that lack any fringe benefit: you learn nothing between drafts 1 and 2, and it takes a long joyless time.

Naturally, you haven't got time to use my suggested method *in an exam*. But the point is that if you've used your course time properly, you won't have to anyway. Over the years you'll have learnt how to structure and write an essay under pressure. If you've experimented with techniques of the kind I'm suggesting, and used earlier essays sensibly as part of a review programme, you will by the exam be sufficiently the master of your material to adjust very fast to whatever question/title is thrown at you. For those who are less convinced about that, I deal with exam essay-writing in the later chapter on **Examinations.**

Introductions

I gave you one paradox just now; here's another.

The best time to write your introduction is right at the end.

'The man's a loony,' I hear you muttering. But let me quote you an introduction I read in an Open University assignment. The question was 'Is religion indefinable?', and the student wrote:

In order to answer this question adequately, it is first necessary to consider what religion is, and then to ascertain whether or not it can be clearly defined.

I was sorely tempted to write a sarcastic 'good thinking!' in the margin. In the end, I simply drew the student's attention to the fact that *it says absolutely nothing*. All it does is offer an empty and unnecessary paraphrase of the question. Now, it's an excellent idea to *think* for a moment about what the question involves; but it is *not* a good idea to make such preliminary sorting-out the first thing your reader encounters.

Furthermore, it's most unwise to clutter up your style *at any time* with empty blocks of words such as 'it-is-first-necessary-to…' or 'in order to do *x,* we must first do *y*'. These may have a methodological strength in something like a Maths theorem; but in an essay they are simply boring. And it is particularly important not to allow your readers' first reaction to be a yawn or a groan. They may forgive (or even not notice) the odd clumsiness or empty phrase later; but at the beginning they will be at their most alert, their most hopeful and, conversely, their most severe.

If, however, you write your introduction *after* you've completed the main bulk of the essay, you'll be in a position to produce something vigorous and arresting. One of the finest essays I've ever marked was on Jane Austen's *Emma,* in response to the title, 'Examine Jane Austen's qualities as a social critic'. The material was excellent, with many crisp and invigorating insights. But what made it was the introduction. The student hit me right between the eyes with:

Jane Austen knew a great deal about people, but nothing about sex. As a result, her social and moral vision is essentially *conservative;* ignorance of passion leads to a view of society that is founded on and celebrates order and good sense.

The student was very bright, admittedly; but the real point about this introduction is not its textual intelligence so much as its *calculated* success at grabbing the attention. The student knew *exactly* what he was doing and the effect he wanted to achieve. He knew that, even if readers turned purple with rage at such an opinion, they were nevertheless hooked; and he was sure enough about the soundness of his material to feel confident that he could demonstrate his argument clearly.

I asked him afterwards if he'd written the introduction last, as I suspected; and he had. He knew that the majority of his insights and judgements in the essay's core pointed to such a view, and so he chose to launch the essay with it. If you adopt the same method, you'll be surprised how immediately effective you can make your essays. At the very least, you won't ever waste your time and the reader's patience by taking half a page to make your first remark of any weight or purpose.

Conclusions

Similar considerations apply to conclusions as to introductions. What you want to avoid is anti-climax; so, for a start, cut out all such phrases as:

'In conclusion we can say that…'
'Thus it can be seen that…'
'By way of conclusion I would like to say that…'
'Thus, to conclude…'
'Thus, in answer to the question, we can safely say that…'

and so on. They say precisely nothing; they fall dully on the eye; and they are quite unnecessary anyway. In most cases, it's perfectly obvious that you've reached your conclusion—the writing stops a few lines down! So concentrate on saying something punchy instead.

How you achieve *that* is less straightforward, of course. You are, after all, summing up: it is not a good idea to introduce a completely new point at this stage (though, to be honest, such a policy is to be preferred to the kind of dull obviousness listed above). On the other hand, you want to avoid merely repeating things you've covered already, and you should *especially* avoid using the same words. Ideally, your conclusion should sum up your ideas and argument by 're-visiting' them in a fresh and economical way. Perhaps I might quote again from that *Emma* essay to show you what I mean:

> **Jane Austen seems to have been serenely confident about the values in which she was brought up. Unlike her near-contemporary Emily Brontë, there is in Austen no sense of inner conflict about what is right and true: the strength of her books and their moral outlook lies in her certainty. This confidence is never righteous, because of her compassion and humour; but it does mean that her social criticism, for all its authority, is based on a belief that, at root, her society was a just and good one. Radical alternatives never occurred to her, because they lay outside her experience and imagination.**

Let's list the virtues of that conclusion:

1. It is contentious (as was his introduction): it could cause violent disagreement. But that is its strength: it engages the reader's full attention, and assumes a kind of dialogue with him.
2. It is logical and true-to-itself. In no sense does it repeat the introduction, but it does *match* it impressively.
3. The use of a comparison (Emily Brontë) is invigorating, inviting the reader the consider the book in a broader context, and thus extending the debate beyond the essay.
4. It is tautly written and freshly phrased.

5. It is *short*: long rambling conclusions are always a mistake, no matter how much interesting material they contain.
6. It is, according to your point of view, stimulating or challenging: it asks the reader to think a little.

You might be fearful of producing such a conclusion, in case it was read by a rabid Austenphile who'd regard any implicit criticism of his or her heroine as a major heresy. All I can say is that, however much a reader might disagree with or even dislike such an argument, it would be a harsh and stupid one who would **'**mark it down**'** as a result. Just remember this: few if any students are ever penalized for being interesting. So try to make your conclusions muscular and compelling, using the principles I've listed above. *Anything* is better than a tired rehearsal of points and phrases the reader has already digested.

WRITING ESSAYS: SOME FURTHER PRELIMINARY POINTS

1.
Trust your voice

For the majority of students, the essay or dissertation is the longest, most complex and most ambitious genre they will use, and it is very important to stay as natural and individual as possible when writing it. Just because it is a formal, public and intellectually demanding task does not mean you need to adopt a disguise or hide behind others' views and style. On the contrary: a successful essay reveals something of the writer as well as an argument. It is ultimately a very personal form: you should bear that centrally in mind, and take advantage of it. Naturally, you need to make your language appropriate; but if you follow the many guidelines earlier in this book, there is no reason why your essay style should not be both pleasing and telling.

2.
Try to start the essay in plenty of time, and on no account leave it till the last minute

Part of the pressure attending the writing of an essay or a report is *compulsion*. Students are formally required to write essays, or they risk being thrown off the course, and any rising executive who refuses to submit an important report to his or her board of directors will soon be collecting a P45. As a result, only a handful default; but many shy away from the task for too long, perhaps because shelving it gives them the illusion of a freedom that the sudden arrival of a deadline brutally explodes. As a psychological ploy, this is readily understandable: we've all done it. And we therefore know that **as a strategy,** it is a recipe for disaster, as I trust this next example demonstrates.

It comes from any essay written by a normally very able student of mine; on this occasion he was already two days late in submitting it, and he was forced to dash it off on pain of my severest displeasure! As a result, he was cloudy-headed and panicky, and probably feeling both resentful and guilty as well. That was not the ideal state in which to address a demanding task—in this case, the analysis of a sonnet by Milton. Here is his first paragraph: I have highlighted the moments that are especially unfortunate.

> **'This poem is a way of expressing Milton's feelings.** The start of the play is the unhappy depressive side of Milton: he is discussing how useless he feels without his sight. **For a start at the beginning the opening line is:**
>
> "When I consider how my life is spent…"

' ... forced to dash it off on pain of my severest displeasure'

He is implying that his eyes where [sic] his life, everything, he had experienced, seen.'

The first highlighted sentence is so obvious as to be useless; the same goes the second, which in addition is a wretched symphony in tautology; the third collapses into illiteracy. And to repeat: this as a bright student, one who I'm happy to say went on to get a grade 'A' at A-Level. Obviously, he learnt from this comical performance, and I hope it's a useful lesson to you too. For if you leave an essay to the last moment, you've got no choice: you've got to do it no matter how tired, stupid, stale or resistant you feel. It is all too likely that such negative states will show through in your writing. And even if you're lucky enough to be feeling fresh and vigorous at such a time, you've still got to rush things. There's unlikely to be time for any editing or a period of careful thought to ensure that you get something just right.

All this is obvious enough, I know; nevertheless a sizeable proportion of students continue wilfully to ignore such obvious facts. As a result, they put themselves under an extra and severe pressure that a little sensible planning would render unnecessary. Furthermore, there's a positive side to it: if you do start early, you'll feel much more confident about being in control, and that will increase both your pleasure and your quality of performance.

3.
Pay full attention to mechanical accuracy, sentence structure and paragraphing

I am constantly struck by how many students whom I know at root to be mechanically sound seem to jettison half their competence in this respect when they write essays. (The same is true for many younger pupils when they write 'compositions'.) The reason for this is not hard to find. If one gives students an exercise on punctuation, parts of speech or whatever, they concentrate specifically on such things. There is, after all, nothing else to do; consequently, they perform very well as a rule.

But writing an essay is a multiple activity. You've got to:

(a) decode/understand the question/title;

(b) work out what you chiefly wish to say;
(c) figure out how to start;
(d) decide on how best to deploy your material;
(e) ensure you regularly substantiate your points with detailed illustration, quotation or reference;
(f) effect a satisfying conclusion

and several other things. It is therefore not surprising if you fail to pay ordinary attention to mundane matters like spelling and grammatical accuracy. Not surprising—but very unwise and probably highly damaging. Careless errors reflect badly on you and undermine any authority your arguments may have; moreover, there is a bigger danger still.

If you don't pay enough attention to how to spell words and structure individual sentences and paragraphs properly, the chances of your essay having a clear and persuasive *overall* structure are very slim.

Good large structures consist of well-engineered and flawlessly connected small structures: that goes for essays as well as buildings, cars and domestic machinery.

4.
Always pause before embarking on a fresh argument or theme

There are two good reasons for this. First, it allows you time to check that you've got all you can out of your previous focus. Very often, a few moments' reflection will lead you on to further points that lift the material from the merely satisfactory to the truly authoritative.

Secondly, the slight rest or change of activity will do you good, and should ensure that when you do turn to your fresh argument, you yourself are fresh and ready to tackle it with real vigour. If this does not happen, the chances are that you've become tired and should stop for a while. Note, incidentally, that this provides another reason for not leaving the essay until the last minute, when you won't be able to afford such valuable rests!

5.
Read as many essays/articles as you can

You cannot become a good essayist simply by osmosis, but reading others' work will quickly make you more alert to matters of style, structure and so on. You will learn from their strengths, but equally from their weaknesses and flaws: when you come across something that is unclear or badly expressed, the chances are high that it will help you not to make the same mistake.

8.2
ADVANCED SKILLS AND CONSIDERATIONS: ESSAYS AS PERFORMANCE

If I say that so far we have considered only the rudiments of essay work, I do not do so lightly or dismissively. The issues I've been addressing– why essays are necessary and why and how they differ in kind; how to plan (and how not to); how and where to start; how to effect a satisfying conclusion; what voice and tone to adopt; the sheer number of skills that essay writing draws on and demands, and so on—

Read as many essays/articles as you can

are far from easy to master. They may be fundamental, but I'd be the last to claim that they are straightforward. In my experience, it can take many months for an able A-Level student to reach the 'comfort zone' in these matters, and more than a few mature or tertiary students can experience similar difficulty.

Now for the good news! It may take a seemingly inordinate time for you to become serene about those fundamentals, but once they are secure, your graduation to 'advanced' should be a rapid one. From this stage on, your concern becomes chiefly one of **performance—**of ensuring that everything coheres and everything counts, that our case is the best it can be, as polished and enjoyable as possible. Once again, knowing what *not* to do and what to reject is arguably as important as anything apparently more positive, and I start this section with two 'don'ts'.

AN UNWISE STRATEGY

When I first went into the Sixth Form, one of my teachers gave us this model for writing essays:

(a) Say what you're going to say.
(b) Say it.
(c) Say you've said it.

That is all right for the first few 'beginner' weeks: students struggling with masses of new material and the major change in work patterns that characterizes the transfer to Sixth Form work may welcome its bald clarity. But it soon becomes redundant at best and decisively harmful at worst. It not only sustains but actively promotes the kind of flaws already discussed—obvious and dull writing, stagnation, anti-climax and a general impression of plodding. Its emphasis on clear logic is a good thing to bear in mind *privately,*

as it keeps you focused on how your essay is unfolding. But it does not have to—nor should it—be *publicly* spelt out in the writing.

Once you've acquired familiarity with your material, and with it an increased confidence and fluency, your approach can look to go way beyond such reductive procedures. You're now at a stage where your essays are a performance rather than a form of enquiry, and you should now have your 'audience' primarily in mind. Your purpose is not only to prove your competence but to *entertain*—to interest, stimulate, even enchant. If you take your readers on a dreary guided tour of basic logic, they won't be too enthralled. Neither, come to that, will you.

THE PERILS OF 'SPACE-FILLING'

In the box opposite you will find the text of a postcard written by an old friend, followed by my reply. I ought perhaps to stress that this exchange was a joke, a spoof of the kind of boring drivel it's all too easy to write when one sends any card or letter out of duty rather than inspiration or pleasure. However

Please read these 'Ultimate Non-Postcards'

for they offer a serious and valuable lesson for every writer of essays. And that moral is of course:

Do not fill up space with prose just for the sake of it.

It is easily done: all writers have times when they get tired or their attention is not as sharp as it ought to be, and before they know it, a vacuous paragraph has ensued. You can afford such 'blips' earlier on in your course; you cannot afford them when performing, so:

Always ensure every sentence has something worth saying in it.

You can help guarantee that by further ensuring that everything you write arises out of your personal interest *and* the desire to interest the reader.

Exmoor, Monday 26/9

Dear Richard & Ann,

We arrived here at 5.25 on Saturday, had dinner and went to bed. The next morning we got up late and had a good break-fast. Then we went out to lunch, which was very English. As it was raining, it was wet. Then we went walking—very steep because of hills. It was dark when we got back and we had dinner. Then we went to bed.

Love, Roger & Helen

****

Wednesday 28/9

Dear Roger & Helen

Thank you for your card. We read it, then we went out to work. When we came back, we had dinner, and thought about Saturday, when we are taking you out to dinner. When we have decided where we're going to

take you for dinner, we'll let you know where we're going to have dinner. I will give you a ring on the telephone when you return.

We went to Blakeney on Sunday. It is in Norfolk, which on the whole is quite flat, though not when you get to the steep hilly bits. It was very damp and misty, but we did not get too wet: we'd have got a lot wetter if it had been raining. Pity it wasn't sunny, really.

Love, Richard & Ann

LINKING, DIGGING AND POLISHING

You should now be fully alert to the dangers of boring your reader by drawing unnecessary attention to the basic steps in your essay's structure. But you must be equally careful not to omit steps in the logic of your *argument*. It is one thing to assume that s/he knows without needing to be told that you're starting the essay, moving onto another point, finishing: such omissions are sensible and indeed essential if you don't want to irritate. But it's quite a different matter if you leave out an important link between two points, leaving the reader to do the work: that is equally annoying.

So, while avoiding a dull, unfruitful survey of your essay's architecture, don't overdo it by insisting that the reader supply the bridges between your *ideas*. Always make sure that your argument progresses clearly and comfortably. It is not enough to put down two related points without showing that they're linked, and why. Very often, you will need nothing more than a simple conjunction (which means 'linking with'), such as 'so', 'thus', or even 'and'.

Essays whose material is not properly linked acquire a bland, almost unfinished, quality: the same is true of essays where the writer doesn't 'dig' into his material with quite enough depth or penetration. As a result, the points lie on the surface, as if waiting for the reader to mine them properly. Don't let this happen in your essays, either. Explore and develop your points as far as you can—don't, as so many students do, settle for the first and second useful ideas that occur to you. If you're talented enough to think of those (and nearly all students are) then a little vigorous turning over the ground is very likely to lead to a third, and a fourth. Time and again I read quite good essays which, with a little more penetration or enquiry, could have been *very* good. 'Linking' and 'digging' are closely related, in that the writer who concentrates fiercely on ensuring that his points flow lucidly from one to the other will very probably find that such a clarity of focus sponsors further, more telling, ideas.

Finally, you should always read your essays over *critically*—that is, in the position of the *reader* rather than you the *writer*. Look them over closely: have you really said what you thought you'd said? Any uncertainty in your answer, and you should clarify the material. For something to be 'more or less there' or implicit in your writing won't do: it's got to be unambiguously out in the open. Look, too, for any 'flab' and emptiness, thus ensuring that the style is as taut as you can currently make it. To 'polish' essays in this way is a pleasant experience, and one which can make a lot of difference to their final impact and quality. Furthermore, to get into the habit of 'polishing' will prove highly profitable in an exam.

ENERGIZING PATTERNS: REDUCING THE THOUGHT-GAP

This section could well have appeared earlier in the chapter, because 'energizing patterns' are useful at the very start of essay planning and writing. I've delayed it because, in addition to offering you a new technique, it serves as a kind of summary to all that I've said about note-taking and even reading, as well as specific essay matters.

Read your essays critically and remove 'flab' and emptiness

One problem that all students have is that their thoughts are so much faster than their writing speed. This is a fact of being human, and in crude approximate figures the disparity can be expressed thus:

1. Some thought is electronic, and can reach speeds of 100 miles per *second*.
2. Most thought is chemical, and therefore slower: even so, the speed involved is around 190 miles per hour (c. 300 k.p.h.).
3. Even a fast writer will not cover the page at more than five miles per hour.

I call this 'The Thought-Gap'. We've all had the experience of thoughts escaping us before we've had time to 'pin them down' in writing; and very frustrating it is too. But sometimes we fail to register them because we try to write down too much—a whole sentence or logical phrase rather than just a word or even a sign. 'Energizing patterns', as I call them, by-pass such laborious and wasteful procedures, and narrow the chasm between the respective speeds of thinking and writing.

As an initial demonstration, since this chapter is about essay writing, let us suppose you have been set an essay on 'The Cruel Sea'. It's probably quite a while since you did a 'composition' of this sort, but no doubt you remember the task well! The 'normal' practice is to think about it for a while until a good idea arrives; to 'chew over' that idea and reflect on ways in which it could be developed; and then to sit down and start the story/essay.

This can of course be quite successful, but it has one major disadvantage. If you simply wait for an idea to arrive, the likelihood is that you'll use the *first* good one that occurs to you, and although the first may be the best, it's more than possible that the second or third ideas would have been better. Best of all, you might have been able to combine all three in a rich and satisfying way.

As an alternative to that 'normal' method, why not try trapping your ideas on paper from the very beginning? This may—almost certainly will—stimulate *further* thoughts very fast. You can do it like this: take a piece of paper, write 'The Cruel Sea' in the middle and put a box round it. Your piece of paper now looks like Fig. 8.1*(a)*.

'Big deal', you might feel like saying. But just focus on that central box, and let your mind mull over it. As soon as any idea comes, write it down: use a 'railway line' scheme, sending different themes or angles in different directions so as to keep them distinct. Then, if and when you've got to about five 'mainlines', look

A thought-gap; thinking is faster than writing

THE CRUEL SEA

Fig. 8.1(a) Energizing patterns: the start.

at each one in turn and see how many 'branch lines', or sub-themes, you can get from each one. The emphasis is solely on speed, on pinning down a thought before it vanishes; therefore

Use single words or even abbreviations wherever possible.

Using this method, you'll be amazed how fast you cover your piece of paper. Look at Fig. 8.1(***b***), where you'll find my own effort, which took me five minutes. Because this is a book, the pattern is quite neat**:** I can assure you the original was much more of a mess! Tidiness is wholly irrelevant and unnecessary. The only thing that matters is what you should be able to decipher your pattern when you come to consider it more sedately. While *doing it,* you should simply try to get down as much as crosses your mind as fast as you can.

The marvellous thing about this technique is that after just five or ten minutes, you have a host of ideas that you can now brood on as slowly as you like, and you have .a large, rich *choice*. No longer is there any danger that you'll settle for the first decent idea that occurs to you: having worked so fast and productively, you can now afford to decide which 'angle' you most like. Moreover, you're in a position to *see connections between the themes*. In Fig. 8.1(***b***), for example, there are links between various 'branch lines'/ sub-themes in 'SHIPWRECK' and 'HISTORY', 'SEA CREATURES' and 'FISHERMEN', and so on. The links are elementary, agreed**;** but they *visually* suggest ways in which you can combine and enrich your material, be it for an essay or a story.

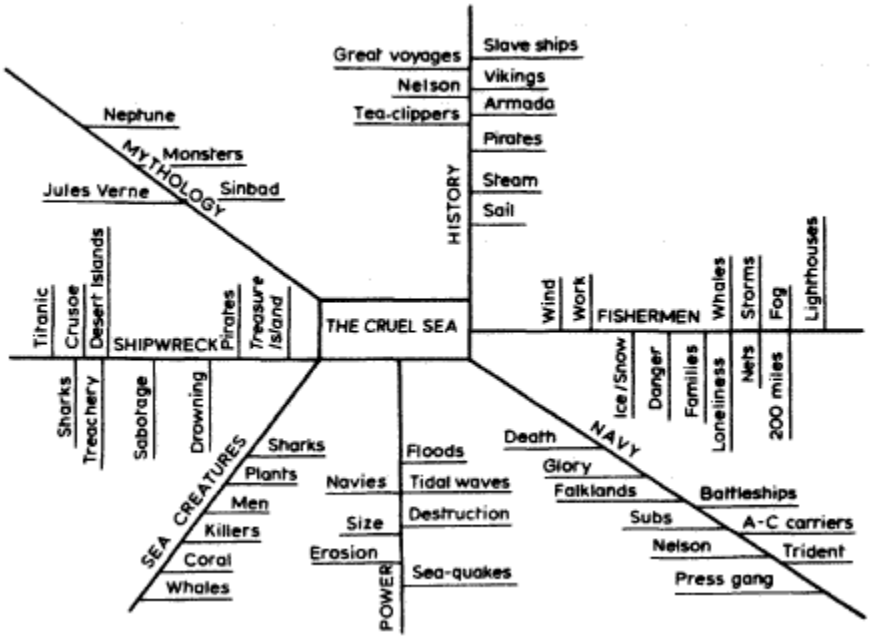

Fig. 8.1(b) Energizing patterns: five minutes later.

'Energizing patterns' are equally valuable in advanced essays. Again, you put your chief concept (perhaps the essay's title, reduced if possible to one word) in the central box, let your mind wash over it, and record as many of the resulting ideas as you can. When you peruse the pattern afterwards, you'll not only have a lot of potential material, but a clear visual signal of the connections you can make. With such a visible reminder, your subsequent essay should be more fluent as well as more substantial, its points related to each other in a comfortable and persuasive fashion.

The greatest value of such patterns is that they start you off, quickly and enjoyably. They will not solve problems; but they will at least identify what the problems are. They have other major benefits too. Because the method is so simple, it is also very versatile—a pattern can be used for whatever you like, whenever you like. Here are some possible uses:

1. During a lecture. Put the title/central concept in the 'box', and see where the lecturer takes you. Using just one-word 'triggers' you should have no trouble keeping up with him, and the 'railway line' method should allow you to distinguish both his main arguments and at least several specific points/pieces of evidence for each one. These can later be listed in the form of notes, and thus ensure an impressively high recall of the lecture's substance.
2. During private note-taking. I don't myself find it works very well during the *first* reading/note-taking; but on all subsequent occasions it is most useful. If you look again briefly at Fig. 8.1(b), you will see that it looks very much like a 'creative doodle' such as I advocated in the last chapter.
3. When key word noting. You can adapt that method to include lines or any kind of visual linking, which will endorse and clarify the key words' importance.

4. At the start of a revision session. Do a quick 'energizing pattern' on as much of the material as you can recall, and you will shortly have a definite picture of what you know, and therefore of what you need to refresh your memory about.
5. As a skeletal plan for an exam answer. You haven't got time to do the kind of detailed planning I describe in the previous section; but you *can* afford the few minutes needed to do a pattern of this kind. This will get you confidently started, and also serve as an invaluable reminder of what you want to say —something easily forgotten when under exam pressure.

If you are anxious to know more about these 'patterns', Tony Buzan's book *Use Your Head** has a lot of interesting and lively material on them. He calls them 'creative patterns': I've rechristened them, because strictly speaking they are not creative at all. They *sponsor* creativity by giving you a rapid and exciting ignition— hence my use of 'energizing'. The best term for them, perhaps, might be 'useful mess'! Out of their apparent chaos, your mind makes order and purpose. Such a transition cannot but boost your confidence, and thus makes the subsequent tasks more fun and more successful.

PERFORMANCE SKILLS: HOW TO PLEASE AND IMPRESS

All the best things in life both fulfil need or desire and afford great pleasure. That is true of a succulent meal, the masterly rendition of a piano sonata, a well-designed car; it is also something which distinguishes any significant *rite*. And it is no less true of a good essay—a phenomenon which, as students know only too well, has ritualistic elements to it!

If you absorb and follow the advice given thus far your essays will, I hope and believe, be at the very least sound, if not highly satisfactory. The only remaining thing to do is to consider ways of making them impressive rather than just solid, and I want to look at five more 'advanced skills' which characterize the work of a truly authoritative writer giving a performance.*

1. Keeping to the point.
2. Drawing on a proper *range* of evidence and focus.
3. More on introductions and conclusions.
4. Quotation and reference.
5. The strengths and limitations of 'argument'.

1.
Keeping to the point

This may seem an elementary skill, and so it is in terms of ensuring basic relevance and the need to answer the question. But advanced writers are vulnerable to a phenomenon that rarely affects their less sophisticated counterparts—that of becoming temporarily 'lost in thought'. What starts as an unremarkable idea may suddenly open up a new avenue of enquiry—a gratifying experience but also a perilous one. In your excited determination to milk this sudden inspiration to the full, you can easily make a major detour from your planned route without realizing it; sometimes it proves not just a detour but an elaborate dead end. Such an outcome can be most valuable during one of those aforementioned 'exploratory essays', for it is

*Buzan, *Use Your Head,* pp. 83–95.

likely to advance your learning and your discrimination. But performers need to be ruthless! Keep your title and main targets in mind at all times.

How you do this is up to you. You can make regular visual checks of your first page; you can write title and targets in bold capitals on a piece of paper kept in front of you; or you can just train yourself to issue regular mental reminders. But however you go about it, make sure that your material is not just interesting in its own right but achieves an overall unity and unbroken pertinence.

2.
Drawing on a proper range of evidence and focus

Most of your essays will address topics that are quite large and broad, although from time to time you will be asked to do something narrow and specific—e.g. the analysis of a scene in a play, a particular scientific reaction, or an historical document. And if the question is wide-ranging, make sure your essay is too. If you're asked to write about, say:

A. The development of a character during a large novel
B. X's foreign policy during a ten-year period
C. The strengths and limitations of Utilitarianism

you cannot afford to have a narrow or thin 'data base'. If you look at only two episodes for A, a couple of incidents for B or one example per 'side' for C, the essay is unlikely to satisfy even if the analysis you do offer is brilliant.

Good prior planning will more or less guarantee that your scope of example and detail is suitably broad. But stay alert while writing: as I've just pointed out in the previous section, it's all too easy to become so engrossed in a particular issue that earlier resolutions and schemes get forgotten.

There is a complementary danger that should be mentioned here:

Ensure a good range of evidence, yes; but don't go to the opposite extreme and sacrifice depth for quantity.

Sometimes an essay title can seem forbiddingly broad, prompting you to think that you must try to cover absolutely every relevant incident or detail. Unless you're intending to make your essay the size of a small book, you can't hope to achieve such comprehensiveness without becoming damagingly thin in your treatment of each point. Go for a muscular compromise: in a four-to-five side essay, you can focus on several key pieces of evidence and deal with them in sufficient depth to persuade the reader of their satisfying representativeness.

3.
More on introductions and conclusions

As is clear from my previous remarks, I believe that knowing how *not* to write an introduction is most of the battle. But two positive things need to be said as well.

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*Further 'performance skills' that are specific to writing under time pressure are examined in Part Three, **Examinations.** See below, p. 240–7.

1. **If you think the title requires you to define the terms it cites, then do so at once as your first paragraph.**

There is no need to be apologetic or diffident: you should not 'pussyfoot'. By all means spend some careful time composing your definition and confirming that it will sustain your argument; once you're satisfied, put it down clearly and confidently and then move on to your first point.

2. **The art of writing crisp and stylish introductions takes a lot of time and trouble to acquire, but it's worth it.**

If you can guarantee that your first few sentences will have genuine impact, you are well on the way to writing a most successful essay. There are times, yes, when your best policy is to leap straight in with your first substantial insight; but an introduction that serves as a clear platform and is also invigorating to read will give your work that touch of class that always impresses. And although taking extra care over that first paragraph/page will not automatically ensure that the rest of the essay is of high quality, such good habits and sharp performance tend to be self-sustaining.

So far, I've said a lot less about conclusions than about introductions. The chief reason is that in many respects exactly the same points apply: if you side-step the various flaws that characterize poor introductions, the likelihood is that you'll also avoid ending your essay in a lame fashion. However, some separate guidelines may be valuable.

3. **Before closing your essay, always look back at your introduction and then make sure that you say something fresh and/or express yourself in a different way.**

I don't mean you should contradict yourself! But you should try to ensure that your introduction and conclusion are not mere duplicates. You want to achieve unity, but that does not mean the essay should be *circular*.

4. **Short conclusions are usually preferable to long ones.**

Your ideal is the snappy tying-together of the main points and analysis you've recorded, leaving the reader impressed by your authority and perhaps interested in 'talking back'.

5. **If possible, conclude your argument in a way that makes explicit insights that have been implicit along the way.**

The conclusion is often the best place to register your overall reaction to the proposition in question—better, in most cases, than at the start, when you haven't yet 'earned' your right to pass considered judgement.

6. **As with introductions, shun self-evident phrases.**

If you observe guideline 4 above, it's worth remembering that it will usually be obvious to the reader that you've reached your conclusion, because they can see that the writing stops a few lines below! You therefore don't even need the phrase 'in conclusion', let alone anything more bloated.

4.
Quotation and reference

First, there are six key procedural and stylistic conventions which you need to observe.

1. The noun is **quotation,** not **quote,** which is a verb. The use of **quote** as a noun is becoming ever more widespread among educated people and media pundits. But don't do it: it's illiterate. And if you think that to worry about such minor confusion is tiresomely pedantic (and I can see your point), let me just say this: virtually every academic examiner I've met, dealt with or read finds the use of quote as a noun intensely annoying. Silly of them/me, very possibly; but if as a student you're subject to such pedantic whims, it's best to play safe!
2. There is no need to include the absurd phrase **and I quote**. All that is required is a colon after your introduction or 'set up', and to open quotation marks. (Don't forget to close them, either !)
3. Quotations shorter than two full lines may be incorporated into ordinary text. However, if quoting say 1½ Lines of **verse,** you should signify with an oblique stroke (**/**) where the break occurs in the original's lines.
4. Longer quotations should be isolated—i.e. treated as if they were self-contained paragraphs. In addition, they should be *block-indented* to add visual emphasis and thus impact.
5. If these longer quotations are in **verse,** always write them out in their original form—that is, in blocked lines.The oblique stroke usage identified in (3) is not appropriate in 'isolated' quotation.
6. When dealing with eponymous works (where the title of book is the same as the protagonist's name), be sure to distinguish between book and character. Underlining the former is probably the best way; thus **Macbeth** would refer to the man, **Macbeth** to the play.

   You can use quotation marks instead— **'Macbeth'** is perfectly in order. But since one tends to use quotation marks quite a lot in many academic essays, to underline may strike many as the clearer, better option.

So much for the mechanics of how to quote; if you are in need of a more detailed survey—including instruction on how to punctuate quotation—I have written extensively on the topic elsewhere.* Now a look at **when** to quote, and **why**.

A great many students—and I fear some teachers—harbour misguided ideas about the 'magic' of quotation, about what it does and what it proves. Certainly, the ability to quote with assurance and apposite timing is a sophisticated quality, one which characterizes the notably impressive writer, and such classiness will take time to acquire. But you can accelerate towards that goal much more smoothly if you first clear your way of all pot-holes and dangerous detritus—various snares and delusions that are far too commonly held to be sound practice. So let's look at a few **don'ts**.

1. **Don't quote for the sake of it**. Any quotation that does not illuminate a point just made or one about to be made is useless. Furthermore…
2. **…Don't quote in a vacuum.** Quotations hardly ever speak for themselves, and it is a great mistake to think that a quotation will automatically make your point without any further contribution from you. You need to show **why** you've chosen it and **how** it illustrates your argument.

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*See my *Write in Style,* pp. 178–85 and 320–6. There is also more on quotation skills in Part Three of this book, on **Examinations**.

'Be sure to distinguish between book and character'

3. **Don't quote too often.** Too many essays resemble a Jumbo Quotation-Sandwich whose 'filling' consists of increasingly indigestible extracts from other sources. It is very irritating to have an argument constantly interrupted (or indeed suspended) in such a way: be selective.
4. **Don't quote at great length**—or keep occasions when you do so to a minimum. Quoting a substantial extract can be justified sometimes, when the material is crucial to an argument or establishes several issues that are to be explored. But I find that most students who quote at length do not use such extracts well, providing only a cursory gloss before moving on. Such practice is an elaborate extension of the flaw cited in (1), similarly reducing quotation to a feat of memory, or simple copying!
5. **Don't make your quotations mere *duplicates* of the points they accompany.** It's important that quotation and point match, as observed in (1) and (2); but this kind of thing is feeble:

…Lady Macbeth cannot bring herself to kill Duncan, because he looks like her father:
'Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done 't.'

The quotation adds nothing to the point already made, other than proving that the writer has read the play. Good quotation always does some real **work**.

Similarly or conversely:

6. **Don't just *paraphrase* quotations that you use.** Look at this extract from a sixth-form essay on Keats's *Ode To Autumn*:

…The second stanza's last two lines are notably successful:

Keats's *Ode to Autumn*

'Or by a cider-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.'

Here Keats imagines Autumn as a spectator serenely observing the gradual fermentation of the cider, not concerned by the slowness of the process.

These comments are attractively written, but they don't **say** anything. Having cited the lines as 'notably successful', the writer tells us merely what they mean, not how and why they work. We might have expected a gloss on 'hours by hours', where the unusual use of the plural emphasizes the drowsy, long-drawn-out process, or some mention of the profusion of 's' sounds, which have a similar effect. As it stands, however, we have no idea why the writer thinks these lines successful or indeed why they were quoted.

Sometimes you will feel it necessary to 'explain' the material you quote, because it is difficult or ambiguous; if you're sure that applies, go ahead— it is sensible and enlightening. But do be sure—including the certainty that the quotation at issue really is difficult, not just a personal problem!

As you may have deduced, all the above **don'ts** include or imply more positive principles, which can now be listed.

- Always ensure that your quotation matches your point.
- ***Use*** your quotations: comment on them, show why you've chosen them.
- Quotations are fine servants but bad masters: they should assist your essay, not run it! Stay *in charge*.
- Your quotation must be grammatically complete in its own right; it must also fit in grammatically with whatever point of yours it accompanies.
- Before writing out a quotation, ask yourself if it's really necessary. Is it going to do some telling work? If in doubt, leave it out.

In addition, or as a summary:

- *Think* before you quote, as you quote, and after you've quoted. Staying thus alert will increase the chances of your quotations being apt and fully integrated into your argument.

Bearing those six points in mind will make your use of quotation pertinent and illuminating. Now for a look at the closely related skill of **citing references.**

So far my examples have been literary ones. I teach English, and most of the work I encounter has a literary focus, where the ability to quote aptly from a text is a prime requirement. But I am of course aware that the writing of essays in other subjects brings other things into play. Here you will probably make less use of quotation as such: it will be more a question of citing sources, theories, known arguments and so on. Even so, the *principles* I've outlined concerning quotation hold good when acknowledging an authority or referring to a particular maxim. In all instances you need to be sure that:

1. It's necessary and relevant.
2. It does some real work, moving your essay forward.
3. It's accurate and correctly set out.
4. You're not doing it too often.
5. It is not merely a time-wasting paraphrase.

This last point is especially important when referring to a well-known source or argument, and needs a paragraph of its own.

You must of course acknowledge major sources if mobilizing them in your own argument. But it is invariably a mistake to reproduce them in detail if they're seminal or even just renowned. Let us take two examples—Elton's work on the Tudors and Friedman's monetarist theories. Any competent historian will be fully conversant with the former, and any competent economist with the latter. You may therefore take such readers' knowledge for granted, and concentrate on showing how your knowledge of this work influences your own thinking. Reference to such sources can and should be crisp and brief: if you know what you're talking about, there is no need to prove it with a lot of laborious 'story telling', just as there's never any need in a literary essay to recite the plot.

The mechanics of citing references are fairly straightforward—more so than the rather intricate conventions affecting quotation. A reference, whether it be the name of a writer, a well-known theory or the title of a book, can be worked into your text within brackets, or as a footnote. However:

> **Be careful about footnotes. While they are a useful device and suggest scholarly devotion, too many of them can clutter up an essay and start to irritate the reader.**

If your essay is going to contain a lot of references—and you should be aware of this before you start writing—it is probably better to use a numbering system and collate all of them at the end of the essay. Alternatively, if your use of others' work is more general, functioning as overall influence rather than the detailed citing of specific points, you can just provide an extensive Bibliography of sources used.

As a summarizing piece of advice, remember that

> **It's *your* essay. The ability to provide illuminating references and apposite quotation is a valuable part of any good writer's armoury, but such things should always be ancillary to your work and thinking. To rely too frequently on others will serious damage your impact, no matter how superficially learned it may make you seem.**

The strengths and limitations of 'argument'

Here are two remarks as judicious as they are cautionary:

> **Argument seldom convinces anyone contrary to his inclinations.**
>
> Thomas Fuller

> **The aim of argument…should not be victory, but progress.**
>
> Joseph Joubert

Your essays are unlikely to bring about a major change of mind in someone with firmly established views of his or her own. That isn't to say you will never do so: I have found that one of the delights of being a teacher is that of learning from one's students; sometimes I have significantly altered my view or interpretation of a work in the light of their insights. But on the whole I would advise you to look on your essays as a pleasurable discourse rather than battle for supremacy. Such an attitude should make them more fun to write; moreover, it will stop you from using embattled or aggressive language, which can often mar an otherwise cogent case. Consider this paragraph from an essay written by a sixteen-year-old girl:

> **To a much greater extent than most of us realize and any of us want to believe, we have become 'programmed' like computing machines to handle incoming data according to prescribed instructions. Anyone who denies this is either naive or wilfully stupid; there is nothing more dangerous than the illusion of freedom, as Orwell demonstrated with such terrifying wisdom in *1984*.**

She is clearly intelligent, and her confident tackling of a huge subject inspires admiration. But her hectoring tone is a serious flaw. Her technique of labelling anyone who does not agree with her is a decrepitly stale rhetorical trick: the idea is that readers will not want to think themselves stupid, so will meekly go along with the proposed case. In all likelihood, however, they will instead resent this approach and dissociate themselves from the argument. In addition, she offers no 'proof': she just asserts. The use of Orwell is an arresting analogy, but is less effective than intended because no attempt is made to demonstrate that Orwell's vision was accurate.

The writer's youth makes it easy to forgive her tonal misjudgements, but they offer an important warning. If you really want to persuade people of your case, courtesy and dignity are crucial ingredients; readers will follow you much more readily if you treat them as likely friends rather than probable enemies. Don't make any concessions in your material and the points you believe in, naturally; but you can stay true to yourself without being aggressive.

Always argue as if you mean it, and by all means look to persuade people to your way of thinking—it is a good ambition to have even if it is not always realized. Perhaps your ideal response from your reader should be something on the lines of **'Yes, but**…' signifying a committed interest in what you've said but a certain degree of respectful departure from it and the desire to discuss things further with you. That is a great compliment that should satisfy most writers. What you cannot afford is the reaction **'No, and**…'! You may feel you're in the right, you may even be in the right; none the less, all you will have achieved is to prove by default the quiet wisdom of those remarks by Fuller and Joubert quoted above, and in addition, the reader may well be left thinking that you match perfectly this definition from Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary*:

> ***Positive,* adj. Mistaken at the top of one's voice.**

Finally, I know that not all of you will be engaged on courses where essays are a regular requirement. Scientists don't have to write all that many essays, and young professionals and managers may not have to do any. Sooner or later, however, every professional person will be required to write a report of some kind, and it is with that 'cousin' of the essay that I close this chapter.

8.3
REPORT WRITING

Writing an essay is a stressful business, especially early on in a student's career, and I've yet to meet anyone who has not at some time regarded the activity with fear and dislike. Yet a great many people come to enjoy it very much; as just noted, some become fortunate enough to derive pleasure and profit from something that once inspired only anxious hostility. But I've met few people who actively enjoy writing reports— even those who are good at it. Most approach the task as a matter of duty, of 'taking care of business'; they may be quietly satisfied with the result, but little or no sense of fun is present.

A cynic would argue that this makes crushingly obvious sense: reports are by definition boring, to writer and reader alike. And in our bureaucracy-infested times, it's not just cynics who believe that many reports are of dubious value if not downright unnecessary, and would be better left in their original rainforest form. Often, it is felt, reports are purely a matter of protocol: they are expected, traditional and must 'be seen to have been done', and even while we connive at such practice, we are all too aware of its underlying joyless futility.

As is I hope already evident, I am sympathetic to this point of view. I have to write and read many reports, and neither activity often fills me with energy or delight. But that is no help, either to you or to me:

> **The attitude and approach I've just outlined are very dangerous, almost a guarantee of indifferent performance.**

If you need to write a report, the only safe attitude is to believe that it **does** matter and that you need to devote your best energies to it. The sad fact that a lot of reports are poorly written should never become an excuse for doing likewise: instead, let it increase your determination to do an admirable job.

The first thing to remember is that **the chief purpose of any report is to *inform***. The genre covers anything from a few lines to thousands of pages. It makes no difference whether it's a brief comment from a subject teacher on a school report or a massive document collating the findings of a major public enquiry: a report is useful only in so far as it is illuminating. Above all things, therefore, you need to **present your information as clearly and concisely as you can**—an 'umbrella' principle that governs all the individual points that follow. If that seems obvious advice, it is well to remember that reports are often highly technical and intricate documents, and one can get so absorbed in their sophisticated subject matter that ordinary writing skills and considerations suffer badly, making life very uncomfortable for readers. They will usually be prepared to make an effort, particularly if the report is long; that does not mean you should allow your writing to become irritating or laborious. Awkward, stuffy or opaque prose can always be avoided, and if you don't avoid it, your readers will quickly come to resent their task: that is not a good basis for persuading them or getting your points across effectively.

You will greatly increase your readers' appreciation—in both senses of that word—by paying close attention to these specific questions and guidelines.

1.
For whom are you writing, and why?

It is always important to have a sense of your audience when writing, but it's especially so when fashioning a report. Are you writing for experts, for intelligent non-specialists, or beginners? You need to address that question—and its answer—in every sentence you write. Experienced and knowledgeable readers will quickly tire of having elementary points spelled out; conversely, a non-expert audience will soon become lost if you go too fast or fail to explain crucial things.

Of course, sometimes your audience will be a mixture, describing a perhaps considerable range of knowledge, intelligence, opinion and so on. This is always a very tricky matter, and I won't pretend I've got any easy or foolproof remedies. But I am convinced that you'll be far likelier to bring off even this delicate balance if you're firmly aware at all times of who's going to read what you've written.

2.
Do you really need jargon? Will 'plain English' do?

As I've mentioned, many reports address technical or specialized matters, and it's inevitable that some of the language used will reflect that. You need to be careful, however. As (1) above advises, remember who your audience is, and be prepared to explain technical terms and other jargon. And if writing for experts, don't be any less watchful: frequent jargon is tiresome even for readers who fully understand it. As much of your prose as possible should be 'en clair': readers forced to 'decode' every second sentence will rapidly become tired and fed up. Conversely, however…

3.
Try to avoid chattiness and trendiness

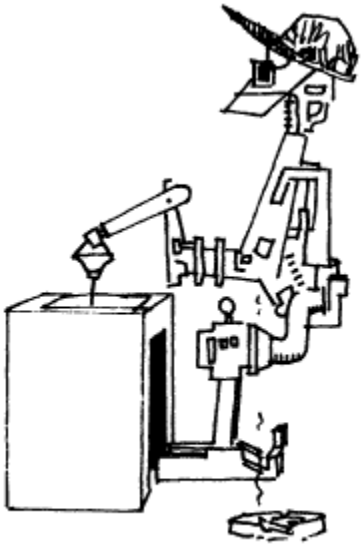
The admirable desire to keep jargon to a minimum can lead the writer astray in an opposite direction. Nobody wants you to be boring or pompous, but slang and conversational idiom are rarely appropriate to a report. Above all exclude trendy phrases: they are often as impenetrable to the 'outsider' as the severest jargon, and they tend to make the writer look like a show-off.

4.
Be especially diligent about accuracy and pleasing layout

Obvious, maybe, yet many reports do not take enough trouble over such basic matters. Good reports are always dignified, and errors in spelling and presentation seriously undermine dignity. Arrange your sections, sub-sections and paragraphs with the reader's flow and convenience chiefly in mind. If a particular section is long and involved, it is both efficient and courteous to provide a short summary.

5.
There is no need to be wooden or anonymous

I've already suggested avoiding both excessive jargon and over-familiarity, and that may seem to restrict your range a great deal. In fact, you have plenty of scope left. Like a successful essay or article, a good report will be a subtle blend of the soundly impersonal and the stimulatingly personal. Yes, it must be clear and logical, professional in its knowledge and dignified in its deployment of material; on the other hand, it



' ... that appears to have been written by a robot'

needs a discernible voice, some kind of individuality. Nothing is more tedious than an extended piece of prose that appears to have been written by a robot—the reading equivalent of a telephone answering machine.

6.
When you've completed the report, compile a single-sheet summary of your major points, and affix it to the front.

This is good public relations—it eases the reader into the task, providing a clear and welcome map for what may be a very substantial journey. You benefit also: composing the summary will automatically involve you in a close check of the material and its organization, and you may well find you can improve them.

Writing reports need not be drudgery. Within the limits outlined, stay natural as well as properly alert, and you should find that your prose is crisp, appropriate and quite pleasurable to write. If you still think report writing and fun are irreconcilable opposites, have a look at the piece which appears below. It is adapted slightly from an item that appeared a few years ago in *The New York Sunday Times*. It is both valuably instructive and genuinely entertaining—a combination that distinguishes the ideal report.

REPORT WRITING

Some Rules of Grammar

1. Remember to never split an infinitive.
2. The passive voice should never be used.
3. Punctuate run-on sentences properly they are hard to read otherwise.

4. Don’t use no double negatives.
5. Use the semi-colon properly, always use it where it is appropriate; and never where it isn’t.
6. Reserve the apostrophe for it’s proper use and omit it when its not needed.
7. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
8. No sentence fragments.
9. Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.
10. Avoid commas, that are not necessary.
11. If you reread your work, you will find on rereading that a lot of repetition can be avoided by rereading and editing.
12. A writer must not shift your point of view.
13. Give slang the elbow.
14. Conversely, it is incumbent upon us to avoid archaisms.
15. Don’t overuse exclamation marks!!!!
16. Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences, as of 10 onwards or more, to their antecedents.
17. Hyphenate between sy-llables; avoid un-necessary hyphens.
18. Write all adverbial forms correct.
19. Writing carefully: dangling participles must be avoided.
20. Steer clear of incorrect forms of verbs that have snuck in the language.
21. Take the bull by the hand: always pick on the correct idiom and avoid mixed metaphors.
22. Avoid trendy locutions that sound flaky.
23. Never, ever use repetitive redundancies.
24. Everyone should be careful to use a singular pronoun with singular nouns in their writing.
25. If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times, resist hyperbole.
26. Also, avoid awkward or affected alliteration.
27. Don’t string together too many prepositional phrases unless you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death.
28. ““Avoid overuse of quotation marks.”””””
29. For Christ’s sake don’t offend your readers’ sensibilities.
30. Last but not least, avoid clichés like the plague; seek viable alternatives.

TEACHERS AND HOW TO USE THEM
9

This chapter marries and extends two separate chapters from the 1984 edition, which offered 'A Student's View', written by Chris Pope, and 'A Teacher's View', which I wrote. I have effected this merger for two reasons.

First, for reasons explained in the Preface to the second edition, I decided to dispense with a co-author this time around, and in those changed circumstances it was inappropriate to retain that first title. I nevertheless remain very grateful to Chris for his wise and valuable contribution: much of its essence is preserved here.

Secondly—and more important—I rather regret the 'them and us' contrast that the original pair of chapters may have implied. For I would now want to stress as a fundamental principle that:

All successful advanced study hinges on a fruitful partnership with one's teachers.

The respective roles and tasks differ and the teacher's status is on the surface senior and more authoritative. But the goal is identical: the success of the student, i.e. you. And the best chance of that happening is if student and teacher work together in harmonious honesty and a direction that is clear to each. In this respect, once again, **you are in charge:** you need to make the best use of your teacher if s/he is to help bring out the best in you.

TEACHERS AS PARTNERS (I): INTRODUCTION

I would like to think that few lessons anywhere are a *complete* waste of time, of no value whatever to every single individual present. Nevertheless, anyone who has ever been a student, even for a relatively short period of time, will at some time have sat in a classroom bored rigid, thinking how much more progress one could make if one were alone. Indeed, with the ever-growing range of textbooks available nowadays, and the major increase in part-time and/or distance learning courses, it is possible to study virtually anything on your own.

That said, it is extremely difficult to master a subject without any kind of help *at all*. It is possible, yes, but it is much the harder option; the chances are that when you have completed the course, your knowledge will be less good than if you'd had a tutor—worse in both quantity and quality of knowledge. If you genuinely do better on your own than with a teacher, it's either because you're exceptional or, more likely, because you're not using your teacher properly*

There are two main reasons why teachers are better than textbooks. One is that they are flexible and can adapt to your particular needs and problems, which a book obviously cannot do. The second is that

' ... hinges on a fruitful *partnership* with one's teachers'

communication between two human beings is usually better (and almost certainly faster) than between a book and a human being.

Mind you, human beings are a lot more complex than even the most difficult and far-reaching book, and this gives rise to problems as well as benefits. Ascribing 'fault' or 'blame' for these problems may not ultimately be very profitable, but I think it only right to say that they do not merely arise out of student inadequacy! In the previous edition, Chris Pope and I concocted two teacher-caricatures which are worth presenting again here. They are stereotype extremes, yes, but it will be an unusual student who has not come across an approximation of at least one of them.

TEACHERS AS PARTNERS (II): TYPES

Spoon-Feeder

For Spoon-Feeders any topic not on the exam syllabus is a waste of time. Their lessons are an exercise in reducing the amount of thinking, for both teacher and student, to the minimum necessary to pass the exam.

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*These remarks assume you have a choice. Some students do not, and are ***only*** able to study hundreds or even thousands of miles away from the nearest teacher, school or college. That kind of 'dire necessity' brings its own will-power and hungry concentration which can often inspire great success: see my portrait of The Distance Learner in Chapter 1. Other, less 'geographically challenged' students should look on their teachers—even the indifferent ones! — as a key resource.

They will therefore use the same notes year in, year out, and dictate them word for word. Homework is set at the end of each lesson, to be collected in at the beginning of the next; every so often there will be some form of test to ensure that the material has been efficiently absorbed. All the student needs to do is assume a fixed look of fascination and let the pen do the rest.

Spoon-Feeders come in all shapes, sizes and styles. Some are extremely able, or were so once; some are hardly more proficient than the students they teach—hence their manic reliance on notes and on an absolute, fixed programme in their lessons. Most of them are solidly competent, and will get you through all right. But if you want to succeed fully—as opposed to 'get by' —you'll need to find a way of getting more vigorous help than they offer. For the Spoon-Feeder is the teacherequivalent of The Earnest Student delineated in Chapter 1—more or less obsessed with supplying you with the answers, but not terribly interested in the questions themselves, let alone in enquiry as an activity. The truly Advanced Spoon-Feeder is not much more than a breathing, fleshed-out version of a Study Aid, and students need more than that for true fulfilment.

Prolix Professor

Prolix Professors are always in a muddle and live in a world of their own. They are highly intelligent, and have an interest in everything… except the syllabus in hand. Never having had any difficulties with the subject themselves, they find it hard to see where other people's problems lie and thus how to help them. Their obsession with obscure topics and an unbridled ability to digress result in the structure of their lessons being rather like that of scrambled egg. It is frequently impossible to follow them, and any notes taken during the lesson stand a fair chance of being incomprehensible. Worse still, should a question be asked, the answer is as likely to confuse as help.

Prolix Professors are invariably enthusiastic and usually kindly, and so they are liked, in keeping with the fondness one feels for 'a character'. But they pose equal, albeit opposite, problems for the student relieved to escape from Spoon-Feeder. In place of a narrow, drily competent Gradgrind, you now labour under a chaotic Brainstawm. Spoon-Feeder gave you remorselessly dull exam-fodder; Prolix Professor serves up a cascade of bewildering bubbles with no core and no substance. Students unlucky enough to draw two such figures simultaneously find that their study approximates a diet solely made up of salt beef and ship's biscuits on the one hand, and candy-floss souffles on the other.

Of course, most teachers fall somewhere between those two extremes, and in any case they will use different styles and tactics depending on the class, the subject taught and the time available to them. However, 'seeing through' the method used should help communication, and also increase your sense of security and confidence; it will also help determine your note-taking strategy.

TEACHERS AS PARTNERS (III) UNDERSTANDING AND ASKING

Although Chapter 7 has already dealt in detail with note-taking, it is worth re-emphasizing its importance during lessons. No matter how interested you are and how well a lesson may be going, you will probably forget a good deal of the material by the following morning, let alone the end of the year! Your notes will be an invaluable and unique reminder; you should also be prepared to rewrite them in the evening, which will consolidate, even advance, your understanding.

As stressed before, it is *crucial* to understand everything you study and note, and it is therefore vital to be honest with yourself about the term 'understand'. It doesn't mean the vague grasping of a situation, but being fully comfortable and clear about it. Only you know if you have truly understood something, when a

problem suddenly resolves itself and the penny drops. And it is always preferable to try to work out any difficulties on your own.

I realize that this is easier said than done. Understanding often requires much thought; it can also take a fair time—longer, perhaps, than you have in the lesson. There are indeed times when it does not dawn at all: in those circumstances, it is worth taking a break and returning to it later. As noted in earlier chapters, it is both extraordinary and heartening how something will suddenly become clear the following morning or at a moment when you're least expecting a revelation. But no matter how frustrating the process can occasionally be, it is always worth trying to solve a problem yourself instead of merely being told how to do it—or, worse, having it done for you. Not only are you much more likely to remember it next time: you will also be much better prepared for the next step. A Chinese proverb sums it up admirably:

Hear and forget; see and remember; do and understand.

Nevertheless, there will be time when you find yourself well and truly stuck/fogged/stagnant, the prisoner of a problem that will *not* sort itself out. It is at this point that the way in which you use your teacher is important—so much so that it can be elevated into a governing principle:

If there is something you do not understand, you must ask—again and again if necessary—until you grasp it fully.

It is almost incredible how many students are prepared to sit in silent ignorance rather than admit to not understanding. What is the point of embarking upon a topic if you're not going to understand it? And what is the point of mutely implying understanding when you have no real idea of what is being talked about? To behave in such a way is the only *truly stupid* thing a student can do: it is a form of false pride, which is about the most useless, damaging quality anyone can have, let alone a student. For remember:

Teachers are *paid* to be asked questions and to answer them.

There is only one thing that *really* annoys a good teacher, and that is outlined in this 'playlet':

Teacher: Right. Does everyone understand that?
Class: *Tacit*
Teacher: Anyone at all unsure? I don't *mind* if you are—I just need to know.
Class: *Tacit*
Teacher: Sure? *[Pause]* Okay, on to the next topic… [ONE WEEK LATER]
Teacher: Okay, we covered this last week satisfactorily, and you all understood it, so you shouldn't have any trouble with it. *(Pause as he sees blank/worried/ bewildered/panic-struck faces.)* What's the matter?
Brave Student: I don't understand this at all.
Other Students: Nor me/Or me/Me neither/What's it all about?/Etc.
Teacher: AAAAAARRRRRRGGGGGGHHHHHH!!!!!!

You can't blame the teacher for screaming, can you? It's partly frustration: a whole week's work has just been shown to be largely wasted, since it's hardly likely that the students have understood succeeding lessons if they failed to grasp the original material. But it's mainly a bellow of rage at the sheer

Teacher: AAAAARRRRRGGGGGHHHHH!!!!

stupidity of remaining in silent ignorance when given a friendly opportunity to voice any doubts, problems, or gaps in understanding.

Speaking as a teacher, I hope I am always sympathetic to the shy student, and I do recognize how difficult it sometimes can be to admit ignorance and thus risk being 'shown up' in front of others. But if you want to learn, such a wallflower approach is a luxury you cannot afford.

So ask your questions—as many and as often as you like. If they are serious and honest enquiries, no teacher will ever get impatient with you. On the contrary, s/he will be grateful—as in all probability will the rest of the class—because

No teacher can help you efficiently unless and until s/he is aware of what you *don't* know and *don't* understand.

It's easy to preach to the converted, and even easier to teach the already knowledgeable. There isn't, however, much *point* to it: the teacher's chief function, and main pleasure, is to help you to master what you didn't know before.

One last point about student questions. Teachers are themselves learning as they teach, and questions and ideas from their students can —often do—throw a new light on their subject. Good questions are a delight to committed teachers: they stretch them, thus expanding their own knowledge and awareness. So, far from worrying whether you're being a pest when you raise a query, remind yourself that you are *adding* to your teachers' enjoyment of the lesson and their overall insight.

You may think that sounds rather idyllic; I can assure you that it's a lot more realistic than the desire 'not to be a nuisance', and a personal anecdote may help convince you. For ten years I taught two Open University courses—the Arts Foundation Course (involving six disciplines) and the third-level course 'The Nineteenth-Century Novel and Its Legacy'. They were good courses, especially the latter; nevertheless, more than a few students asked me how I could stand doing the same material year in, year out. The answer is that it was *never* the same material from one year to the next—*because of the students*. Their reactions were always different, and so were their problems. Most of all, their questions were individual, and therefore invariably new, and so the basic material from which I worked and which I covered was made fresh every year. In short, the material *would* have become unacceptably tedious were it not for you lot out there!

At the start of this chapter I stressed the notion of **partnership**. I can summarize the preceding section and set up the next by observing that the teacher-student partnership is complex and very much 'a two-way street'. You will greatly help your teachers, in all sorts of ways, if you make the best use of them; that in turn will make them more help to you.

TEACHERS AS FRIENDS

Many clichés masquerading as wisdom annoy me, but this George Bernard Shaw item comes very high on the list:

He who can, does; he who cannot, teaches.*

It's not just that it's insulting; implicit in it are two very damaging notions—damaging, that is, to any *student* who chooses to regard the remark as anything more than a faded shallow witticism. The first is the implication that any old fool can teach, just like that; the second is the suggestion that there's something intrinsically inadequate, even sterile, about teaching as an activity. Any student who goes along with either sentiment stands little or no chance of getting the best use out of his teachers—and thus dangerously reduces from the outset any chance of success and enjoyment.

Contrary to still-held beliefs, *not* everyone can teach. For a start, you have to *like* children and/or their elder counterparts. No doubt there are a few misanthropes infesting the odd staffroom here and there—people who dislike schools, pupils/students and all term-hours between nine and four; they should be pitied as well as despised, because they must have a rotten life. In addition, you have to like your *subject,* and to know it properly: as noted above, it is only a matter of time before an intelligent student will ask a question that requires more knowledge than what can be nervily mugged up the night before the lesson.

I stress all that for one reason only: it is essential that you regard your teachers as helpmates, guides and **friends**. They are not gods; they are not infallible. Neither do they regard you as idiots, pests, or absolute disciples. There are a few teachers around, yes, who are bored by all students, and there are also a few others who have no interest or even competence in their subject. But there aren't many of either.* Most of them are skilled professionals who like what they do and regard it as important; moreover, like anyone with a set of skills, they enjoy using them well, and using their skills well means helping you to learn and grow. Very few good teachers are remotely envious: it is *exciting* to encounter a mind better than one's own and to help it develop. And once you realize that teachers are on your side, professionally committed to advancing

* To be fair to Shaw, the remark is given to his hero in *Man and Superman,* John Tanner, a man more distinguished for *bon mots* than for any real sense or achievement.

'He who can does: he who cannot, teaches'

you, and respectful of you as an individual, you will not only be well on the way to achieving the kind of profitable communication that is perhaps *the* chief benefit of being taught: you will—in a profound and entirely non-maudlin way—have made new friends.

WHAT TEACHERS *CANNOT* DO

For a start, no *one* teacher can do it all, no matter how superb. Within their subjects teachers all have particular enthusiasms, fields of expertise, favourite areas; conversely and consequently, they all have certain blind spots, areas they know less well, even prejudices. This is inevitable and normal, and you shouldn't worry about it. You should, however, canvass other views and ideas whenever you can. Your teachers will encourage this anyway—and they *mean* it: it's not just idle professional courtesy. These days, more and more courses use team-teaching, or at any rate an element of pluralism: this is a sensible and valuable development, and you should look to extend it wherever possible It is pleasing to be asked things by students other than one's own: most teachers are to some extent born show-offs, and they're always happy to increase their audience!

You should also question other students. Indeed, it is probable that in the end you will learn more from each other than from us, your teachers. You all *live* the same problems and the same learning experience,

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*Having said that, if you *are* unlucky enough to get a teacher who is interested neither in you nor the subject, there is only one sensible thing to be done—transfer to another class. I am well aware of how embarrassing and difficult this can be, but it's the only way, ultimately. If you're getting nowhere under his/her guidance (or lack of it), it makes no sense to remain miserable and uninstructed; and perhaps it's only right that others should know.

and therefore share a language that is more immediate and more profound than that which you share with even the friendliest teacher. Read each other's essays; compare notes (literally and metaphorically); work on problems together. You will find it fun, and thereby extremely productive.

There is one thing no teacher can do for you, nor is there any reason why s/he should try: **to make you work**. Up to the age of sixteen, when you're legally required to attend lessons, it is perhaps not unreasonable to expect your teachers to nag you about undone homework and so on (though such an attitude seldom characterizes the hungry GCSE student). But once you *choose* to do a course—and this book is written largely for voluntary students—it is no part of your teachers' job to chase you for work that you're doing *for yourself*. If you cannot be bothered to do your various assignments and you are not nagged about it, don't ask yourself what your teachers think they're doing, letting you get away with it. Instead, ask yourself what you think *you're* doing, not completing (or even starting!) work you've made a free decision to undertake. Few things irritate me more than the following 'gracious apology':

I'm sorry I haven't done your essay, sir, but…

It's not *my* essay: it's the student's. To put it crudely, I get paid whether s/he does the work or not; while in the great majority of cases I much enjoy reading the essays I mark, it would be overstating the case to suggest that a student essay undone leaves a dismal gap in my life. But it may well lead to a dismal gap in the student's progress and success— and that is a cause for sorrow as well as temporary irritation. Once again I must stress **you are in charge**—and that means responsibility as well as freedom.

Finally, however closely you work with your teachers, it is important to stay independent. Up to a point, of course, you are dependent on their skill, their knowledge, and their breadth of understanding. Beyond that point, however, you must be careful to stay yourself. It is almost certain that somewhere along the line you will not see absolutely eye to eye with your teacher about an idea, an interpretation, a method. This is, admittedly, disconcerting when it happens; but it is a good thing. It clearly shows you that you're developing, and have a mind of your own. So keep hold of that awareness. Indeed, such a quality is one of the fundamental characteristics of the truly academic mind, and leads me to a most important distinction.

USING TEACHERS: 'ACADEMIC' VERSUS 'STUDIOUS'

It is widely assumed that these two words are synonymous: in fact, in a subtle way, they are virtual opposites. 'Academic' is a vigorous concept; while 'studious' is, finally, a negative or, rather, passive one. 'Academic' connotes someone who can *think,* make his or her own judgements and connections, and for whom study is an exciting exploration—of the self as well as the material. On the other hand, 'studious' —while admirable, and a necessary *prerequisite* of all good academic work—describes a conscientious but sponge-like mind that absorbs but does not give out anything of note. To a teacher, there is nothing more exciting than a genuinely academic mind, and nothing duller than a merely *studious* one.

Academics are bound to disagree sooner or later—and that includes students. Staying independent in the fashion I have recommended does not involve or require arrogance: it is of course idiotic to dismiss someone simply because you disagree with them on one or two matters. (If we all did that, we'd have no friends, nor even acquaintances.) But just as I'm sure *you* won't do such a thing, remember that your teacher won't either. Hardly any teachers are Jean Brodie types: they are not interested in moulding students to an exact specification, and still less do they want their classes to comprise junior clones of themselves. They simply want to help you learn; and that includes learning what *you* like, feel, and consider valuable.

CONCLUSION

I've now been teaching for more than a quarter of a century, and I still love it; I also continue to like being taught. Nobody is ever so 'mature' that they can't learn something new; one can go further and suggest that the seasoned adult who takes the view that 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks' is not so much mature as stagnating into cretinousness. The business of learning is, on the whole, a delightful one—whichever 'side of the desk' you happen to be.

But remember that learning is a business: important though pleasure and inspirational revelation are, you also need a cool and cost-effective approach. Your teachers may become your friends—I very much hope they will; but first and foremost they are your key **resource**. They are there to be cultivated, tapped and mined in precisely the way that any sensible businessman nurtures a valuable commodity or investment. This can be undertaken in the nicest possible way, one which benefits both student and teacher; nevertheless, such warmth does not alter the basic truth—that if you are to succeed fully, you must learn to use your teachers to your very best advantage. Contrary to folk myth, nobody gets very far by being 'the teacher's pet', nor by going along with George Bernard Shaw; students give teachers the most satisfaction when they exploit to the full what is on offer.

SOURCES AND RESOURCES
10

> The mark of an educated man is that he's prepared to look things up.
>
> *Kingsley Amis*

I've made the point several times that no teacher, no matter how clever and how kind, can be expected to know *everything*. Sooner or later, you are going to have to go elsewhere for some of your information, and also for additional stimulation.

I am aware that telling someone to 'look it up' is much easier said than done. Very often, I'm afraid, it is the remark of a tired, irritated or just ignorant teacher; and it is often more or less useful as advice. For the point is, obviously, that no one can 'look something up' unless they first know *how* and *where* to do so. I hope this chapter, elementary though it is, will leave you better equipped for independent enquiry.

I shall be looking at the following resources and techniques:

1. Reference books.
2. Libraries.
3. Periodicals.
4. The interpretation of reading-lists.
5. Bookshops.
6. Abstracts and indexes.
7. Personal indexes.

REFERENCE BOOKS

These are best divided into dictionaries and thesauruses on the one hand, and the remainder on the other.

Dictionaries and thesauruses

There is a profusion of such publications available nowadays, and the majority of them are first-class. But in order to get proper use out of a good dictionary, you've got to know *how* to use it; and this, as with so much else in study, means *thinking sensibly*.

Let's take an example. Suppose you need to find out exactly what the phrase 'professional foul' means. Even a good dictionary (e.g. the Concise Oxford) will not necessarily spell it out for you; so you've got to think a bit. It isn't good enough to imagine that the two commonest meanings of the adjective, 'engaged in for

He has ideas above his station

money' or 'proper to one's profession', can be simply applied in this case: to associate 'foul' with the first makes little sense, and to pair it with the second seems outrageously contradictory. The use cannot be fully grasped until the underlying *concept* has been at least partially understood—that the foul is committed because there is money or some kind of professional pride at stake. In other words, *both* those two meanings are involved —dubiously entangled to make an act of cynicism seem somehow more forgivable.

Another example can usefully be taken from a foreign language. It is remarkable how many quite good linguists commit absurdities to paper, *because they haven't worked out what the* English *means first*. Take the sentence:

He has ideas above his station.

The incautious linguist may well translate this as:

II a des idées au-dessus de sa gare.

This well-known howler is ludicrous, of course. But note that it is not because the translator is poor at French (not necessarily, anyway): it's because he didn't think enough about the English metaphor he was dealing with. As a result, he confuses the distinct meanings of 'railway/bus halt' and 'social position', with inevitably humiliating consequences.

So the best advice I can give you in the preliminary use of dictionaries is this:

Use them with *intelligence*. They are not oracles or magic founts of wisdom: they are *tools* which must always be applied with care and thought

Naturally, there will be times when your own intelligence, however, well applied, is not enough. *That* is the time to ask—a teacher, a friend, anyone who might know the answer. But if you do keep your mind in charge, and not merely expect the dictionary to yield up its secrets like some verbal Slave of the Ring, you'll find the times when you need to ask getting fewer and fewer.

Much the same principle governs use of thesauruses—except that there you must even more careful. A thesaurus, by definition, lists groups of words that have a broadly similar meaning. But it is only a valuable aid if you think very alertly about the possible *differences* between the words as well as their similarities. Consider, for example, these synonyms for the word 'break':

shatter
demolish
interrupt
crack
fracture

Yes, they all mean 'break'; but look at how idiotic these sentences are:

To make an omelette, first demolish four eggs.…

He interrupted his leg while ski-ing.

The pile-driver fractured the shop-window.

We shattered our journey at a motorway café.

More seriously, there is for example, a great difference between 'fracturing' a bone and 'shattering' it, or between 'cracking' one's knuckles and 'demolishing' them. Unless you work out beforehand some idea of the strength of word you require, a thesaurus will damage your work rather than help it. To begin with, you may need to use a dictionary in harness with it—admittedly a slow and rather irksome task. But if you're prepared to endure a little toil at the outset, you'll find that the thesaurus soon becomes a valuable and speedy friend, and not the hidden trap it can be to the thoughtless, or rattier non-thinking user.

Successful use of dictionaries and thesauruses hinges on intelligence rather than knowledge. Knowledge is your *aim:* that aim cannot be achieved unless you apply your intelligence. Of course, someone else can tell you; but someone else won't always be there when needed—and the sooner you apply your own thinking to the search for information, the happier you'll be.

Other reference books

Use of these is less snag-ridden than dictionaries and thesauruses, especially if they have a good index. I find that most students experience problems not so much in using these books as in knowing which one to go to in the first place. There isn't, perhaps, much that a book like this can do about such a problem: knowledge of the most suitable reference books for your particular purpose and subject is probably something you'll learn from your teacher and from the basic information included in your course. However, I can at least list a few admirable reference books that many students seem only vaguely aware of:

1. *The Oxford 'Companion' series:* Covers a wide range of subjects. Entries are reliable, judicious and concise.

2. *Oxford Specialist Dictionaries:* e.g. 'Etymology', 'Classical' and so on. Marvellous aids to the non-expert. Terminology and abbreviations take a while to become familiar, but information is clearly and helpfully set out.
3. *Whitaker's Almanack:* A rich compendium of 'general' knowledge and information. It may seem eccentric if read through for any length of time—one jumps from anniversaries to maps to tide-times; but invaluable as a wide-ranging occasional helpmeet.
4. *Fowler's English Usage:* Still the most authoritative guide to correct and elegant English.
5. *Paperback Subject-Dictionaries:* There's a profusion of these around, of varying quality. In my own experience and opinion Penguin take some beating: I have found their 'Art and Artists', 'Polities' and 'Geography' issues (all areas where I need a lot of help!) invaluable. By no means comprehensive, but excellent as 'ignition'.
6. *Dictionary of National Biography:* Not only full of fascinating factual information, but of great additional interest to history, politics, literature and divinity students (especially) for the light it throws on the values and beliefs of the time of writing.

Productive use of reference books requires some understanding of how to use an index, which I go into shortly. As for how to find the right one for your needs at any given time: well, this will come in time, as you get used to using them and broadening your knowledge of them. In the meantime, teachers can help you, as can librarians *(q.v.)* and, perhaps, most of all, fellow-students. Once you know, too, how to interpret and use a reading-list or a bibliography, your command and familiarity will soon grow. For there is one delightful bonus about using good reference books: not only do you find the specific information you're seeking, but you often learn or suddenly realize other things too. Thus regular and intelligent conference with such aids increases both your knowledge of valuable sources, and your knowledge and intelligence itself: you win on the swings *and* the roundabouts.

LIBRARIES

A good library is a great deal more than a large collection of books and papers; and a librarian is much more than a person who stamps your books and bites into your loose change for late-return fines.

Nearly all Senior Librarians these days are highly trained graduates; and I have invariably found Chief Librarians to be extremely erudite, knowledgeable and, above all, friendly. I owe a good deal to the Chief Librarians of East Anglia and Sussex Universities, who found obscure, long-out-of-print books for me with remarkable speed and enthusiasm; and I have no doubt their counterparts elsewhere are no less admirable.

The aim of these remarks ïs not to offer a free commercial for librarians but to point out that, usually, they *like* to be asked to help you. Just like teachers, that is what they're paid for, and why they joined the profession in the first place. Nobody's going to die of excitement doing the obvious, mundane library chores; so a student with an interesting research request is invariably welcome. Even if they can't help you directly, they will almost certainly be able to point you in the right direction. Nowadays libraries are fully computerized—which means that even a smallish library has on tap staggering amounts of information.

So the first tip to any student for whom a library seems a rather forbidding, belittling place is: *they are there to help you.* As with teachers, never be afraid to ask.

Of course, you won't always *need* to ask. Any library will have a clear and comprehensive index system —both under author and subject. I go into indexes fully later; but most people, armed with either the name of the book or the author, should have no trouble finding out where the particular volume they need is located. It's also worth 'browsing' through a good index, just as one would in a bookshop *(q.v.)*. Very often,

you'll become aware not only of where the book you want is to be found, but of *other,* related books. These don't need to be read at once: simply to note them and thus add them to your over-all awareness of the field is itself useful. It was in just such a way, for example, that I first discovered that Henry Miller had not only written a number of out-spoken novels, but a long essay on American life, *The Air Conditioned Nightmare,* which I would now say has some claim to be considered amongst his best work.

A library is also a rich storehouse of periodicals and academic papers, material that will eventually be important to any serious student. For remember, not all valuable work appears in books. Indeed, in some subjects—particularly science—it can be argued that, for a knowledge of the latest developments and thinking in a given area, periodicals and papers are more valuable than books. After all, a fair proportion of academic books comprise material first published in another form; in addition, a book, to be marketable, can't afford to be *too* far ahead of established thinking. Often an exciting new paper *changes* established thinking, almost overnight, and thus becomes a highly marketable force as a book (the wonderful work on DNA forty years ago is a striking example). So browse among the periodicals, too: you'll be delighted to find out how much you pick up. More on this topic can be found shortly in the section on periodicals.

Lastly, of course, libraries are proverbial as sanctums of quiet in which one can work uninterruptedly. Personally, as I hinted early on in the book, I do not find such an atmosphere conducive to my best work. But many do find it exactly what they want; and if this is true of you, then you're fortunate. For in that case your library can serve you simultaneously as a study, a vast resource, a pleasant place to browse, and a source of further enquiry. Perhaps best of all, most of them are free!

As I've mentioned, many new students find libraries somewhat awesome, scary places. And it's true that the experience of being dwarfed by hundreds of thousands of books can be unnerving: even now, after years of study, I still feel sharply aware, on entering a large library, of how enormous is the amount I don't know and haven't read. But although this is a natural and even salutory feeling, it doesn't do to allow it to possess you in a negative way. The pleasures of using a good library are many; and the advantages of learning how to use its multifarious resources cannot be overestimated. A library is every student's friend; and if you can cultivate that attitude early on, your student life will be much nicer.

PERIODICALS

I've already touched on why periodicals can be important and exciting sources of new information. But they have other uses as well.

To begin with, regular perusal of what I'll call the 'standard' weekly periodicals, e.g. *The Spectator, The Economist,* is both informative and enjoyable. The majority are very well written, and often highly entertaining as well as instructive. Such reading is just the thing for 'semi-work'—part of the 'ticking over' process I talk about in the first part of the book. In addition, some of these publications, e.g. *Private Eye* in the UK and *The Village Voice* in the USA, quite often print information or opinion rarely encountered elsewhere, and thus can be a major source of surprising and sardonic revelation.

The 'heavier' periodicals are, it's true, frequently less stylish or simply enjoyable, and may require early perseverance. But they are potentially very valuable indeed. Science students in particular should investigate as many relevant periodicals as they can; for, as I suggested when talking about libraries, the current pace of scientific discovery is such that often, by the time scientific work appears in book form it is already partially out of date. This is particularly true at present of computer studies: the explosion of advances in that field means that most publications in it have to be substantially revised every year at the least. It thus makes sense to check out the new theories and studies as they first appear. Your teachers should be conversant with the periodicals that will be most use to you, and your library staff can also assist.

Humanities students are hardly less advantaged by regular acquaintance with their fields' leading periodicals. The transformation in historical studies in schools over the last fifteen years (use of original documents and so on) was engendered through articles and debates in historical journals; and in my own field, literature, it is no accident that the two most significant 'movements'—Practical Criticism and Structuralism—both acquired their initial impact in periodical essays.

Of course, there *are* rather a lot of the damned things! And a new student may feel somewhat overwhelmed by such volume, and feel helpless as to where to start and which ones to trust most. Once again, this will solve itself in time. You will become aware of which journals best satisfy your requirements or your tastes. As with most other study matters, a combination of honesty with yourself and belief in your own instincts will get you over those first hurdles, and soon, I can assure you, regular reading of a specialist periodical or two will be a normal and pleasurable part of your academic diet.

One last thing about periodicals. Nearly all of them operate on a tight financial margin; and this means that they depend on advertising to break even. Accordingly, a specialist periodical will carry a lot of information in the advertisements themselves—news of new books, new equipment, new ideas. Such a valuable source of information— including things you might not see mentioned elsewhere—is yet another reason why the committed student should cultivate a familiarity with the leading periodicals in his field. Like libraries, they may at first seem dry and forbidding, but will richly reward the student who is determined to make the best use of them.

THE INTERPRETATION OF READING-LISTS

The biggest problem for a student about any reading-list is that he or she is dependent upon the competence of whoever devised it. I don't simply mean the deviser's knowledge of the field and of the books he or she cites: we can, I hope, take that for granted. But a good reading-list should, I think, include a comment or two about the particular nature and quality of each book. If this is the case, then you probably don't need much extra advice from me.

If, however, your reading-list is simply an unannotated roll of titles and authors, then you can help yourself in a number of useful ways. First, try to determine which are 'primary' works, and which are 'secondary'. This distinction is quite simple in the humanities: a primary work in history is a source written at the time, or in literature a play or work of fiction, while the secondary material is that which comments upon and analyses that primary work. In Science, and subjects like Economics and Geography, the difference is perhaps less easy to determine, since most work in these areas simultaneously *combines* creative discovery and analysis. In these subjects, therefore, it may take longer to establish which texts are essentially primary, and those that are predominantly secondary. But it should eventually become clear enough for you to make a sensible start on covering the list.

Once you have a reasonable idea which of the two categories the books come under, I think it's best to start with one or two primary texts in order to acquaint yourself with the basic material. You *can,* it's true, pick up a lot of information from secondary sources without first so much as looking at primary material; but it's dangerous. There are times when, like most people, I've bluffed my way through a discussion about something I haven't read or seen by relying on secondhand information; but I've found, often very embarrassingly, that it's only a matter of time before the full extent of my underlying ignorance is devastatingly revealed! It is also a *slower* method, even if it seems gentler and more convenient at the time.

Another simple aid you can employ is just to note *frequency* of appearance of authors or concepts. If, for example, an author is cited three or four times, it's safe to assume that he's important to your study, and you could do worse than start with his work. In addition, it's worth taking the trouble to find out what else he's

written that's *not* mentioned on the list. Similarly, if the same phrase or idea occurs in several of the titles, you can assume it's central to the knowledge you're being asked to acquire; so that's another useful place to begin.

If your list is not very helpful, however, you may have to seek further advice from whoever designed it. This will need a little tact, but is worth while. Reading-lists can be very forbidding, almost hostile, documents; and a chat with your teacher is likely to establish a greater sense of comfort about the whole thing. You will probably learn, for example, that much of the list is *not* essential, but is recommended for your further interest and growth. This doesn't mean you should ignore such books; but it does mean you don't religiously have to cover each one in sequence to stay on course. A reading-list is advice, not a command. Dip into it if you like (using the kind of methods I outline in Chapter 6), and find out which writers you find most stimulating and useful. If you're not reading enough, you'll soon be told, or it will become evident in other ways.

Finally, annotate and revise your reading-list yourself. Over the year or whatever, other books will be recommended, or you'll read them independently; and it's a good idea to relate them in some way to the original list. In this way, you can use your list *critically,* and thus incorporate it creatively into your other course work.

BOOKSHOPS

Much the same is true of bookshops as is true of libraries, but there are one or two additional points worth making.

The best thing about today's bookshops is that they too have been caught up in the computer revolution. Even a small bookshop in, say, a market town will have available a complete record of books in print, plus information about titles that are being reprinted and when they'll be available. That is not only a valuable information service: in my experience, it means that books can be ordered for you more quickly than used to be the case.

The major benefit of this advance is that it has transformed bookshop assistants into instant mines of information. Gone are the days when it was possible to meet staggering ignorance in the most famous bookshops in the country. (I'll never forget asking, as an undergraduate, for a copy of *Piers Plowman*—a set text for over four hundred Cambridge students—and being asked in return, 'Which of his books did you want, sir?'!) An enquiry will be answered with comprehensive accuracy within a few minutes: I've even known bookshops work out from my muddled, half-digested snippets of information which book I'm talking about, and where I can get it most quickly.

Bookshops are, in any event, pleasant places to spend time. No one minds you browsing (most shops encourage it), and it's thus a good place to dip into books and start your knowledge of them, even if it's months before you get round to buying and reading them. And a last word on second-hand bookshops: it really is amazing what you can pick up. Forgotten but good essays on an area in your field not only make fascinating reading: they increase your sense of the development and changes in that field, which can only be good for your study and its own development.

ABSTRACTS AND INDEXES

An abstract is a short summary of a work or an argument (usually in thesis form, or something similar). They are extremely useful for anyone seeking particular information on a topic, for they take very little time to read, and announce their main direction and conclusions clearly and without fuss. All universities carry a

'Which of his books did you want, Sir?'

facility known as Dissertations Abstracts (DA): they used to be printed in the form of telephone directories, but are now computerized, and collected on easy-to-use sheets. And although it's unlikely that a new student will need to refer to such material at first, there will come a time when your own knowledge is extensive and sophisticated enough for such research to be both useful and stimulating. Incidentally, it is often worth while, if only as a brief mental exercise, to concoct abstracts of your own work, or of stuff you have read. I talk further about this in the next section.

Using an index productively is more of a skill than might be imagined. Obviously, any old fool can look up, say, 'President Nixon' in the index to a book on US politics, and establish where he is mentioned, or perhaps analysed in detail. But, rather like a reading-list, you are at the mercy of the compiler. Many indexes are by no means comprehensive: they simply list the major topics and names covered—and this may mean that the precise thing you're after is not mentioned. If this happens, it's unwise to assume at once that the book doesn't contain what you want. Try another 'heading', or even a third, before you move on to the next possible source.

Let's take an example, developing one I've just hinted at. Let us suppose you are researching the Watergate scandal in America in the early 'seventies. You look up 'Watergate' in the index, and find to your dismay that it's only mentioned once, 'Not much use', you say to yourself, and prepare to find another book instead. But wait. Maybe there *is* a lot of valuable material about the scandal in the book you're about to discard. Try looking under 'President Nixon'. Or under 'John Dean' (centrally involved in the whole business). You might even try under '1972 Presidential Election' (which took place just after the original Watergate burglary, from which the whole scandal snowballed). In other words, don't give up on a book until you've checked out all the information you've got against the index.

You see, by the time you're *ready* to use an index, you'll know a fair bit about what you want to further your knowledge in. People who know nothing about a subject don't start by using the index: there's no point, because it won't mean anything to them. They'll have to read up about the subject a bit before they're in a position to narrow their focus of enquiry in such a way. So when consulting an index, stay aware of *all* the information you've got. If, to take another example, you're working on Scott Fitzgerald, don't just try his name, but also 'American Novelists'; 'Hollywood'; his various book-titles; even 'alcoholism'. I think you'll be surprised by how often the second or even the third entry that you consult turns out to be very profitable, when the apparently most obvious, first choice disappointed.

Indexes are also very useful tools for rapid cross-reference. To return to our example of 'President Nixon': most books about US politics of the 'sixties and early 'seventies will have masses of material about him; and this will be reflected in the gigantic index entry under his name. If you're researching just one aspect of his career and administration, you'll need to check out other places in the index, and establish a clear 'fix' on which part of the book has what you really want. This method is analogous to direction-finding using three bearings, used to establish a precise location for a plane, a transmitter, or something more mundane like a church steeple or bench mark.

Sometimes, using an index can give you an early sense of whether the book is going to be reliable or not. To take a faintly ludicrous example: if you pick up a book entitled, say, *Great English Painters,* and the index contains no mention of Constable and only one reference to Turner, you can be pretty sure that the book is, at the very least, eccentric, if not positively ignorant or deranged. And such short-cuts are perfectly legitimate, sensible methods of coping with the vast amounts of potential reading available to you. An index, intelligently read, can do very similar work to an abstract: it can establish clearly and revealingly what the author's major preoccupations are and from that it may well be possible to work out his overall point of view. Try out the index in this book, and see if I'm right!

PERSONAL INDEXES

As I've stressed from the start of this book, there are as many ways of working successfully as there are students who succeed; so there is no need to feel that you *must* adopt some kind of 'personal index' system. To be perfectly frank, I don't use one myself: my mind works in other ways, and finds other methods quicker and more convenient, so I've never persevered with constructing one—there's never been any point.

But I do know many students and colleagues who find an index system immensely time-saving and helpful to them; so here are a few basic tips about how to go about establishing one.

As with mnemonics (see Chapters 4 and 7), the *precise* format and method is entirely up to you, for you know your own rhythms and organizatory methods best. The most obvious overall method might seem to be alphabetical; but you might find you'd rather do it under topics headings, or something else. Quite a lot will depend on what subject you're indexing. If it's history, a chronological approach might suit you best, whereas this method is unlikely to be a great help in literature or physics, say.

Although I don't use an index system in my 'day job' as a teacher, I do for all my other work, especially my writing on music. I now own about 2500 LPs, tapes and CDs: in the past I used an alphabetical system to catalogue and store them, but at present I file classical records according to chronology and jazz under broad stylistic headings or according to instrument. This has a drawback, in that nobody else in the family knows where to find a given recording! But at least *I* know—and that, as with you and your study method, is the real point.

It's a matter of taste and temperament how large and inclusive you wish to make any such system. Some people just log important references (books and page-numbers, etc.) that they know they'll want to find quickly and regularly; others extend their system to include summaries of their own essays, listed both chronologically and cross-referring to other, similar work done at another time. Such an advanced system takes time to compile—especially if you're starting from scratch. But if you find it tolerably enjoyable, it can be very valuable, for two distinct reasons. First, once you've done it, you'll have a strongly organized, personally logical resource centre that is all your own, and you will rarely have to waste time hunting feverishly for something you know you've read/written but have forgotten where it is. And secondly, the very act of going over all your work and rearranging it into a new reference system is a kind of intensive

revision which will reinforce and probably clarify your knowledge. Even better, the process of systematizing it all may well make you aware of connections that you hadn't thought of before, thus broadening and sharpening your knowledge all round.

In sum: you can use a personal index in any way you like, and include in it as much or as little as you wish. As I say, not everyone will want to make such a system a part of their study organization; but for those whom it suits, it can be a great technical aid and also a considerable boost to confidence and sense of security. If you're one of the fast-growing army of people who have some kind of personal computer, then you'll have a lot of fun using it for such a purpose (for which a computer is absolutely tailor-made, by the way). The nice thing about them all, however, be they computerized or 'longhand', is that you, and only you, are in charge; and the construction of an efficient and time-saving index system is one of the best ways I've encountered of convincing an individual student that he has talent and an independent mind.

CONCLUSION

If the information revolution of our time means anything profound (beyond, that is, the creation of a new technology and a shift in employment patterns), it is that students and academics of the future are going to be less crucially at the mercy of their memories. This does not, I hope, mean that my earlier chapters on Memory are about to become redundant! But it is probably true that great success for a future student will depend rather less than at present on his having a super-power memory. Just as important are going to be good organization and an efficient working knowledge of sources and resources. I seem to have quoted Dr Johnson a good deal during this book; but once again a remark of his is most apposite:

> **'Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it.'**

I hope this brief introduction to how and where to find information has helped to start you off, and that you can now see that there is no need to be frightened of the new technology that impinges upon study, or of the size and wealth of the various storehouses. They are all there to help you, and you can be assured of a welcome.

COMPUTERS AND STUDY
11

Bob Eadie
Head of Information Technology, Bedford School,
Bedford, UK

> Books will be foresaken by all dwellers upon this globe, and printing will absolutely pass out of use…

Always conscious of my audience, I wondered as I wrote this chapter whether anyone would actually read it. I mean read, in the traditional sense of my generation,* as from the printed page rather than the screen. Should I be putting such a topic as this in print, or should I request that it is released on CD-ROM, or made available over the Internet, or whatever is the latest technology of the moment?

The quotation above is not a modern comment on the advent of the CD-ROM or Internet, but a man named Octave Uzanne writing in 1894 in *Scribners Magazine*. He welcomed the advent of the wax cylinder which could record voices, and even the 'photo-cromo' which would project images on to white screens. There is no doubt that the technologies of that day have made impacts on learning, and few would question the benefits of the video and cassette recorder today. Yet one hundred years on the printed and written word are still the major means of communication and study.

There are, I think, two questions you need to ask yourself about computers and how they might affect your study: first, whether the use of a personal computer could be of benefit to you, and if so the best way of using it; and secondly, how might you use computers in the broader context to assist your study.

Without a doubt, the major use of a personal computer for most people is word-processing. I would assume from the fact that you're reading this book that you are embarked upon some formal course of study, involving the taking of notes, the writing of assignments, essays, practical write-ups, projects and much more. The very act of writing forces you to analyse your thoughts in a way that verbal dialogue does not require; moreover, writing is still the main communication medium between pupil and tutor, and in the final analysis the examiner. A word-processing package on a personal computer can therefore be of enormous help to the student.

A word-processor relieves you of the need to plan a piece of written work, since you can so easily go back and alter things as you work. However

It does not remove the *benefits* of planning.

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*For most of you, I would guess that that is at least one generation before yours.

'... the thrust of software development and marketing over the years has been aimed at the business world rather than academia'

Traditionally, handwritten essays and other work were so time-consuming and laborious to redo that you had to ensure that your first attempt was also your last. Planning helped you avoid the worst mistakes, and careful preparation could ensure that when you came to read through your final copy, you were less inclined to throw it all in the bin and start again! With a word-processor at your fingertips, when your final read-through reveals glaring errors or omissions, you can simply go back and correct them. But it is worth repeating that

Although the means of planning might be different when you use a word-processor from when you use pen and paper, it is still just as important to include this stage.

Often, planning on paper involves key points—usually single words or phrases—written rather randomly on a sheet of paper as thoughts occur to you (see Chapters 7 and 8). These will then be embellished via underlinings, circles and lines joining related topics or perceptions. This is mechanically quite tricky on a word-processor, and it will often be easier to revert to pen and paper. However, once your 'trigger' words and phrases are organized and ordered, typing them in to a word-processor enables you to develop your writing around this basic skeleton, inserting the appropriate paragraphs amongst the notes, and then deleting the notes themselves—or perhaps retaining them as section headings.

As an alternative, most of the windowing-type software now available allows you to have one window with your notes on screen while you type the main text in the word-processor window. Some software has become available that helps with the planning process, enabling you to gather and organize initial thoughts on screen rather than on paper. Do not get bogged down with this process, however: it may well be that pen and paper remain both easier and quicker. Besides, it's still very important that you keep up your handwriting skills, since the majority of examinations still insist on that medium, and you cannot afford to let your ability to develop, plan and submit handwritten work get rusty—or slow, given the premium on speed that examinations all embody. Since I now have a computer on my desk at work, and find it easy to word-process any writing I do, I now find it quite difficult to hand write anything of any quality for any length of time. But I am past the point of written examinations: you most probably are not!

Another point to remember when assessing the capabilities of word-processors is that the main thrust of software development and marketing over the years has been aimed at the business world rather than academia, and that billions of dollars have been ploughed into the *presentation* facilities offered by modern word-processing software and printers. How many fonts are offered, what paragraph styles are possible, how easily you can mail-merge a circular letter to 500 customers that includes their personal details picked up from your customer database—all these are the kind of facilities that may be of immense interest to the office manager and secretary but are not necessarily going to be what you most need or find most important.

This problem is actually intensified by the fact that it's *fun*. Most computer users, myself included, find the process of improving the presentation of a piece of work highly enjoyable and very rewarding; such pleasure can become a dangerous end in itself. I have seen many a candidate working on an exam project spend hours on a really fancy front cover at the direct expense of the project's material content. Fortunately, in this case recognition is cure: once you're aware of the danger, it can be countered by self-discipline. But do remember that

Most of the work you will do using a word-processor will be judged and assessed on its content.

Whether it is presented in reasonably readable dot-matrix form or via a super-quality laser printer with fancy fonts is in all likelihood ultimately irrelevant, and you need to gear your work to those ends and with that in mind.

Word-processors now additionally provide such features as spelling checkers, grammar and style checkers, and so on. So far as I'm aware, however, they do not provide 'irrelevant drivel checkers'! That is not really a facetious remark: it is essential to realize that these features are only as good as

(a) the author of the word-processing software and/or the compiler of the computer dictionary supplied;
(b) the mind using that software—i.e. you!

You must be on your guard at all times, in proper *control* of the service provided. You need to remember, for instance, that a good deal of software is American in origin, and will therefore give such spellings as 'color' rather than 'colour'. That isn't 'wrong', naturally, but it *is* non-applicable for UK users, and you should always bear in mind who you are and what you're doing! Remember too that these checkers can only confirm that you've used *a* correct spelling, not that you've found the right one for the right context. For example:

'*Their* you are, my *chequer* does it *two*!'

All three italicized words exist, of course; equally obviously (I hope!), they are embarrassingly incorrect in the context used. You would be advised to regard spelling checkers as chiefly useful for spotting typing errors; it can also be wise to have a dictionary and a thesaurus available on screen as you work rather than as hefty tomes by your elbow. Most of all, your own mind needs to be in gear: you should look on these aids *as* aids and nothing else. You may even wonder if you want your work reduced to the Lowest Common Denominator of a computer-driven style- 'n' -grammar package.*

After the word-processor, spreadsheet software is the one you are likely to find most useful. It lends itself to manipulating any data which can be organized into rows and columns, whether such data is the names and dates of the Kings and Queens of England or the readings from your latest scientific experiment in the

'...or whether a hand-drawn sketch might be quicker and just as effective'

practical laboratories. Originally spreadsheets were designed merely to perform mathematical calculations on the data—for example, calculating the length of each monarch's reign from the dates of accession, and then calculating the average length of reign; nowadays, however, they are capable of much more sophisticated manipulation of data, including selecting (e.g. all the monarchs who reigned for more than thirty years) and sorting (into descending order of age at accession). For these fairly straightforward purposes they have begun to oust database software, although that may still be required for more complex applications. Most modern spreadsheets will also now produce graphs of various kinds from your data, including pie and bar charts as well as line graphs and scatter graphs.

What other available software might be useful to you probably depends on your subject specialization. The Historian may not find packages which assist the production of graphs much use, whereas the student of Geography, Economics or Technology may well find spreadsheet/graph drawing packages of considerable value. There is some excellent design software available which may help Architecture/ Technology students develop and convey their ideas to paper; similarly, graphic art software is becoming highly attractive to the Art student as an alternative medium to the traditional charcoal, pencil or paint. Once again you need to bear in mind how important to you is the quality of the final product, or whether a hand-drawn sketch might be quicker and just as effective.

If you do come to decide that your own personal computer is essential, or that it is sufficiently cost-effective to persuade you that you can afford one, do not be wooed by salesmen's soft-talk. To draw an analogy: if you decided that a car would be useful at college, it is most likely that an eight-year-old Metro or an even older Volkswagen Beetle would do you fine: you don't need to go out and buy the latest Volvo or BMW. Similarly, it is quite likely that an aged second-hand computer will suit your purposes, and cost a fraction of the price that the latest Intel or IBM model would set you back.

On the other hand, if computers are your hobby and enthusiasm, there is as much or more scope for pursuing them as a status symbol as there is for cars or hi-fi. In my time at university hi-fi was the rage, and how

*Richard Palmer has some further thoughts on these matters in the next chapter.

many Watts per channel, total harmonic distortion, and the tracking weight of your arm were all-important. Nowadays it can easily be Megabytes of RAM and hard disk, MHz clock speed, and MIPS which divert your attention from what you actually need!

Bear in mind that many businesses *do* require the latest model (since speed of graphics manipulation and handling of large databases are invariably vital for them) and that there is therefore a ready market in second-hand computers that they have discarded. The rate of development of computer technology shows little sign of slowing, and many computers are considered obsolete for business purposes within three or four years; their loss and expense can be your gain! Do be sure, though, that the machine will run the software you'll require, and if you are used to a particular brand of software, such as 'Windows', ensure that the machine can cope with it.

On now to the 'new' technologies of CD-ROM, Multi-Media and the Internet: what of them? I say 'new' advisedly. We must remember that on any *historical* timescale, the computer itself is a new technology, developed at a much faster rate than any previous technology: it's just forty years since computers made their first mark. The newer technologies have, rightly, moved away from computing—the original word implicitly centred on arithmetic abilities—to Information Technology. The devices' power is now increasingly being harnessed to store and access information, and information in different forms: sound, pictures and video as well as traditional text. In short, more and more information is becoming readily available to us all, and to the student in particular. This is I think a valuable development; however, it is all too easy for the student to become swamped by the sheer *quantity* of data, and to lose sight of the wood for the trees. As Richard Palmer observes in the next chapter, information is one thing, knowledge quite another; the former is of minimal value unless you know what to *do* with it, how to use it to increase your subject-command and range.

The skills of reading and using a library have always been closely associated with the student and academic (see Chapters 6 and 10) but the mechanical process of finding, borrowing and reading books is physically clumsy compared with using a computer screen and mouse. The traditional picture of learned academics in a library with up to six books around them with various slips of paper marking several places in each may become a thing of the past. It will not happen quickly, as present computer screens have as much to recommend them as early papyruses, and the information presented on CD-ROMs and similar media is still in its infancy. What they do offer already is a phenomenal range and variety of information, much of which may be of use to you.

Most of the information on current CD-ROMs has merely copied books. Encylopaedias condensed from several volumes onto a single CD have appealed to many, but the main advantage of using a computer rather than paper to research into a topic is the greater flexibility offered to the 'reader', who is released from the mechanics of paper and print. Books are by their very nature linear in structure: they start at page one and continue through page two, three and so on to the end. Leaving aside for a moment readers of a novel or a work of literature, many students would often prefer to flick from page to page, following a line of thought or research which may not exactly follow that of the author.* It is here that a computer can help. The ability to flick from page to page, to insert markers at various places to enable one to retrace a particular path, to extract significant sections for more detailed reading later—all these can be useful and should soon be widely available. Add to that the inclusion of graphics, video and sound clips, and you have a source of information much more powerful than books, cassettes, videos or any other *single* source. Whether such facilities are relevant to your study, and whether you feel able to take advantage of them, will depend on your individual preferences, but it is at least worth finding out what is available.

The provision of even larger quantities of information is technically easy once your own computer, however simple, is connected to a network, and most college and university computer systems are now

connected in their own local area around the campus, as well as to wider networks such as 'Janet' (the Joint Academic Network) and the 'Internet'. This latter, initiated some twenty years ago by the United States government, is now a voluntary interconnection of millions of computers around the globe. These computers provide a colossal information store, equivalent to many libraries; however, because Internet has evolved rather than been designed, the information is organized in a chaotic fashion, and finding what you want is both somewhat tricky and time-consuming.

Electronic mail and 'newsgroups' are provided by the system. Electronic mail is a system for sending messages to other users on the network, who can of course be anywhere in the world. Once you have recipients' Internet addresses, you can send them messages and the next time they log on to their system, they will be informed that a message has arrived, and easily read it and if necessary reply. For those who use computers regularly it is a fast and convenient method of communication. For students, particularly those embarked upon Open or Distance Learning, it may well provide a valuable way of keeping in touch with other students and an essential link between student and tutor; indeed, some Open Learning systems are now being developed specifically around this form of communication. The system can transmit text files, such as essays or reports, and as systems become more sophisticated they will (some already do) transmit graphics files, provide voice and video mail—which many find more expressive than the written word—and allow video conferencing, which enables several people to communicate with linked sound and video facilities.

Newsgroups are many and varied, from Vintage Cars to 'Technical Help on DOS6.2', from 'Adult Interests' to the Bosnian War. Once a topic has been initiated, anyone can add comments to the 'discussion' (although some newsgroups are monitored by someone who controls what new additions are allowed), and most topics are further organized into sub-topics called 'threads'. Reading and contributing to these electronic discussions can provide a valuable additional learning and research source.

Many of the computers on the Internet provide access for 'guests'. This will usually be a matter of permitted access to investigate (non-sensitive) databases on those computers and/or 'download' files from their system to your own. Considering the vast quantity of data made available around the world in this way, you can see that you have a near-incredible resource literally at your fingertips. Whether you can put it to good use depends on you, and it ought to be said here that the skills of Information Technology place the emphasis firmly on information, not so much on what is then done with it. Nevertheless, access is becoming ever-easier with the development of the World Wide Web, which is a multi-media method of guiding you around and presenting information to you on your screen. Finally, some of the host computers on the Internet allow 'guests' to use the host computer as if sitting in their site, be it in this country or the other side of the world. You are in effect merely using your keyboard, mouse and screen to communicate with the host computer; as a result, you may be given access to more powerful computers and to software which you would not be able to run on your own machine.

Unfortunately, the present set-up is severely limited by the international telephone system generally used for communication. That system is an existing electronic infrastructure which stretches to almost every corner of the globe, and almost every home and office in the developed world, so it was understandably adopted as a convenient method of linking computers and hence the Internet. But its basic design and cables are not capable of supporting the present computer 'traffic' adequately, and users connected from home with a modem to the telephone network are likely to find the system very slow—and expensive. More

*See Chapter 6, especially concerning 'browsing' as a basis for speed-reading/getting to know a text authoritatively.

The student of today and tomorrow needs to be adaptable to the new technologies

sophisticated computer systems such as university campus networks tend to be connected to the Internet by more advanced and faster cabling, thus overcoming these problems.

Present computer technology provides many opportunities for the student, and future systems will inevitably provide more rather than less. The student of today and tomorrow needs to be adaptable to the new technologies if s/he is to take full advantage of what they offer.

COMPUTERS: FURTHER THOUGHTS—FROM AN AMATEUR
12

> Graham liked record-players, regarding records as things that showed off record-players. Patrick only liked record-players as things that played records.
>
> *Kingsley Amis, Take a Girl Like You*

I am extremely grateful to my friend and colleague Bob Eadie for the preceding chapter, which I was simply inequipped to write. I do not have the requisite knowledge, experience or understanding. I use a word-processor; I am familiar with one or two systems and a certain number of software packages; and that's about it. Like many of my generation I've dragged myself into computer semi-literacy, but I shall never get even close to the professional mastery of Bob and his kind.

So where does such an amateur get off, writing his own chapter on the subject? Who do I think I am? Well, I'm like Patrick above. I value mechanical appliances and gadgets for what they make possible, not for themselves. Moreover, although I'm not for a moment implying that Bob resembles Graham in the same quotation, I was amused by his reference to hi-fi as the 'rage' of our time at university, since virtually all the Wattage-freaks I came across had one rather disturbing characteristic:

they had the most awful records/taste in music!

I will never forget going to four university friends' house shortly after we'd all graduated to find that together they had just spent £1000—an enormous sum in those 1970 days* —on state-of-the-art stereo equipment. And what did we spend two 'demo' hours listening to? I'll tell you what we listened to: an almost preposterously dreadful 'folk-group'—ethnic Muzak at its ghastliest.

There's a serious point implicit in that waspish little anecdote. It strikes me, as Bob implied in his original parallel, that people who were happy to lash out a small fortune on the latest hi-fi package and then play that kind of stuff on it are remarkably similar to today's computer buffs. So enchanted are they by the multifarious tools and facilities at their disposal that these become their own reward and justification. Hi-fi freaks are interested in sound only as sound, not as music; their computer counterparts are so smitten by their machine's intrinsic capabilities that they fail to ask—or perhaps are not even interested in— what the computer can do *for them*.

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*The 1996 equivalent would be at least £10000.

A PC is glamorous, even sexy

That's why I decided to write this chapter. My aim in it is to endorse from a different perspective several of Bob's points, and to add a few of my own concerning the properties and effects—good and bad—of the machines that have, almost in the twinkling of an eye, taken centre-stage in so many aspects of our life, work and culture. In keeping with the fundamental thrust and 'message' of this book, I'm anxious that you should regard computers as no different from everything else: **you are in charge,** and that if that is forgotten they hold as many dangers as opportunities.

The first points of Bob's I'd like to address are **planning** and **presentation facilities,** along with his extremely important remark that computers are *fun.* From my own experience and observing others', I believe he is right to suggest that rough planning with pen and paper is often quicker and more effective than doing it on your word-processor. It is often a good idea to *transfer* your first handwritten notes to the screen as a form of reinforcement, making the next stage of thinking and composition clearer—I did just that while writing this chapter. (So, he tells me, did Bob.) However, I would argue that initial planning is still best done in the old-fashioned way, or at any rate a variant of it, as in the 'Energizing Patterns' discussed in Chapter 8.

Of course, you must make up your own mind about that: as always, do what is best for you. Nevertheless:

Using a PC is fraught with complications and potential muddle.

I'm not referring to either the prodigious capacities that PCs possess or the fact that even the most expert user of highly advanced electronic systems will be puzzled or stuck at some time. I'm not really thinking of the machines at all, but the people who use them—you and me. Those 'complications' have to do with a PC's multi-faceted *appeal*. A PC is glamorous, even sexy—rather as hi-fi was perceived to be a generation ago* —and its seductive charm can reduce one's understanding of its status and functions to a perilously simplistic level. Yes, it's an amazingly compact resource, storing masses of information and offering any number of valuable facilities; it is also

1. **a toy**

and

2. **a high-*performance* machine.**

There's nothing wrong with either feature, naturally. From the outset I've stressed that study should be enjoyable, and in that respect point 1 is a plus, not an objection. But while toys are, obviously, fun, they are also things we *play with,* things we turn to when we're bored or at a loose end. Nothing wrong with that either—unless and until it leads you to confuse work and play. There are times when working elsewhere and/or in different 'mode' would be far more productive. However, these toys have a formidable charisma. I know from bitter experience that the mere presence of a PC on your desk generates a kind of force-field: it *drafts* you to it. And its magnetism doesn't stop there: once in place you can con yourself into the belief that you're making effective progress when all you're doing is fooling around. That leads me to the second feature logged above.

On the surface, point 2 is so self-evident as be hardly worth saying. Even the most computer-illiterate person imaginable has at least a vague grasp of a PC's power, precision of micro-engineering and sheer speed of activity. But those properties can work *against* the student—which is why I italicized the word 'performance'. In Chapter 8 I drew a distinction between 'exploratory essays', those written as a major part of the learning process, and 'performance' ones, and I have more to say on the matter in Chapter 15 on **Examination Skills and Techniques**. What I want to stress here is that

> **For the majority of any given course, the student is learning and developing. True *performance* only emerges towards the end; the rest of the time—no matter how brilliant s/he may be—is a form of *apprenticeship.***

In his chapter, Bob spoke wisely of tailoring your choice of PC to your needs, using the analogy of a Volkswagen Beetle 'versus' a state-of-the-art BMW. I am tempted to extend that analogy and suggest that for students early on in their 'apprenticeship' to make *any* PC their central resource and facilitator is akin to letting someone loose behind the wheel of a Formula 1 monster after just two driving lessons in an old Ford.

Okay, that's somewhat melodramatic: losing control of a PC is unlikely to get you killed! Nevertheless, the dazzling performance that PCs offer can be wholly inappropriate to a learning student, and these remarks by the distinguished educational philosopher John Dewey go much of the way to explaining why:

> **Education is a process of development, of growth. And it is the process and not merely the result that is important. A truly healthy person is not something fixed and completed. S/he is a person whose processes and activities go on in such a way that s/he will continue to be healthy.**

The distinction here is between **process** and **product,** and it remains as crucial now as when Dewey wrote those words thirty years ago. For while it would be nonsense to suggest that computers cannot assist process and growth, their most *obvious* appeal is very much that of product, and product that even the youngest or most inexperienced 'creators' can take pride in. Just touching a few keys can provide instant concrete evidence of work completed or healthily on the way—stylish evidence too, eye-catching and positively professional.

Of course it is always a pleasant, even heady experience to see on your screen or hold in your hand that multi-coloured rainfall graph, that impeccably-fonted essay, that 'pan-optic' statistical table, and so forth. Nevertheless, a student's life, especially during the first half of a course, is as much if not more about

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*Not for nothing, I think, did *Playboy* magazine feature hi-fi analysis and advertisements so prominently amongst its more 'up front' material.

process than product. It is about reading; about reflection; about self-discovery and the discovery of many other things; it is above all about the acquisition of *knowledge*. That aspect is so important—despite the notion dear to certain contemporary educationalists that 'skills' matter more—that it deserves a section to itself.

INFORMATION 'VERSUS' KNOWLEDGE

It seems to me that a good case can be made for citing 'information' as *the* word of our time. We have all heard a great deal in recent years about 'the information explosion', and there has been an enormous boom in the sale of all sorts of machines (not just computers) that offer consumers immediate access to facts, analyses and data of every possible kind. Moreover, a new and major academic discipline— Information Technology—has evolved both to cope with and advance this revolution.

This is all well and good—up to a point. Being well-informed is clearly preferable to being ignorant, and I suppose if people find their quality of life enhanced by being able to access, in three minutes via a CD-ROM, the lyrics of every Lloyd-Webber musical or Elton John song in existence, one should be glad rather than otherwise. But I do wonder sometimes what and to whom are the true and lasting benefits, what all this information is *for.* Whenever (which admittedly isn't all that often) I hear Internet buffs comparing notes about this or that nugget they've happened upon, Michael Caine's celebrated reaction to the more obscure gems collected in *The Guinness Book of Records*—

> **Now, not many people know that**

invariably comes to mind, frequently accompanied by my own 'And why should they *want* to?'

In case you think I'm becoming frivolous once more, let me again quote the psychologist William James, whose work I drew on in Chapter 4 on Memory. These words were written ninety years ago, but they are just as relevant to our own time, and particularly to what a student's life is about:

> **'Facts' themselves are not *true*. They simply *are*. Truth is the function of the beliefs that start and terminate among them.***

That is very difficult: what it means, I think, is that the real significance of facts—of all data, if you like—is how they are *interpreted,* how they are used by an individual, discerning human brain. That is how people arrive at the 'truths' which inform and direct their lives; it is also how they arrive at **knowledge** as opposed to mere **information.** And that implies a lesson and distinction that every student needs to learn:

> ***Information* is raw material. You may have it 'on tap' or you may need to 'access' it in some way —that doesn't really matter. What does matter is that it remains essentially inactive until you do something with it—and that's when it becomes *knowledge*.**

In the context of this particular chapter, that means that any use of a PC that does not add to your store of knowledge and understanding should be shunned. That in turn means exercising something that no computer has or can provide for you—discrimination.

The greatest damage PCs can do to students is cause them to lose control of their most precious commodity – their own mind

GIGO—GARBAGE IN, GARBAGE OUT

Many of you will know that acronym and its meaning: it is rightly famous and can be found prominently displayed in most good IT classrooms. Its most immediate and obvious value is to remind students that it's no use blaming the computer if things get fouled up or come out badly: it's down to you—for not thinking, hitting the wrong key, issuing a faulty command, whatever. But its significance goes further: it addresses, if only implicitly, what in my view is the most fundamental 'computer issue' of all.

The *greatest* damage PCs can do to students is cause them to lose control of their most precious commodity—their own mind. The undoubted and multiple powers of computers can blind even the most intelligent person to the fact that they *are* just machines, and—a point I first made in Chapter 2—that

> **Even the most magical-seeming, awesome new model is utterly inferior to the living brain between your ears.**

Furthermore, once that is forgotten, you are in double jeopardy—on the one hand forsaking your greatest asset, on the other expecting its replacement to do your work successfully on its own, without either your control or your judgement. As Bob observed, computer-services are only as good as the humans who designed them and the mind that engages them: they'll be a lot less good if that mind surrenders all initiative to a software package.

Bob has already spoken with instructive wit about two common symptoms of such loss of control—the obsession with fancy presentation and the reliance on spelling checkers and the like. All I'd like to add on the first is that, while a beautifully presented assignment is both fun to do and impressive to receive, never let that beauty be only skin-deep. There are few things more disappointing—and indeed annoying—than a piece of work that looks lovely at first glance, only to be rendered ugly by the fact that the actual content is full of errors, poorly argued, off the subject, or all three. So

> **By all means spend hours 'tarting up' your presentation—but first make sure the stuff itself is worth presenting.**

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*James, W. (1906) 'Pragmatism', in *Pragmatism and Other Essays*. Washington Square Press, New York (1963).

Concerning spelling checkers and their ilk, it appears that the jury is still out. Amongst English/Humanities teachers of my acquaintance, about half swear *by* them, the other half swear *at* them, and I can identify with both points of view. In so far as they focus students' minds on the importance of getting things right and supply them with the means to do so, they can only be applauded. As noted, computers are fun, and if a student finds Spell-Check more enjoyable to use than a dictionary or teacher-provided spelling list, fine. As with so many things, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and if electronic gadgetry produces results that pulped trees don't or can't, you won't find this teacher complaining!

Against that, such so-called aids instantly become destructive viruses once you imagine that they can *think*. Correct spelling is not just a matter of getting the right letters in the right order: it's a question of getting the right word for the context as well. Bob's use of **their/ chequer/two** made that point unimprovably, but you can also slip up in less embarrassing but equally unfortunate ways. If, for example, you run the word **dependant** through a spelling checker, it will—or should! —confirm its authenticity. What it won't tell you is that the word is only used as a noun, meaning 'one who depends on another for support', and that the other form, with an e, is the ordinary adjective, as in

His entry for the race is dependent upon his fitness.

Furthermore, *all* other forms based on the root **depend-** also take an e: **dependence, independent, dependency,** and so on. Your Spell-Check will have them too, of course; the point is that only a *human* brain can decide which one is needed.

I also endorse Bob's point about style and grammar checkers and their 'Lowest Common Denominator' quality. The more recent software in this area has been cleverly put together, and it can be useful to have an electronic eye monitoring your use of language. But you can do the job *yourself,* just as efficiently, and with more insight; so why bother with such things? At best, they use up your time to no real advantage; at worst, they once again seduce you into surrendering your own brain power. And as Bob said, no software firm has yet come up with an 'Irrelevant Drivel Checker' package!

CONCLUSION

Computers are unquestionably exciting, both for what they offer now and the developments they presage. Sensibly harnessed, things like Internet offer all sorts of advantages to all sorts of people and every kind of student, and Bob Eadie was right to celebrate such advances. But he also introduced a proper note of caution about them, and in that light I'd like to quote from a 1995 letter to the Toronto *Globe & Mail,* written by another good friend, Colin Brezicki, Director of Drama at Ridley College, St Catherine's, Ontario:

Computers are remarkably good at doing tedious and time-consuming tasks at the speed of light. They store data, they process it as programmed, they crunch numbers, produce pretty graphs and connect us to the vast store of knowledge and garbage indiscriminately mixed in the ephemeral gossip of the Internet. They are, finally, the source of a great deal of bad art and mind-numbing nonsense.

I wouldn't go *quite* that far; that said, Colin points up certain distinctions that are crucial, especially to students. Computers can do a lot of things that we can't, or unimaginably faster than we can manage; conversely, they can't do things that every human being can do from about the age of six—discriminate; express preference and taste; understand instinctively when something is right, or wrong; in short, *think.*

In Chapter 6 I indulged a tirade against Study Aids, and some of my remarks in this chapter might seem to indicate that I have a similarly jaundiced view of computers. That is not so. There is an enormous amount to be said for them, whereas there is nothing to be said in favour of nearly all Study Aids. In addition, as Bob suggested at the end of his chapter, the fact is that computers are here to stay, and anyone who sneers at them and/or the concept of 'computer literacy' is in for a pretty grimy time when attempting to get a job. Like it or not, 'keyboard competence' and related skills are a *sine qua non* for most of the posts young—and not so young—professionals are likely to apply for, and one ignores that at one's peril.

Let me end with two more quotations. The first is from a poem by Roy Campbell; in it he was talking about writers whose work may be notable for restraint and meticulous craftsmanship but who, in his judgement, have nothing to say:

They use the snaffle and the bit all right,
But where's the bloody horse?

In analogous fashion, don't let yourself become so intoxicated by your computer's power that you allow it to be an end in itself and forsake all those infinitely superior qualities that you carry inside your own head.

The second quotation is a famous remark by Cassius in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar,* and helps nail the fact that, in so far as PCs are problematic and dangerous

The fault…is in ourselves

It is grotesque to *blame* computers if you lose sight of distinctions between product/process and information/knowledge. **You are in charge,** and if our culture's present emphasis on hi-tech presentation, vast databases/data-banks, and above all sheer speed of access makes it hard for you to maintain such control, it can—and must—be done.

PART THREE

EXAMINATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Examinations are a built-in part of nearly all vocational courses. The overwhelming likelihood, therefore, is that you will face an exam at the end of your course—be it after one, two or three years. And no book on study would be complete without a section investigating their purpose, the attitudes they inspire, and the techniques that can help you to succeed at them.

The first point to make is that the majority of students dislike exams. Indeed, student unease about them is far and away the greatest and most frequent problem that teachers encounter. As a result, a lot of *teachers* dislike exams too. This was always the case, but never more so than now: with the advent of National Testing, League Tables, Ofsted Inspection at all levels of our educational system, and other highly public modes of scrutiny, teachers feel under considerable pressure on their own account,

Teachers dislike exams too

since results reflect nearly as much on them as on the students themselves. In addition, given that we live in a world where qualifications have never seemed so important, teachers become disturbed and anxiously protective about the intensity with which some of their students worry. And this can create a vicious circle, whereby teacher and student simply aggravate each other's suspicions and fear.

I hope that the following sections will help you to relax somewhat about exams and lead you to regard them as just another part of your course, not some horrific and undermining ordeal. Above all, I want to persuade you that taking exams is a *skill*. Examinations are not a lottery, an Act of God, or an evil game run by a secret society: they are a perfectly rational method of assessment whose techniques can be comfortably mastered. Naturally, as with any skill, you have to possess some aptitude, and work at it. There can be little doubt that you have the aptitude: were this not the case, you probably wouldn't have lasted the course long enough to get anywhere near the exam. The application, as always, is up to you; I hope the discussion and advice that follow will make such work both worth while and congenial. And it is again worth repeating this book's regular refrain: even though other people will of course set and mark your exams, you are—or should be—no less in **charge** during a public performance (which is what an exam is, at least in part) than is the case in private study.

EXAMINATIONS: PSYCHOLOGY AND ATTITUDES
13

Everything in life, including marriage, is done under pressure.

Isaiah Berlin

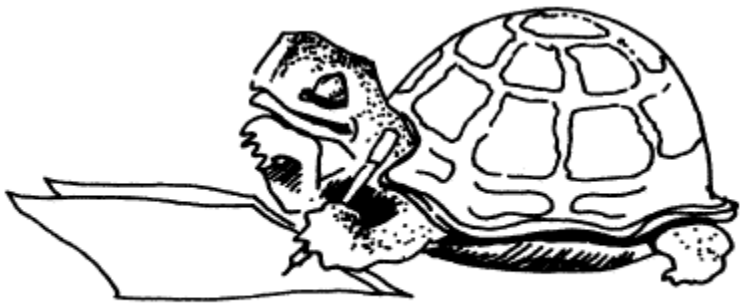
OBJECTIONS TO EXAMS

If I asked you to summarize your objections to exams, I imagine you would arrive at a list that approximates this one.

1. Exams put an excessive premium on speed.
2. That accent on speed encourages glibness.
3. Slow writers are thus at a double disadvantage. They are not able to put down as much as they would like or need to, and they are unable to spare any time for preparatory thinking.
4. The formality of the occasion is artificial and damaging. To work in serried ranks is unnatural, and unnatural work by definition cannot be representative of either the student or true quality.
5. To test a year's work—or maybe two or three years'—via a handful of three-hour papers is ludicrous. No student can do more in such a time than suggest the tip of an iceberg of learning and development.
6. It is impossible to think carefully because of the need to write so fast. In addition, it is wrong to confuse clarity of thought with speed of answer, which exams inevitably do.
7. Examiners have no contact with or knowledge of the students they judge. There is no room within such a set-up for personality or individuality: it is a cold business dependent on 'mark schemes' and 'right answers'. To fail someone is therefore of no consequence to examiners: they may even rather enjoy it.
8. Passing exams is less a matter of true knowledge than an artful acquaintance with the tricks and quirks of 'the game'.
9. There is no allowance for the fact that we all have our good days and our bad days. Inspiration should not be at the mercy of something as arbitrary as an exam date.
10. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to find out any details about one's performance. Worse, the procedure for challenging one's grade is so complicated and drawn out that it seems actively obstructive.

No doubt you could frame others; but I believe the above covers most of it.

There is enough truth in these objections for each one to be taken seriously; and as an amalgam it would seem to present a powerful case for the immediate abolition of such a cruel and unnatural practice.



A slow writer may have a mind as slow as a tortoise

The fact that exams are still very much with us suggests one of two things. Either all educational administrators *are* cruel or, worse, stupid; or the above objections are rather less convincing than they appear. With the latter notion in mind, here is a list of 'examination defences', or answers to the objections outlined above.

1. Exams do put a premium on speed, yes. But why is this so awful? All the jobs I can think of require you to think fast and efficiently at some time—and most of them require you do so *often and as a matter of course*.
2. It is a fallacy to equate speed with glibness. Every teacher—and indeed, every person—has known hollow and obvious statements to be delivered with staggering ponderousness, often following an interminable 'incubation period'. Conversely, some of the greatest thinking in human history has visited the mind in question at tremendous speed. Not for nothing do we speak of marvellous ideas occurring to us 'in a flash'.
3. Slow writers are somewhat disadvantaged, it is true; and there are times when this is unjust. But *why* are slow writers slow? Might it not be because their *minds* work slowly too? I have known one of two excellent minds whose owners wrote slowly—but I've known many more tortoise-like writers whose minds were merely dogged or pedestrian. Generally speaking, good minds work fast and indifferent minds do not. Very often, fast writers are fast because their minds are alert and in command of what they want to say; the sad converse of the slow writer is evident all too often—s/he is sluggish and uncertain.*
4. Exams are of course artificial—*up to a point*. They create pressure; and many people object to this as 'unnatural'. In fact, nothing could be less convincing. It is a truism that most of us do our best work under pressure; besides, most of our lives are conducted under pressure of some kind, as Isaiah Berlin's epigram wittily suggests. An exam *concentrates* this pressure, admittedly; but it does so in a controlled and flexible way, provided it has been wisely set. In addition…
5. Examiners know perfectly well that a few three-hour papers cannot cover all that a student knows. Allowance for this fundamental point is not only made in the marking, but is built into every intelligently set paper (which means at least 95% of all papers set).
6. The belief that an exam offers no time to think is an illusion fostered by unskilled and/or panic-struck examinees. There is *always* time to think: only the foolish or the manic try to write for every minute of the exam. Furthermore, there is no reason whatsoever why speed and clarity shouldn't go together. Clarity of thought hinges at least partly on knowledge, and if you really know something it is instantly

Even decisions like marriage involve pressure

available to you. *Haste* will damage thought, certainly; but haste and speed are very different things, whatever their surface similarity. In the same way, *care* is of course important, but 'care' does not mean merely or even chiefly 'taking a long time'. It means fully concentrated, efficient effort—and that is more likely to attend a fast-working mind than a plodding one.

7. Examiners are profiessional educators; they are experienced and well disposed towards the student. In any advance exam, 'right answers' come into it much less than many students (and more than a few teachers!) imagine: what examiners look for above all is 'quality of mind'. Far from penalizing individuality, they seek to reward it. Moreover, they dislike failing anyone, and great care and thought (by several examiners) is expended before any paper is confirmed as a fail.
8. Those who think exam-passing is a kind of game dependent upon tricks and clever dodges are just plain stupid. If you are ever unlucky enough to get a teacher who plays earnest the Russian Roulette of 'Let's guess the questions on this year's paper', take as little notice of him/her as you can. Only the naive or the drearily cynical (which amounts to the same thing) look on examiners as a bunch of academic bandits who must be 'outsmarted'.

   However, there is as I've stressed a *skill* involved. I hope that I can set you on the way to acquiring it with the advice that is to follow. The point is that you won't acquire it if you persist in thinking of the matter as a rag-bag of tricks and corner-cutting conning.
9. 'Inspiration' has got little to do with knowledge, which is what exams test. It has to do with primary creativity, such as painting, composing, or poetry composition. It is possible that lack of inspiration at the time could untypically affect say an Art student; but usually you are given a two-week period in

*There are times, as I've stressed (see pages 90–2) when slow writing and thinking are valuable and necessary; but an exam is not one of them. A properly prepared and capable candidate ought to be able to think fast: if s/he cannot do so by this stage, it's doubtful if s/he knows their material.

Examination Russian Roulette: guessing the questions on the exam paper

which to complete your creative work (as opposed to your theoretical/critical papers). If no 'inspiration' arrives during such a period, isn't it equally likely that you're a bit low on actual *talent*?

In my experience 'lack of inspiration' is, at least nine times out of ten, an entirely bogus argument. It is nearly always an excuse for either laziness or extreme ordinariness, or both; and it is a complaint that should be regarded with deep suspicion.

10. Finding out details about your grade, or challenging it, is admittedly a difficult business. But it can be done, and it quite often succeeds. You usually have to pay for a re-mark, but it is done carefully and thoroughly. It is in the examining institution's interests as well as yours that true justice is done and seen to be done. Nobody will trust a 'dodgy' institution for very long, and in addition word soon gets around: examining bodies are very much aware of both those facts. Frequently, candidates *don't* challenge their grades because they imagine it will be too much hassle and/or a waste of time and money. Such an attitude really won't do: if you feel strongly enough, and if it matters enough, *do it*.

Summary

Provided they are sensibly set, and provided too that they are not the *only* mode of assessment, timed examinations are a valid and illuminating method of discovering a student's overall ability. They test three central things which no other format yet devised can truly evaluate.

1. **They establish whether students' knowledge is actually *theirs*. All other methods of assessment leave room for plagiarism, collaboration, or mere parrot-like regurgitation.**
2. **Is this knowledge available at short notice, or indeed more or less instantly? Or does the student require three days' preparation? I wouldn't be very happy hiring or working with the latter kind of mind: would *you* trust someone that slow or uninformed?**

3. **Can this knowledge be transformed into rapid and intelligible communication to others?**

Nobody pretends exams are perfect. Injustices do occur; there are occasions when papers are poorly set. But such cases are rare, and while exams must *themselves* continue to be closely examined, no one has yet come up with a superior alternative—one that achieves what exams try to, and in a 'fairer' way. Until that occurs, you are, it seems, stuck with them. And, having listed their strengths and argued for their virtues— no doubt to your considerable annoyance! —let me now go into some matters of exam psychology more closely. To begin with, we'll take a detailed look at examiners.

EXAMINERS: FRIENDS OR FOES?

I once carried out a word-association test with a class of fifteen-year-olds. There were twenty-two pupils—all girls—and I asked them to write down the first *two* words or phrases that came into their minds when I wrote on the board the word 'Examiner'. The breakdown of the forty-four selections was as follows:

Devious	2
Unreliable	3
Hostile	4
Sarcastic/superior	5
Mercenary	5
Boring/bored	6
Old	7
Men	12

That is quite funny; it is also quite sad. There isn't a single positive word/reaction, and the list as a whole is deafeningly eloquent of fear, mistrust and an overwhelming sense of 'them and us'—hence the high figure for 'men'! A student who tackles a paper with such an Identikit monster in mind as the recipient is hardly going to be at her best. And the saddest thing of all is

That picture and those reactions are almost awesomely inaccurate.

Here are a few cheering facts about examiners:

1. Most exam-markers are under forty. I was thirty when I was appointed an A-Level examiner, and I noticed at my first Examiners' Meeting that I was far from being the youngest.
2. Most markers do it for the money, yes; but that is never the only reasons. Doing *anything* solely for cash is a dreadful, humiliating experience, and no one does so voluntarily. Examiners take on this extra work because they are interested and sympathetic educators. You *need* to be interested in education as well as keen on money to spend the first two weeks of a holiday marking scripts. *Truly* uninterested people wouldn't touch it.
3. The idea that examiners are hostile old hacks withering in jealousy is pure nonsense.Their job is much more agreeable if *you've* done a good job; so on that count alone they will be on your side. I have yet to meet an examiner who did not dislike failing a candidate. This is partly because it's depressing on a human level, and also because one has to be twice as careful, and spend twice as long, considering

Most examiners are under 40

a 'borderline' script. A really good paper, on the other hand, is doubly pleasant: its quality makes it enjoyable to read, and its obvious class makes it easy (and therefore quick) to mark.

4. At least 40% of markers are women.
5. Examiners have all done exams themselves at some time, and so have a sympathetic awareness of what it's just been like for you. Moreover, they are quite clear about the limitations of the whole business, and as a result will approach your answers with a professional friendliness that probably allows you the benefit of the doubt eight times out of ten. The only candidates who are really 'hammered' are the arrogant, the plain silly, or the irredeemably ignorant and/or lazy; and in such cases one really has to say that it's the candidate's fault and not the exam's.

To summarize:

- Examiners are just people; so are you.
- They are hired to do one job—to find out if you can do what the exam asks you to do. If you do that well, you will score well.
- Moreover, they *like* you to do well: it makes their job easier and faster.
- Forget all ideas of 'them against us': in truth, it's them *with* you, working in harness to ensure, wherever possible, your success.

Remember, too, that you are not at the mercy of the whims of one examiner. By the time the final mark and grade have been determined, the majority of scripts will have been closely assessed by several people. Extreme care is taken to ensure that candidates get a thorough and fair deal. Any unusual circumstances (illness, dyslexia, recent bereavement and so on) are taken fully into account. All examining bodies canvass schools and colleges prior to the exam for an estimate of each candidate's likely performance, and any major disparity between estimate and actual grade leads to all his/her papers being looked at again. Universities

are no less thorough; the Open University is, as I have found, particularly caring and generous in its attitude to examinees.

So whatever terrors you may still have about exams in general, I hope I have eased your mind about the men and women who mark your scripts. Further positive advice is to be found in the sections that follow, but as a fundamental matter of attitude and approach, you will benefit from believing in this governing principle:

If humanly possible, try to look on exams as an enjoyable challenge, the chance to shine. Negative waves are not only unnecessary: they are self-fulfilling passports to failure/ disappointment.

CHANGING GEAR AND APPROACH: GOING BEYOND MERE REGURGITATION

One of the nice things about being a voluntary student—the kind for which this book is primarily designed—is, obviously, that you're doing something you *want* to do. There is, however, a rather more stringent corollary to this pleasing advance.

During your 'elementary' schooling, which in most Western countries means roughly up to the age of sixteen, it is likely that you have to study a number of subjects which you find less than riveting, including one or two you are profoundly grateful to give up. But one of the built-in advantages of these early days is that a great deal of your work is directly taught, and moreover pre-digested for you. By this I simply mean that

up to the age of sixteen, you do not necessarily have to think creatively or independently to succeed.

Most of your work at this level is a question of absorption and subsequent regurgitation. Of course, you have to *understand* the work properly for that regurgitation to be clear and accurate, but your progress is largely dependent upon how sound is your technical ability to digest and reproduce information that in the majority of cases has been pre-packed for you. It is for this reason that many dutiful, well-taught and alert students can get a grade A in a subject they at bottom detest.

I have no wish to sneer at such work and such qualities, nor to suggest that they are not important and admirable. Of course they are; but —and this is my point—you are about to find (if indeed you haven't already done so) that in terms of advanced study they are not enough on their own. True, they are the *basis* of everything; however, unless you learn confidently to do some independent thinking of your own, your advanced study will remain somewhat humdrum.

For there is one undoubted fact about all early learning: it is *conservative*. This remains true even if the teacher is radical and imaginative in style: there are basics to learn, and to do that there is no need for you to do anything other than rehearse, sensibly and intelligibly, the factual and methodological knowledge you've been absorbing for years. But now, as an undergraduate or advanced student of any kind, your course requires you do some real thinking, to have opinions, to 'wonder'. In short, you are now implicitly being asked—indeed required—to respond as a sophisticated individual, and to do rather more than operate as an efficient sponge.

ACCURACY VERSUS CORRECTNESS: EXAMS AND THE 'RIGHT ANSWER'

Many advanced students make the forgivable but highly dangerous mistake of confusing the concepts 'accuracy' and 'correctness'.

Only a fool or a charlatan would deny the importance of accuracy. It is the basis of everything, and without it anything is just a shambles. If a recipe tells you to cook a dish in a moderate oven for thirty minutes, your guests aren't going to be over-delighted if you submit it to furnace-like temperatures for an hour and a quarter. In the same way, if a petrol-pump gauge promises you ten gallons, and you find out later that it was fixed/on the blink, so that all you actually received was ten *litres,* you aren't going to be terribly happy.

In the academic field, therefore, you can't expect to get away with, say, the proposition that 4×6 is 257, or even 25, any more than you can expect leniency in your submission that the Battle of Hastings took place in 1382, or that the French for 'man' is 'le bloke'.

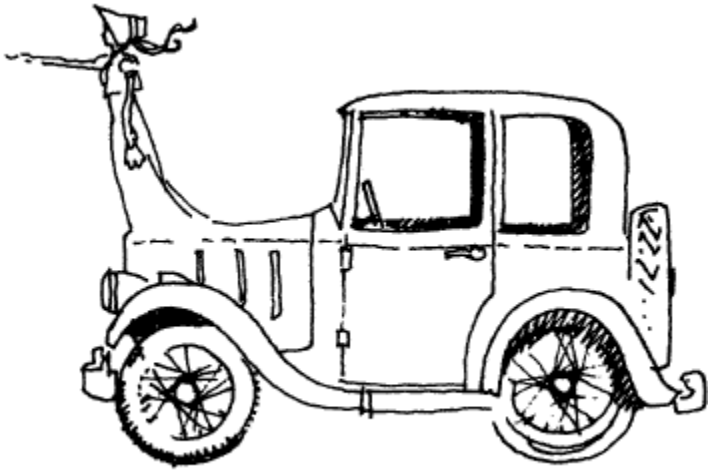
Nevertheless, the point about all those examples is that they are *elementary*—in the sense of 'fundamental' rather than 'easy'. Yes, you need to obey oven temperatures and time, and you need to be able to trust the pump gauge. But it's a matter of choice, taste and subtle debate whether you add a little sour cream or some extra seasoning, or whether you select Texaco, BP or Esso. The same is true for academic matters. You must ensure your maths is accurate, and your spelling correct—you must, in short, get all your *facts* right, whatever they may be. But your use of those facts is up to you: the key now is *interpretation,* whether your subject is Physics, History, Economics, or anything else.

Of course, many students do realize this, as no doubt you do. At least, they realize it in principle, but nevertheless fail to act on such theoretical awareness, as could easily happen to you too. There are, I think, two main reasons why this is so.

The first is the constraints of the exam itself. It isn't easy to relax in an exam (it can be done, however: see Appendix C), and because of this, one is often more cautious than normal. The temptation is to 'play safe' —and that can mean shutting out most of the things that have made you a talented and successful student in the months before. I'm very sympathetic to this syndrome, but it is important that you try not to 'tighten up' in such a way. I've stressed throughout that you will do better, and have more fun, if you stay yourself and stay **in charge:** this is *especially* true of the exam.

The second reason returns me to the innately conservative nature of your elementary schooling. In pre-advanced exams, there is little obvious difference between 'accuracy' and 'correctness'. The name of that earlier game is whether you 'know your stuff'. It would be silly to suggest that earlier work actively prevents you from thinking in an independent, creative way; the point is that there is no pressing need for you to do so then. As a result, many able pupils deduce that there is apparently little value in trying to be different or stimulating. They gradually get the central message—that if they trot out their facts in a well-organized fashion, and do precisely what they're told, they pass. It's virtually as simple as that. And that is more the case now, I regret to say, than when I wrote the first edition. The entire tenor of National Curriculum Key Stage 4 has become dismally conformist, pivoting on drab correctness; I sometimes think it's now a disadvantage for students at this level to have any true personality or individual quality of mind. Greyness is all.

Fortunately, that last pseudo-epigram does not apply beyond sixteen. But many such newly advanced students do not grasp that fact: forgivably, they think dutiful regurgitation and 'getting things right' is a permanent law. And I cannot emphasize too strongly that in *advanced* study, there is no such thing as *one* right answer. In exams, many advanced students ignore this. Instead of answering questions in a natural way, they convince themselves that they must search for what the examiner thinks and wants them to say.



Jane Austin

This is very bad policy for a number of reasons. For a start, it's self-evidently doomed, because you'll *never* know what an unknown examiner's opinions /tastes are! More subtly, and more importantly, you thus turn your back on the qualities that have made you a good student. Once you start thinking in terms of what you ought to say rather than what you feel/want to say, you're turning yourself into a studious zombie rather than a vigorous academic. Edgar's lines at the end of King Lear are a splendid model for any examinee:

> The weight of this sad time we must obey,
> Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

Those who regard an exam as a 'sad time' will find the 'weight' of the occasion lessens considerably if they rid themselves of all *extra* constraints. Assuming that you have learnt well, been taught well and prepared yourself well, the simple and cheering truth is that

> **If you apply your knowledge, and have a sound methodological and factual base, you will be fine.**

Naturally, all advanced study requires you to master a great deal of information and factual knowledge, and I am not in the least suggesting that this level is unimportant. Of course you have to satisfy your assessors that you know what you're talking about; you *must* know your formulae/dates/vocabulary/laws/characters' names and so on. As an English examiner I encounter a rather alarming number of candidates who refer to Jane Austin, as if she's a literary sub-division of a once-thriving British company, and many other howlers will pepper any batch of scripts. Two favourites from papers I've marked are:

1 'In Hardy's novel, Toss of the *Derbyfields*…'

and

2 *'In Defoe's* great *play, Gulliver's Travels…'*

The second delighted me particularly: I think I wrote 'Close!' or 'one out of three isn't bad, I suppose' in the margin. But two serious points also arise from these examples. The first is that, clearly, they don't create the best possible impression (both howlers occurred in the essay's first paragraphs). But the second is that (so far as I remember) both candidates passed with some comfort. They may have made a ghastly error or two; but they also produced quite interesting, sound and responsive work.

In short: 'accuracy' is important, naturally. It means *getting the basics right*. But at any advanced level of study, that is *all* it means. The real quality of advanced work lies in its freshness, or its distinctness from other interpretations of the same material. Take a tip from something we've all had to study for at least several years—Maths, and specifically O-Level Maths. Anyone who has taken this subject will remember being told time and time again that one gets more credit for the 'working' than for the solution. The same is true for all advanced work. The credit (which, crudely, means *marks*) is earned by your method, your approach, *you*. Such things are far more vital than any notional sense you may have of 'correctness'. Don't ever forget that—especially in an exam.

Lastly in this section, before I go on to techniques useful in the exam room itself, let us look at some of the ways in which students approach exams, with a view to establishing how you can 'psych yourself up' sensibly (as opposed to damagingly!).

Do you sincerely want to do well in exams? Then *enjoy* them

I can clearly visualize some of you preparing to throw this book through the window, swearing loudly the while, as a result of the above sub-title. Please lower your arm, and bear with me for a moment!

I have argued throughout that successful study will be fun. This is as true for exams as all other aspects of your work—arguably *more* vital, since the pressure on you is greater. I believe it is essential for you to cultivate a *long-term attitude* that grows to regard the exam as a natural and exciting climax to a pleasureable course.

You may think such a remark silly. But it's a lot less silly than working ourself up into an induced panic, whereby the exam seems about as attractive as being on the wrong end of a thumb-screw. If you've worked well during the course, no exam should hold any terror for you. On the contrary, it ought to be a nice release, a chance to show everyone how good you are. For remember:

All good students are humble; but hardly any of them are modest.

I don't mean you should swank cockily into the exam room; still less do I advise you to assume smugly that it'll be 'a doddle'. But too much self-effacement is equally absurd. If you're properly humble, you know how much you *don't* know; but it's worth remembering that you're aware of that ignorance only because of all the things you *do* know.

Of all the annoying (and usually dishonest) attitudes I encounter as a teacher, the permanent prize always goes to the person whose demeanour and performance roughly add up to the proposition, 'I'm, sure you won't be interested in what little me has to say.' Very often, such modesty (mysteriously held to be a virtue) is either a cover-up for simple laziness, or a coy invitation to be showered with boosting praise until such time as a beneficient, condescending contribution is offered in return.

So do not go modestly in that exam fight. Operate sanely on the premise that you know what you're doing and have enjoyed your work. The exam should then turn out to be a pleasant affair. After all, an exam is only different in its setting. The basic truths about your work and your pleasure in it remain unchanged.

I'm not so insensitive or stupid as to think that all exam fears can be cured by a few minutes' 'positive thinking'. Exams require a number of strengths and qualities (including sheer stamina) that do not materialize very quickly. But if you can think of the exam in the terms I've outlined from an early stage in your work, it will be very fruitful. For the *opposite* approach, which we'll look at now, can be disastrous, and has no compensating factors whatever.

NEGATIVELY CHARGED

Posturing excuses

How often have we heard a candidate aged ten, thirty or fifty, just prior to entering the exam room, announce to all within earshot:

'I'm dreading this—I haven't done a stroke of work for weeks.'

It is an apparently straightforward, throwaway remark. But consider the number of powerfully implicit messages that such an offhand disclaimer sends out:

- It protects the speaker from failure, or at least the *humiliation* of failure. If s/he *does* fail, it won't be through inadequacy but because s/he didn't do 'a stroke of work'.
- Conversely, kudos is being added to any possible *success*. If s/he passes, s/he will seem naturally gifted—someone who had no *need* to do 'a stroke of work'.
- The casual, what-the-hell tone creates an air of bravado and cool style, establishing an immediate superiority over all those who are quietly wrecking their finger-nails.
- The impression created is one of lofty boredom. The underlying idea seems to be that only an idiot would *bother* to work for an exam.
- There is even the suggestion that s/he has had much better, more exciting things to do than *study*!

It seems almost a shame to pour cold water on such a blaze of virtuosity. But the fact is that all those implications are annihilated once it is realized that

It is all splendidly but utterly *untrue*.

Examinees who really are 'dreading this' will have been up most of the night working, don't you worry. On the other hand, if they *genuinely* haven't done 'a stroke of work', then they won't be dreading it at all— the whole exam ceased to have any meaning for them weeks ago. After all, 'dread' is not boring!

Tony Buzan has pointed out* that such a syndrome can equally apply to able students who know they've made a 90% effort rather than a 100% one. Public disclaimers of this kind protect you from the narrow failure to achieve a distinction just as winningly as from the dramatic failure to secure a pass. It is frightening how ingenious we can be when it comes to making excuses. If we expended just half that mental energy on doing the actual work, results would be remarkable!†

False pessimism and self-fulfilling prophecy

Unjustified, unearned confidence is not a happy or attractive quality; however, there is *nothing* more devastating than false pessimism. The shock that awaits false optimists can be salutary, showing them what has to be done in future. Their self-esteem will be bruised, but it won't be obliterated at one go. The appalling thing about false pessimism is that it can destroy your real ability and its future potential long before they are tested. If you work yourself up into believing you're going to do badly, then I'm afraid the odds are that you *will*.

As sporting analogy usefully demonstrates this point. If you go into a rugby tackle *expecting* to be hurt, it is distinctly likely that you will be. Your body will be awkward and vulnerable, making injury much more probable. Similarly, if you are frightened of a hard ball (cricket or hockey) and imagine it will hurt you if you try to catch it, then it probably will: your fingers will be stiff and angular, and your palms will be wincing well in advance of receiving the ball. Result: the ball will probably hit the fingers rather than the soft cushion of the palm, causing sharp pain at the least.

Exams are much the same. If you go into the room in a muck-sweat of panic, your brain ablaze with feverish anxiety, and your memory straining to remember everything you've ever been taught, you will be

1. More or less exhausted by the time you read the paper.
2. Already conditioned to think in terms of failure and the impossible difficulty of the whole exercise.

Jean-Paul Sartre once defined modesty as 'the virtue of the half-hearted'. Modesty's insidious cousin, false pessimism, takes all the heart out of you—and invariably for no reason. You can guard against it by cultivating an attitude that is far more cheerful…

'Si tu veux, tu pexu'

The ideal mood in which to enter an exam room is keyed-up but expecting to do yourself justice, perhaps also to 'show 'em'. The best analysis of this positive approach that I know is by Adam Hall. It is from a thriller, but that does not detract from its astuteness:

> I subscribe to Coué, Maltz, and the Frenchman who said, 'Si tu veux, tu peux.' They all make the same point, but Coué put it quite well: in any contest between the imagination and the will, the imagination always wins.
>
> An example would be: if the ship's been sunk under you and it's a ten-mile swim to the shore, you'll stand more chance of getting there by using imagination instead of will-power. You can grit your teeth and will yourself to do it, but the command is conscious, and your *subconscious* is on board for the trip and it can be a lead weight if left to its own little games: once it starts brooding about the black silent fifty-fathom void below your body, the will-power is going to lose a lot of steam. But if you bring in the subconscious to work *for* you, it means the imagination will be programmed in, and in place of a lead weight you've got yourself a propeller. Feed it the key image 'shore' and you're there already, prone as a log and coughing up water, but safe and alive.*

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*Use Your Head, pp. 110–12.

†See the portrait of The Would-Be Student in Chapter 1!

The activity of exam-taking is rather less dramatic than Hall's example; but the principle is identical. 'Si tu veux, tu peux': if you want to, you can. Establish the right attitude—that is, a proper sense of confidence in your ability and preparedness—and the worst is over before you even sit down. You are ready for anything they can reasonably throw at you, and you are positively looking forward to it. Such an approach won't guarantee success; but it will guarantee an absence of dry-up, panic, mental blocks, and that sudden sense of not being equal to anything you're asked.

SUMMARY: EXAM PHOBIA—AUTHENTIC OR PHONEY?

Some students experience genuine, deep-rooted problems in exams. Their minds 'go blank', they get the shakes, their hands go numb, and they suffer from any number of sudden disabilities. Such cases need careful and caring help, and I hope I'd be the first to be sympathetic. But the vast majority of so-called 'exam-phobes' are not of this order. In my twenty-five years as a teacher, I have come across only about half a dozen authentic cases. The rest are simply nervous, in a normal and healthy way. The trouble is, they don't *regard* it as normal and healthy.

They aggravate their nerves by talking about it with their friends and colleagues, swopping horror-stories and exaggerations in a kind of masochistic game.

I use that last word advisedly. For I've noticed that a great number of students *enjoy* getting 'het up' about exams. Up to a point, this is both harmless and amusing, and is fine. But once it takes root it becomes a neurosis that can't be fully controlled. If you're such a student (and you'll know if you are), then try to act on some of the ideas and approaches I've outlined. They certainly won't do you any harm, and they may allow you to wrench yourself out of a pointless and damaging prejudice.

As I said at the beginning, exams are a perfectly rational, if imperfect, method of assessment. The major problem is that student unease about them is nearly always *irrational*. For a number of reasons and via a number of routes, student anguish about exams acquires a pathological dimension, ranging in intensity from anxiety to semi-hysteria. Such sudden lack of confidence and calm is, in the overwhelming majority of cases, quite unjustified. And it's as if the sufferers somehow *know* this— hence the way their irrational fears are quickly *rationalized* in the form of ostensibly intellectual objections to exams as 'cruel', 'unfair', and so on. But the process shouldn't be allowed to fool anybody—least of all, I hope, you yourself. Nearly all objections to exams are rooted in a gut response rather than a reasoned appraisal; and once you look clear-sightedly at what an exam sets out to do, and at your own abilities, I think you'll find that your gut returns to normal, de-shrunk and calm!

Now it's time to move on from contextual discussion and matters of attitude to detailed questions of technique, in terms of both preparation and the exam itself.

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*Hall, A. (1975) *The Striker Portfolio*. Fontana, London, p. 71.

EXAMINATIONS: PREPARATION HINTS
14

> It's not escaped my notice that the last few grains of the sands of time are already slipping through the egg-timer of fate.
>
> *Humphrey Lyttelton*

In the original edition of this book, my then co-author Chris Pope wrote the following paragraph concerning revision:

> If you have followed the advice in the book so far, by the time the exams approach you will have understood everything and it will all be stuck firmly in your long-term memory. There will therefore be no need to do any revision at all, and you'll be ready to take the advice given by a certain study aid I once read—leave your books behind and spend a fortnight before the exam on a tropical island, relaxing and sampling the local delights.

He then quickly pointed out that this was a somewhat rosy picture, that most students' nerves and worries—including his own—render such a scenario pure science-fiction, and idiotic into the bargain!
And of course he was right in suggesting that for the vast majority of students the run-up to an exam is a time of great pressure and considerable anxiety. Even the best and most confident can feel alarm that time is fast running out and that like some renegade Horseman of the Apocalypse the day of reckoning is galloping towards them. In short, they wouldn't find Humphrey Lyttelton's above gag* remotely amusing: they may instead think he complacently and insensitively understated the case!

Well, I think there *is* a good deal to be said for the advice Chris read in that Study Aid. I wouldn't recommend the tropical jaunt *literally,* but its accent on relaxed pleasure and the refusal to get solemnly panicky has a lot going for it. In fact, I would make a fundamental principle of something I implied during Chapter 5:

Try to regard your revision-period as a 'working holiday'.

Yes, it is a pressured time; but more than at any other stage of your course **you are in charge**. There's nobody to tell you what to do or when to do it;* there are no classes or lectures to attend; it is entirely up to you how the organize your time. And in keeping with the second part of that 'working holiday' approach:

- *Enjoy* the respite from regular classes. No matter how much you may have valued your lessons or how well you have got on with your teachers, it's nice not to have to turn up to room X at point Y on day Z any more. As the old idiom has it, 'A change is as good as a rest', and this new freedom ought to refresh and energize you.
- *Don't try to revise too much or work all the time*. I address this in full shortly, but it's important that from the start you have some rest and have some fun. Your stamina is about to be tested as well as your knowledge; for that you need to be fit and serene. So you should turn off and 'get away from it all' regularly and without shame or worry.

In Chapter 5 I introduced the principle of **RAYL—Review As You Learn**. Even if you have followed it only fitfully, you should find that you know a great deal more than your darkest moments lead you to imagine. But however secure most of your knowledge and ideas may be, you will of course need to do *some* further work, and that will be all the better for being sensibly thought-out and scheduled.

REVISION STRATEGY AND TIMING (I): BASIC PRINCIPLES

I've discussed this already in Chapter 5, under the heading 'Taking the misery out of revision'. But a number of points are worth repeating, and there are others to make as well—the first of which is of paramount importance, not least because so many students ignore it:

- **Revise in shortish bursts—30–40 minutes at most.**

I stress this partly because half an hour represents the normal optimum concentration span (see Chapter 2). But I do so also because revision is—or should be—by definition a *second* (or let's hope fourth or fifth!) look at material you're pretty familiar with. As a result, your mind will be working far faster than was the case when you first perused it, and half an hour's work will be both highly productive and quite tiring—you'll *need* a rest before going on to the next topic, subject or task.

Next:

- **At the start of your revision period, make a careful and detailed list of everything you feel you're least strong on.**

These areas should be tackled right away; not only are they urgent anyway, but if you 'crack' them early on, your sense of confidence and pleasure will receive a major boost.

In addition to that overall strategy, you should:

- **Start each revision *session* with your weakest topic.**

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*Fiom the long-running—and wonderful—BBC Radio 4 show, *I'm Sorry I Haven't A Clue* (November 1993).

*Younger readers may have parents to contend with! you will find some advice on this thorny problem in Chapter 3, pp. 24–5.

That's the same advice 'in miniature', if you like: to get your worst and least pleasurable task out of the way when you're fresh is both sensible and subsequently delightful, for it allows you to go on to stronger areas with a sense of real achievement and earned respite!

In keeping with the principles of self-bribery I established in Part One, you should make a point of giving yourself

- **Plenty of breaks, and little 'rewards' on completion of each task.**

More negatively, but no less important:

- **If you get bored with something, *stop*.**

It never makes sense to push a tired and resistant brain too far anyway, and that is particularly true when revising. If tedium is your main reaction, very little of what you're doing will register, let alone stick.

Finally in this section, a return to an earlier point:

- **Have a good time between working periods**

A happy student who's having plenty of fun is very likely to be more efficient when s/he comes to work than one who is doggedly joyless. As always, you've got to be tough and honest about this: if your revision-period degenerates into a series of riotous binges, you've got the balance wrong! But there is no need to work all the time; moreover, you can actually revise *too much,* as this anecdote tellingly suggests.

> **At one of the Colleges of London University, a survey was conducted amongst Finals Students concerning the amount of work they did per day in the lead-up to exams (including attendance at lectures and tutorials). Those who ended up with low 2:1s and 2:2s averaged 7 to 8 hours per day; those who got high 2:1s and 1sts averaged 4 to 5 hours.**

There is a clear, even irresistible inference here:

> ***Quality* of revision is more important than *quantity*.**

And that quality is likely to be more forthcoming if the student is rested, contented, and therefore—who knows? —actually quite eager to return to important work.

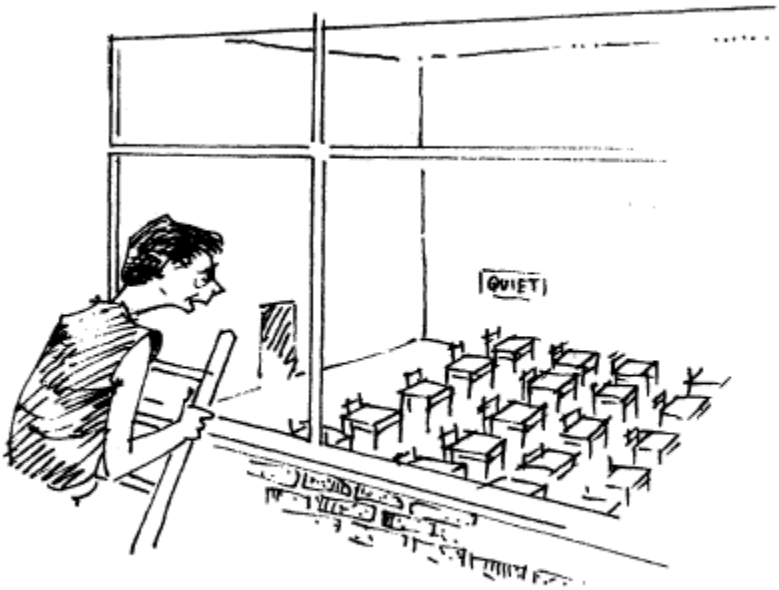
Now on to some more sophisticated ways of ensuring that your revision period is as productive as possible.

REVISION STRATEGY AND TIMING (II): SUBTLER CONSIDERATIONS

At various stages in this book I've suggested that the more you can bring your own experience—including that of your five senses—into your work, the more effective it will be. That goes for the lead-up period and the exam itself, and I would therefore suggest that:

- **If possible, you should visit and inspect the place where you'll be sitting the exam.**

Memory relies partially on environment: if you can arrange to do some of your revision in the exam centre, that could prove an important bonus. But even if that facility is not available, such a visit is still worthwhile.



If possible, you should visit and inspect the place where you'll be sitting the exam

It will reduce—perhaps remove—the disagreeable awe you feel when entering the place on the exam day, and the consequent familiarity will enable you to relax and think more efficiently.

Self-evidently, a great deal of your revision work will be reading— although I'll shortly be looking at *written* tasks that you might think of doing. But now more than ever you don't want to emulate a sponge, important though reinforcement of what you've learnt undoubtedly is. And so:

- **Look over your past work *critically.***

Seek to *improve* it as well as absorb it more authoritatively and deeply. In the natural scheme of things, you should be a better student and mind now than when you first did that work: *use* that development as fiercely as you can. Correlate your teachers' marginal comments with your own sense of how good (or otherwise!) you now feel the work to be; make notes and take action accordingly. Log your discoveries and plug the gaps you've become aware of. This increases not only your knowledge and control but also your confident awareness of how far you've developed.

- **Try to ensure that you do some writing—other than note-taking —every day.**

One reason for this is purely mechanical. You (literally) need to 'keep your hand in': all exams make formidable demands on your wrist-and finger-muscles, and regular daily writing will ensure that they are supple and acclimatized. But there are of course other reasons too. Writing will reinforce and sharpen lessons learnt from your reading, and also make your brain more active, more in command.

How you go about this is in my view rather more problematic than some teachers and commentators think. The standard advice is to 'mainline' on past papers; I'm not entirely convinced by this, and I hope it will prove helpful if I devote a brief section to the matter.

PAST PAPERS: ADVANTAGES *AND* LIMITATIONS/DANGERS

First, I should at once say that all examinees should be thoroughly schooled in the *format, requirements and structure* of every paper that they will take, and that the most effective way of ensuring that is to peruse the syllabus and attendant past papers with concentrated care. No argument about that, in short; and if, for whatever reason, you find it hard to get that information from your teachers or tutors, you ought to contact the Examining Board—they'll send you all you need.

Secondly, I would of course agree that exam practice is essential. There is a big difference between doing a fine essay or an exquisitely answered mathematical problem in your own time and doing it under timed conditions, and it is highly probable that the latter part of your course has featured such practice more and more intensively. Again, well and good. The problem arises, I think, when 'overkill' becomes a possibility. As a wise ex-colleague of mine once put it:

> **In the end, and beyond a certain point, doing past papers makes you good at one thing only—doing past papers.**

That slightly epigrammatic remark embraces these tough, perhaps unpalatable truths:

- No matter how diligently you do a practice paper, you are always aware that *is* a practice.

There is—can be—no substitute for 'the real thing', and while you can polish technique and consolidate knowledge, there is a limit to how accurate a guide it will be to your performance in such circumstances. Furthermore…

- When you attempt a past question as a revision exercise, you almost certainly will have prior knowledge of it: that is to say, you've *chosen* it to fit your needs of the moment.

Nothing wrong with that in itself, naturally. But you don't get to choose the topics/questions in the exam: the most you can do is select one from the two set, four from six, whatever. Again, 'the real thing' is crucially different—not necessarily worse, but different.

- They can become addictive, persuading you that *this* is the way, when in fact other methods might prove much more fruitful.

That's partly what I meant earlier when I used the word 'mainline'. It's very easy to get into a past-paper-rut, and also to imagine that by doing so you're mining the 'secrets' of exam procedure and technique. On the contrary, you're likely to *dull* your readiness for the exam itself, because you're not addressing your subject in full, only 'angles' on it.

- There is a distinct danger of becoming bored or sated.

'They can become addictive, persuading you that *this* is the way'

If you do *too many* past questions, all your pleasure and most of your interest in the topic are likely to disappear. Of all the things you want to avoid, the chief one is arriving at the exam centre bored by the subject you're about to sit, all its stimulus and challenge ground out of you.

All that said, past papers do have their value, provided you regard them as useful adjuncts and servants rather than elixirs and masters. But, in Humanities subjects especially, I would advise against undertaking *full* essay-form answers, unless you feel your style is in need of a stringent work-out. Instead

- **Choose some questions/topics, and do an outline answer for each.**

Talk these over with your peers/friends—with your teachers too if they're still around and available. In addition, look them over a couple of days later (perhaps after doing some further reading and noting on the topics concerned) and then ask yourself:

1. **How many good points have you made?**
2. **How many more could/should you have made?**
3. **Did you actually answer the question?**
4. **Are they are irrelevancies/things best omitted?**
5. **Could your answer have been clearer/better designed?**
6. **How easy is a stranger going to find your handwriting?!**

All those questions are excellent revision aids and spurs to even greater command—and you don't need to have done a complete answer in continuous prose to make the discoveries you need. You thus save time and energy, and you also avoid the Boredom Factor that at this stage especially can be your deadliest enemy.

SUMMARY

Some of my chapter summaries have turned out to be lengthy. Not this one: all I want to say in conclusion is:

However you go about your revision, try above all to enjoy it, or at any rate to look on it as the opportunity to prove all those teachers, lecturers, parents, brothers and sisters, friends and Uncle Tom Cobbleigh wrong!

If you've worked well, and if you've followed just some of the advice given so far, I can assure you that you have every chance of success. Revision—the last preparatory lap of your course—is at root the time when you assert yourself fully, when you are in sole control. There is no reason whatever why that experience should not be as pleasurable as it is decisive.

And now on to the biggest crunch of all—the exam itself.

EXAMINATIONS: SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES
15

We have nothing to fear but fear itself.

F.D.Roosevelt

THE DAY OF THE EXAM

Good preparation from the start is essential.

If the exam is in the morning, all that you need should have been laid out the evening before so as to prevent a last-minute panic. Obviously that means all writing implements, geometrical instruments, calculators and so on; these days it also can mean certain texts or pamphlets that you are permitted—or in the case of 'Open Book' literature exams, *require*. Most exam centres can lend you a pen or whatever, but they are most unlikely to have a stock of set texts, so be warned!

Get up early enough to leave yourself plenty of time. You may be tempted to get up really early for a last intensive revision session, but I'd advise against it:

The freshness and energy you lose will not be compensated for by the small amount of knowledge you might gain.

Try to get ready in as leisurely fashion as you can manage. If you've got time, listen to some music or do something that you know has a relaxing effect. On the other hand, allow plenty of time for any journey that has to be made—don't let a delayed train or bus ruin things! But don't get to the exam hall too early—about ten minutes before is ideal. Any earlier, and you'll have an empty time in which to panic or expend a lot of nervous energy uselessly; any later, and you'll be rushed and won't have time to compose yourself.

Much of the same advice applies if the exam is in the afternoon. Here, however, a gentle look over a past question or two can be a good way of 'ticking over' in the morning without losing too much energy. If there are some quotations or formulae that you've always found hard to memorize and which you think may be useful, it's worth trying to get them into your short-term memory. But launching into full-scale revision is as unwise now as it would have been in the early morning; besides, if you've followed the advice in the previous chapter, it won't be necessary!

Any performer *should* be nervous

IN **THE EXAM HALL: BEFORE WRITING**

Compose yourself

As noted, get there with about ten minutes to spare. Try to relax as much as you can: those meaningless conversations are a *good* idea, however inane—if only because they ease your mind by revealing that others are just as nervous as you! If you prefer to be alone and silent, then take a crossword puzzle or something similar to fill those few minutes: it will 'warm up' your brain without the risk of it focusing grimly on the approaching 'crunch', which is unpleasant anyway and can induce panic.

Nerves

For a start, don't *worry* about being nervous. You are about to perform: any performer—actor, footballer, musician, politician, TV weatherman— *should* be nervous just before starting. Indeed, experienced performers are only worried when they're *not* nervous: it suggests they are too laid back, or simply uninterested. A sharp, heightened sense of being alive is admirable—what we call being 'keyed-up'. Adrenalin will charge you up perfectly and naturally, and ensure that you are at your most alert.

Nobody else can do it for you, and you certainly can't get it out of a bottle of *any* shape!

The first few minutes

Once at your desk, you'll have a few moments while people settle and so on. *Use* this time. Get properly comfortable; look around you and banish that inevitable sense of strangeness; set out your pens etc. for easy access; jot down any notes/reminders you feel like making; and try to relax—deep breaths and muscle tensing-and-relaxing exercises may help. (See Appendix C.)

The exam paper

When you get your paper and/or instructions to open it:

Take it easy for at least two minutes.

Read it; and then read it again. Don't try to frame answers right away: just let the questions sink into you naturally. The brain will register most of the essential information without you having to push it in any way. You're under time-pressure, yes, but a 100 m.p.h. charge at it from the absolute outset makes no sense at all. 'Festina lente' is a wise Latin saying:* your speed will be much the more efficient for having first settled into a relaxed groove.

Understanding the questions

Be quite sure you've fully digested all the instructions—including the questions' *precise* wording. As an (I hope) amusing and instructive way of showing how important this is, how dangerously easy it is to 'understand' things too quickly':

Please try the 'Intelligence Test' on page 237; you'll find the answers overleaf, but don't cheat!

The spoof intelligence test light-heartedly dramatizes the fact that any fool can *read* a question; understanding its exact requirements is another matter entirely. Therefore:

Never start writing—or even thinking/planning—an answer until you are 100% sure you've 'decoded'/understood the question.

All exam boards 'advertise' such vital matters—word-limits, numbers of examples to be included, methodological instructions and so on—by the use of heavy type, but it is still a good idea to highlight them further by circling them in red biro or whatever method you've found suits you best.

This is especially advisable in that not *all* crucial instructions *are* in heavy type. Take particular note of all instructive verbs, and make sure you're absolutely clear on what each one involves. For example, the verbs 'describe' and 'explain' may seem virtually synonymous at first sight; but they are not. Consider the difference between these two questions:

1. Describe the rise of Hitler.
2. Explain the rise of Hitler.

I am not a historian; but even to an amateur like myself, it is clear that the first question asks for an 'objective' historiographical account, listing stages, events, and what we will call 'facts'. The second question, on the other hand, is much more a matter of interpretation, involving a consideration of mass psychology, of the emotional appeal of Fascism, and an understanding of the way mania can take hold of a nation. Question 1, in short, demands an account that is essentially *'public'* or *external,* while Question 2 requires a more *intuitive* or *internal, psychological* approach. They are, in fact, sufficiently different for

*Literally, 'hurry slowly'. An English equivalent might be 'more haste, less speed'.

there to be no reason why the two answers should more than vaguely overlap in terms of their basic material.

So be sure you've sorted out such subtleties before you begin. Your teachers will have—or certainly *should* have—covered such vital distinctions during the course; it is especially important to remember them now.

There is one final thing to bear in mind before starting, even though it doesn't come into play until you've nearly finished. It is:

Always try to leave yourself ten minutes to read through your answers at the end.

To have a good chance of achieving this goal, you need to 'programme' it into your planning from the outset. You might even—if you have such a thing—set the alarm on your watch to remind you forcibly.

Concerning the advice itself, two observations:

1. **I *know* every teacher advises you to do it, and that it's therefore a boring and predictable remark on my part**
2. **I also know that hardly any student actually does it! This is not usually out of defiance or contempt, but because they simply don't remember until it's too late.**

The benefits of such a step are considerable, even crucial.

- If you check ruthlessly for errors, flab, lack of clarity in both expression and handwriting, you will forestall quite a few of what would otherwise be the *examiner's* discoveries, and thus improve your mark.

INTELLIGENCE TEST

You have three minutes to complete this test

1. Write your name in the square provided. ☐

2. How many of each species did Moses take on the Ark? _____

3. Divide thirty by half and add ten. _____

4. What was the highest mountain in the world before Everest was discovered? _____

5. If you drove a bus leaving London with forty passengers, dropped off seven and picked up two at Watford, then stopped at Heathrow Airport, dropped eight there and picked up five, then drove on to arrive at Oxford three hours later, what was the driver's name? _____

6. Take two apples from three and what do you have? _____

7. If a doctor gave you three tablets and told you to take one every half hour, how long would they last? _____

8. Which country has the fourth of July, USA or UK? _____

9. What was the Prime Minister's name in 1966? _____

10. Some months have 31 days; some have 30; how many have 28? _____

☐

Intelligence Test Answers and Explanations

1. Your name should appear, as instructed in the sqquare –which is located **at the bottom of the page, right hand corner** – not in the oblong alongside the questions.
2. None. The Ark was Noah's enterprise.
3. 70. Basic arithfdmetical terminology and practice, this: **dividing** something by **half** is the same as **multiplying** it by two, **doubling** it. Thus:
   30÷½ = 30×2; add 10:70
4. Everest. It was there before man discovered or named it.
5. What your name is: 'you' did the driving.
6. Two apples. It is dangerously easy to assume that you're being asked 'what do you have **left**?' or what remains?'. but you're not! A wonderful illustration of the need to read/'decode' a question properly.
7. 1 hour. e.g. Take the first tablet at 12.00; the second at 12.30; the third at 1.00.
8. Both of them. The question says nothing about, nor even implies, the date's national significance.
9. Whoever the Prime Minister is when you read this; at the time of writing, it is John Major. The Prime Minister in 1966 was, as a matter of fact, Harold Wilson, that that's not what the question asks!
10. All of them. [Cf. Qusestions, 8, and 9]

- Such correction is in any event a much more fruitful use of that time than the frantic addition of a further paragraph or two to your final answer. Remember that by this stage the examiner's judgement of your material will be more or less formed. Last-minute thoughts are unlikely to affect it very much, but tightening and polishing *earlier* answers might well do so.
- By this stage, also, you are almost sure to be suffering from fatigue, and unlikely anyway to come up with anything too brilliant in the way of a new idea. Mechanical checking makes no demands on your tired imagination, and is the perfect activity for a brain now beginning to wind down.
- Paradoxically, because you have now begun that winding-down process and are thus a little more relaxed, it is possible that a snappy phrase/the right word/any kind of 'missing link' *will* now occur to you where previously you had neither time nor inclination to 'let it come'.
- You will almost certainly feel better when 'Time' is called—and if you're doing another paper that same day, such a feeling of well-being is a significant bonus.

WRITING YOUR ANSWERS (I): ELEMENTARY STRATEGIES

The rudimentary tips which follow are no less important for being obvious.

1.
Answer the easiest, or your strongest, question first

This boosts confidence, which in turn gives you added energy, or the illusion of it, which in these circumstances amounts to the same thing. It may also leave you extra time to deal with the harder tasks later.

2.
If you answer a question on a topic you haven't prepared, you're taking a gamble

In my experience, such gambles either come off very well or—much more often—very badly indeed. Unless you feel truly inspired, stick to what you know you know/can do successfully.

3.
In multiple choice papers, don't change your first answer unless you're *positive* that the second decision is correct

Better still, leave such a decision till the end—those final ten minutes just discussed. Make a note somewhere visible to do just that.

4.
Always pay particular attention to the marks allotted per question

These are not included on your paper for laughs or even polite etiquette: they are decisive signals about how much time and substance you should devote to each one. I've lost count of the number of times I've examined scripts which lavish twelve lines on a 2-mark question and then about fifteen *words* on a 10-mark one: don't fall into that trap.

5.
Don't imagine you need to write—or even work/think—all the time. If you need a brief break, take it

Most advanced exams are 2-hours-plus—an artificial length of time so far as the brain's natural rhythms are concerned.* If you feel the need to 'down tools' for a minute or two, to yawn cavernously and have a stretch, then *do it:* your brain's messages to you are rarely wrong, and that goes for an exam as much as any other time.

So far, my advice will probably be familiar to you: you'll have heard most of it before from your teachers. Don't let this familiarity breed contempt. Remember that:

> **More people fail exams—or do less well than they should— through carelessly ignoring such advice than through lack of ability or preparation.**

Now, however, I'd like to offer some tips that you may not have encountered.

WRITING YOUR ANSWERS (II): PERFORMANCE STRATEGIES

Let's assume that everything is 'set up' soundly and well. That is to say, you have:

1. Been adequately taught.
2. Worked hard.
3. Settled yourself in the exam room in a relaxed and alert way.
4. Taken full note of all the rubric and all the requirements of the paper.
5. Succeeded in banishing panic, and now feel quietly confident.

How can you ensure that you 'perform' at your best?

The first 'performance strategy' hinges on your paper's eventual destination—the examiner's desk.

1.
Bear in mind your examiners' timetable and work-rhythms

I have already spoken about the stupidity of trying to second-guess an unknown examiner, and I stick to that. It is even worse if you allow yourself to think that your answer must match what the marker things, which is an absurd and harmful delusion. **Absurd** because you have no idea who any of your (invisible) markers are and therefore no knowledge of their beliefs, prejudices and so on; **harmful** because this approach sacrifices your biggest asset—you. The quality of your answers will depend on your ideas, your intellect, your prose, your analysis. Provided your 'information base' and knowledge are sound, your readers/markers will be interested in what you have to show them—the more so if it really is what you want to say and not what you think they want to hear.

However, it is very sensible to be aware of probable examiner-*behaviour,* and I can best help you towards a sound working estimate of that with the question:

Roughly how long do you think an examiner will spend reading and marking your script?

I've have answers ranging from 'twenty minutes' to 'over an hour'. In fact, an experienced marker will look to do an average of five to six scripts an hour, which means that you have approximately

Ten minutes of his/her time to make your quality count.

That isn't meant to frighten but to help you, as is this brief explanatory look at the inside facts of an examiner's task. I will take myself as an example—marking A-Level papers in the summer and Open University papers in early November. The work-load and schedule are remarkably similar:

1. I receive, on average, between 100 and 140 scripts.
2. Each script comprises three or four essays, with an overall length of about 10–12 sides of A4 paper.
3. My 'deadline' for the return of scripts and the submission of mark-sheets and reports is about a fortnight from the day they reach me.

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*See Chapter 2.

4. Like the vast majority of examiners, I am usually working at my full-time job as well during the marking period.

You don't need a calculator to work out what this means. Any given script will be part of a batch that examiners have to work through at an overall rate of *ten per day*. They will have the weekend to 'catch up' in case one or two weekdays have found them too busy to fulfil their daily quota; but the real point is that they simply haven't got the time to dwell on your essays/answers in the way that your teachers have done over the preceding months.

In addition, it means that you would be very wise to make as good an *immediate* impact as you can. An old friend, now at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, once informed a class we were jointly teaching that

80% of exam answers are graded by the time Sheet 1 has been read.

That doesn't mean that everything else is a waste of effort and ink! Nor does it imply that examiners are 'quick decision' merchants who only skim the rest. No: of course the rest of the script matters and will be marked very carefully. The fact is, however, that four times out of five an examiner gets an early 'feel' of what the script is worth which turns out to be confirmed by the rest. So remember:

First impressions really do count.

I am aware that all that may strike you as sobering, even alarming information and advice. I want therefore to emphasize that on no account should you imagine that your examiners' assessments will be slapdash or superficial, or that you're at the mercy of one such tearaway! For the schedule and psychology I've outlined have these comforting corollaries:

1. Examiners are experienced professionals who have acquired the ability to assess work fairly and incisively in such short periods. A *new* examiner will take longer, as I did: the speed comes with practice, like most things.
2. The reason our deadlines are so 'squashed' is that, once the scripts are returned to HQ, the Chief Examiners/Awarders spend over a *month* carefully correlating marks, patterns of distribution, and so on. *Our* task is made fast so that *their* job—deciding your grade over *all* the papers—can be done with proper care and unpressured judiciousness.
3. This means that your script will, in all likelihood, be read by *several* examiners by the time your grade is determined.

Nevertheless, at the start of any exam and all your papers, it is an excellent strategy to

Grab your examiners' attention as early as possible.

Make them sit up and say, 'This one knows what s/he's doing'. It's always a pleasure to mark scripts that have a sense of purpose and clarity, and such qualities nearly always render your *material* cogent and enjoyable too. Let's now look at how you can best achieve this.

Grab your examiner's attention as early as possible

2.
Make an immediate impact

First of all:

Get some ideas down on paper as soon as you can.

On the whole, I *don't* advise you to begin writing the actual answer straightaway. There can be exceptions to this: if, for example, you quickly spot a question you know you can launch into at once, then go ahead—it will boost morale by getting you off to a flying start. But it's more likely that you'll need a brief warm-up first. So use an 'energizing pattern', as described in Chapter 8. This will take only a few moments, will ignite your mind fully and (best of all) give you a wealth of visual triggers to aid your progression from point to point, stage to stage, and argument to argument.

I've already, in Chapter 8, written at some length on the subject of introductions, and will not weary you with its repetition. All I'll suggest for exam work is this:

Map out an introductory paragraph in your head—and *then abandon it,* or at any rate examine it ruthlessly.

Does it really say anything? Are you using your time or merely marking it? For now is the time above all others to remind yourself that

A blank piece of paper is a uniquely frightening thing

and the temptation to start filling it up *on principle* can be almost overwhelming. Don't do that: reconsider your planned first sentences as calmly as you can, and if in any doubt, scrap them. Unless you have a particular knack for constructing short, pithy introductions,* it is always best—*especially in an exam*—to get right into the substance of your argument/answer. This increases the chance of grabbing the examiner's

'A blank sheet of paper is a uniquely frightening thing'

attention, and it also avoids the danger of making your first remark a paraphrase of the question, which is never a wise way to begin.

There is one kind of question where an introduction *is* essential, however, and we need to look at it at once.

'Stating one's terms'

Sometimes you will need to *define* what is to be the basis or 'angle' of your answer. An example will soon establish what I mean.

A recent English Literature A-Level paper included this question on Milton:

Examine the ways in which Milton's style assists the argument in *Paradise Lost, Book IV*.

Incautious students might say to themselves: 'Nice one! It's the banker-question on Milton's use of language —plus the Biblical story, naturally. I *like* it!' Well, partly, yes; but crucially, no. It is not a trick question, but it's more subtle than such a breezy reaction recognizes.

The thing is, you cannot answer that question properly until you've defined what Milton's 'argument' *is.* Your answer requires a brief introduction, summarizing that argument; then, and only then, can you go on to show how his use of the book of Genesis and the English language reveals and dramatizes that argument.

You might say that this is obvious enough, and you wouldn't be wrong. But it was sobering—and sad—how many quite able students failed to do it. As a result much of their stylistic analysis was insufficiently locked-on to the question's real focus to impress. And by the way, it doesn't matter if your subject is Physics or Economics rather than English Literature, the principle I'm outlining applies to all disciplines:

If you need to 'state your terms', do so, clearly and quickly. Otherwise, just get on with it. Beware of confusing *private,* preparatory thinking with *public* performing and arguing; furthermore, don't offer coy appetizers—hit the main course at once.

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*This is an unusual quality, and you'll know/have been told if you possess it—in which case you can ignore my advice!

So much for how best to start. Turning to the main body of your exam time, how can you maintain maximum impact and advantage?

3.
When in doubt, be interesting: show them you can think

I've addressed this vital matter in earlier chapters: all I want to do here is to emphasize the importance of being fresh and individual in this your final test.

Now, it is true that nearly all exams are *conservative*. That is, they address ordinary obedience and whether you have absorbed elementary things as well as being more sophisticated tests of your quality of mind; that is one reason why I've several times stressed the value and importance of the obvious. So do what you're told, yes; answer the question, yes; never 'bend' a title to your own whims and in defiance of its own focus; above all jettison altogether any 'prepared' answer unless it matches the question's concerns word for word.

But within those requirements try to produce *your* answer, as opposed to a dull worthy featureless consensus.This is especially true if you want more than a mere pass, the achievement of which is not—nor ever has been—either scary or prestigious; here are five tips to help you go beyond that.

- Don't be too 'holy'. If you've got something negative to say, and you genuinely *feel* it, then go ahead and say it. If you pretend to be impressed with something when you're not, it will show—badly.
- Never apologize. By this I partly mean that you should avoid the kind of phrase I analyse in Appendix A —the time-wasting and curiously undermining emptiness of things like 'in my opinion', 'I think', 'I would say that…' and so on. But I also mean that you should both trust your responses and present them straight-forwardly. Very few people truly object to what an incisive and honest mind has to say in any circumstances, and that is perhaps truest of all in an exam.
- Never 'rave' emptily. Such remarks as

  Shakespeare's brilliant play is quite wonderful

or

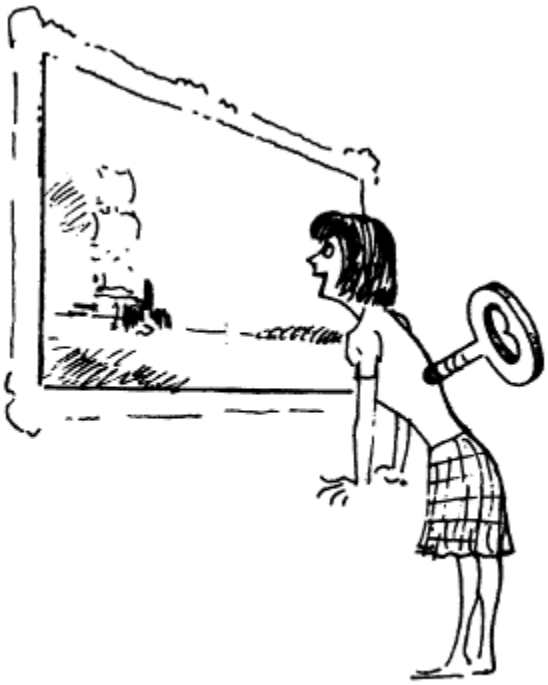
  Turner is a fantastic painter who really turns me on

are not only useless but annoying. I've encountered both those statements in exam papers I've marked, and they strike me as mere crawling waffle!

- Equally, void *arrogant* criticism—that is, snooty and unsupported judgements: they nearly always bounce damagingly back on you. An exaggerated example might be:

  Chaucer's middlebrow wisdom about unimportant and extinct matters renders him merely dull. Besides, he can't spell.

- Aim for dignity, politeness and the air of one conducting some kind of *dialogue* with the examiner—a meeting of two interesting and interested minds.
- Finally, try to remember that crucial last step that I mentioned earlier:



'Turner turns me on'

Always leave ten minutes at the end to check over and correct your work!

INTERIM SUMMARY

When you've perused the exam paper and decided, at least provisionally, which questions you're going to answer, you need each time to address these three things:

- **What does the question ask you to do?**
- **Do you know what you chiefly wish to say?**
- **How are you going to start?**

They are separate, and yet they interlock almost spookily, as these two contrasting formulae illustrate. The bad news is:

Ignore or make a mess of one of them, and the other two will suffer as well.

The good news is

Solve the first 'problem' properly, and the second will be easier; solve that, and the third one will be.

If you follow all the above strategies, your chances of success will be high. And I hope I've managed to make you feel positive about the whole business of exams. However, my account could never be complete without a hard look at the examinee's worst nightmare—'exam block/getting stuck'.

WHAT TO DO IF 'STUCK'

This apparent disaster is often more easily dealt with and solved than the panicky student might think.

- The first thing to do is recognize the fact—say to yourself 'I'm stuck'.

The very fact of articulating this should calm you—and panic is a deadly enemy to be avoided at all costs. Remind yourself that we all get a mental block from time to time, and that you may just be tired: after all, the examinee's other deadly enemy is **fatigue.**

- Do *not* 'rack your brains'.

As noted in Chapter 4, it rarely works anyway, and such frantic mental activity is precisely what you *don't* want/need at this particular moment.

- Further to those last two observations, give yourself two minutes to de-fever yourself and amass some 'cool'.

You can probably do with a brief rest in any case, and now is a good as well as necessary time to take it.

- Free associate.

Cast your mind back to when you last heard or saw the material you want. What was the book, who was the lecturer? What was s/he wearing, what was the weather like? Where were you? Was there any music going on when you last perused the stuff, and would remembering the tune trigger other recall? Any system like that may well yield the secret you require.

- If none of the above works, then abandon the point at issue and go on to the next and/or one you're solid on…
- …If necessary, go on to an entirely new question.

A drastic measure, maybe, but still a much better idea than sitting there in a doubly injurious state of panic and inactivity! Besides, now that you've made an **in-charge** decision, it is distinctly possible that the 'stuck' material may come back to you later. Your brain has relaxed and reassumed control, and it may yet come up with those missing goods.

EXAMS AND QUOTATION/REFERENCE

[This section is primarily designed for Literature students and also, perhaps, Historians and Economists; however, others might find it interesting and useful, for it reinforces several central principles of exam behaviour and performance.]

I have already, in Chapter 8, devoted a substantial section to the techniques of quotation and reference. Here I merely want to look at specific examination considerations—mainly because a deal of rubbish is spoken and thought on the subject.

Time and again I am asked, or hear of students asking, how many 'quotes' (sic) they should include in an essay and, worse, what they should be. Those questions are doubly problematic:

- **They are unanswerable.**
- **They indicate a seriously mistaken attitude and approach.**

Let's look at each problem in turn.

They are unanswerable in a way that resembles that celebrated spoof-question, 'How long is a piece of string?' Or rather, the only answer that can be provided is guaranteed to frustrate, if not enrage, the anxious student:

It depends!

It depends on countless things; some of the more obvious are:

- the text you're quoting from;
- the question you're answering;
- whether you're doing an 'Open Book' or 'Memory-Text' exam;
- whether the quotation does any work, as opposed to merely proving you're familiar with the text;
- whether it matches the point you're making, or indeed whether there *is* a point you're making;

and so forth—the kind of things I addressed in full in Chapter 8. But at root it depends on something much more subtle, both to explain and to adopt as a working principle:

Quotation and reference are only really authoritative if they come to you *naturally,* as a near-seamless part of your own thinking, response and knowledge.

That's what I had in mind when defining the second 'problem' just now, concerning seriously mistaken attitudes and approaches. And those hinge, I think, on the erroneous belief that the use of quotation and reference is some kind of higher *skill*—rather like spelling and punctuation, only more elusive and more sophisticated. Finally, it is nothing of the sort: it is an art. Unlike mechanical skills, which are learnt and then automatically applied, quotation is a matter of discernment, of imagination and personal choice.

When, what and why you quote is—or should be—an expression of your personality, your knowledge, your particular response.

If you simply learn a list of 'quotable quotes' or some such drill, you surrender that personality, which is a bad move in any event; moreover, that list, and your use of it, is all too likely to be deployed with a by-numbers dutifulness that neither sparkles nor convinces.

Besides, the idea that a top-class essay, or even a convincing one, must be regularly spiced with apposite quotation is in my view quite false. Yes, many such essays do adopt that technique; but I've read any number of equally excellent efforts that do not, and do not need to: their quality of arguing is such that one

Quotations and references are only really authoritative if they come to you naturally

knows that the writer's book-knowledge is first-class and that it does not require remorseless proof. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that:

> **It can actually be counter-productive to quote regularly: constant textual reference can irritate, interrupting the writer's thrust of argument and risking its dilution.**

I don't want to overstate the case: given the already-noted conservative nature of exams, your wisest course is probably to include at least a modicum of quotation and reference. But make sure it's *yours,* and that it strengthens your analysis. What you need to avoid at all costs is this kind of reflection in mid-exam:

> **'Help! I've been writing this essay for half an hour, and I still haven't quoted anything. Better bung one down, pronto!'**

Quotations included on this basis—even if they're accurate! —are almost certain to be wasted or a mistake. Just let them come: if you know your stuff even adequately, they will do so without you forcing the matter.

So, in sum:

> **Don't imagine there is any special or 'secret' formula concerning quotation in an examination. Success depends on good knowledge, alert thinking and overall *quality of mind,* not on 'tricks' or any model craftily designed beforehand. You should rid your thinking of any dependence on these false props, and treat with extreme caution any teacher who advocates them. As in everything else, truly effective use of quotation and reference comes when you are fully *in charge*.**

CONCLUSION: DON'T BE FRIGHTENED

I've opened this chapter with a wise remark by one of the greatest presidents of the United States. His words are by now a cliché, but they still have value for anyone who cultivates either excessive modesty or self-induced nervousness—about anything, but particularly about exams. Although I've warned about arrogance, the fact is that very few students ever make *that* error: far more—indeed, far too many—reduce their impact through coyness or needless diffidence.

Above all, stop yourself using fear as an *excuse*. It is always tempting to do this: it gives you a first-class and apparently unanswerable get-out. But remember: people may be sorry for you if you say, 'I messed up the exam—I was too scared to do myself justice'. They may even *believe* you. But they won't *admire* you—how can they? You've had your chance, and now you've blown it. As I've admitted, on a few occasions such an event will be a genuine injustice; far more often, however, it'll be nobody's fault but the candidate's.

I'm not trying to preach. If you've followed some of the advice in this book, you'll be aware of how able you can be, and that exam success is realistically—and enjoyable—within your grasp. Good luck to you; but, if you've studied well (and I hope this book has helped you to do that) then you don't need *luck:* all you have to do is—

Just do it! You are in charge.

PART FOUR

STUDY SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT

INTRODUCTION

Although this new edition incorporates a substantial reworking and extension of the 1984 text, this section is the only completely new one. Perhaps I should have included some such survey in the original edition, as the topic was hardly unimportant then; however, there is absolutely no doubt that one is needed now. The intervening years have seen a number of significant developments in student life and practice, but few are more important than the premium now placed on personal and application skills. These include the fashioning and submission of a Curriculum Vitae (CV); how to complete an application form, or apply for a post if such forms are not provided; how to present yourself at interview; and the underrated and surprisingly subtle skill of letter-writing.

For make no mistake, the business of presenting/selling yourself is a highly complex, difficult, even elusive one. Maybe that was always so, but the pressure on today's job-seekers is intense. As I write, there is still substantial recession in evidence, no matter what politicians may claim. The job market has shrunk, and shows few real signs of forthcoming expansion. In addition, as I note in the Preface to this second edition, our Overwork Culture means that those fortunate enough to be in work are being asked to do more and more and need ever-increasing 'competencies' — a ghastly word that you will none the less soon become familiar with when applying for posts and/or promotion.

To confirm and expand those observations, I turn to Paul Brown of the Oxford University Careers Service, who has identified certain key characteristics of current employment that are well worth considering closely. He argues that the much-changed world of work is now dominated by such features as:

- **Smaller organizations.**
- **Ever-increasing emphasis on professional qualifications.**
- **Ever-increasing emphasis on multiple skills.**
- **Many job changes within a single career.**
- **More than one job at any given time—i.e. a portfolio of occupations.**
- **More self-employment.**
- **European-wide competition.**

These changes have major implications for every professional man and woman.

Smaller organizations means, among other things, much greater variety and variance, affecting decisions about how to present yourself and tailor your talent for a particular post/organization.

Ever-increasing emphasis on professional qualifications and multiple skills—a.k.a. in many organizations as **continuous professional development—**particularly fascinates me. It suggests that a phrase that used to signify lack of ambition and mere dabbling—'the eternal student'—will now define the lives and rhythms of the majority of the professional work-force. Training and learning are life-long.

Many job changes and more than one job at any given time obviously connote flexibility and powers of adjustment—hand-in-hand with the point just covered. It is not all that long ago that young men and women chose a career for life at twenty-two or so and stayed in it till 60/65. That still happens, but the norm is now spectacularly different.

More self-employment is partly the result of large companies reducing the size of their core businesses and contracting out services. And **European-wide competition** simply endorses and further explains all the phenomena listed above: they are as widespread as they are basic.

All this confirms how much more fluid and, perhaps, bewildering job-seeking and job choice is going to be for you. It also suggests that a significant asset will be *geographical and social mobility*—a willingness to consider many alternatives in both locale and activity.

In short, Paul Brown's analysis underlines this fact:

> **The business of applications and interviews is not only likely to be a *frequent* concern for you: it is much more complex—even *slippery*—than was the case even ten years ago.**

Nor is the problem confined to those in their twenties and beyond: it's just as tough on younger people looking to take the momentous step from secondary to tertiary education. Any reader under forty-five will probably be unaware that thirty years ago university entrance was almost breathtakingly straightforward compared to nowadays. That's not to say that universities let just anyone in! On the contrary, even after the 'sixties 'boom' in the creation of new universities, the tertiary student population was way below what it is now—and that meant that the bureaucracy involved was out of all proportion simpler. The body that started life as UCCA was in my day (1965) a minor if important clearing system.* In its later years, and in its current incarnation as UCAS, it has become a juggernaut, ferociously complicated and requiring any student to spend weeks (if not *months*) coming to grips with it all, then researching, visiting and choosing. As a result, rare is the school that does not have a senior member of staff assigned to managing and trouble-shooting the whole thing: it is now a significant industry in its own right.

It's time to address a couple of questions that I would guess are simmering in at least some readers' minds. You may—I hope you do—find convincing the picture I've painted of the world you face: it is one of rapid and mushrooming change that has affected and continues to affect the separate spheres of commerce, industry, academe and the professions. But why go on about it in a book about *study* skills? And quite why should *I* be the one to write such a chapter? After all, those reading this book are, in the main, likely to be one or all of these things:

- **Able**
- **Young/youngish**
- **Socially mobile**
- **Amongst the elite of tomorrow's professional work-force.**

I, on the other hand, am middle-aged, and unlikely now to apply for any major new job, since I'm still very happy in a post I've held for over ten years and have no real desire to move or change. So what can this

' ... much more slippery than ten years ago'

semistagnant ageing teacher tell you about how to present yourself that you don't already know, or help fit you for applications in fields of which he has no direct experience whatever? And what happened to my maxim **You are in charge?**

Well, my answer is partially telegraphed by the title I have given to Part Four. It is obvious enough that you need study skills when under-going an academic or professional course of study. What is much less obvious is that

You also need them—just as much—to *get work*.

Nearly all the topics I've covered so far are of fundamental relevance to the apparently quite separate matter of applying for jobs and forging a career. Knowing yourself, how best you operate, what you care most about and find most interesting; patterns of work efficiency and retention; effective reading, note-taking and use of all available resources; drafting and editing; high-pressure concentration (as in examinations); and perhaps above all the art and skill of writing/communicating clearly, vigorously and with concise authority —all these are as important after your course as they were during it. In a way, maybe more so: there's money in it now! I hope the three chapters that follow ease what can be a rocky and perilous path and help secure the kind of post or placement you really want.

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*Indeed, although I remember completing an UCCA form, it quickly turned out to be irrelevant. At that time several universities—including Cambridge, where I was lucky enough to do my first degree—operated quite independently of the new system.

PRESENTING YOURSELF (I): THE CV AND THE APPLICATION FORM
16

Everyone lives by selling something

Robert Louis Stevenson

The arch-flatterer…is a man's self

Francis Bacon

The rest is silence

Hamlet

16.1
THE CURRICULUM VITAE (CV)

FIRST PRINCIPLES

The whole business of applying for courses and jobs is an intimidating and stressful one—and it remains so even for those with lots of experience in it. So let me at once stress that there is no single 'right way', no watertight model. Nevertheless, there are some practices which have grown up and are best followed for clarity.

You need from the start to differentiate between:

- The personally designed CV
- The prescribed CV layout which occupies the first part of an application form*

simply because your approach and technique need to be distinct for each one. In the first case, design and chronology are up to you; in the second, those will have already been formatted for you. Nevertheless, they are closely linked, in that your goal in each case is the same: what is the best way to provide information, answer questions (be they explicit or implicit and present yourself most strongly?

To help provide an answer, it's wise to start with the absolute basics. This is not to patronize or assume that you're unaware of such things, but to examine them afresh and cast new light on things which seem obvious but are in fact subtle and complicated.

A CV falls into two parts:

• A checkable list of facts	**—age, gender, qualifications, experience and so forth**
• Personal information	**—background, interests, skills, achievements, aspirations**

It gives the interviewer a basis for assessing an interviewee, and the process of completing the CV gives the applicant a chance to assess the firm/post/course at issue.

All perfectly straightforward, apparently. But out of that summary we can infer three further, crucial points.

1. **From the moment you begin to compose/tailor your CV, an application is a *two-way* phenomenon.**

You are of course assessed from the moment you submit your documentation; but you should also be assess*ing*—working out if the post/course is right for you, whether they know what they're doing and what they're after.

That does not imply any undue conceit or aggression on your part. Most of us have attended at least one interview which was poorly conducted, where 'they' seemed all at sea, vague or other negative things. If and when this happens, the chances are that other aspects of the operation may be faulty or equally unfocused, and that can be a significant 'warning'.

The second point is arguably the single most important thing to impress upon anyone entering the job market:

2. **The CV gets you the interview; the interview gets you the job.**

One of the commonest CV errors is to *try to do too much with it*. The point will be fully explored later; for now it cannot be stressed too strongly that:

3. **Designing a CV is complex, delicate and full of problems— almost a minor art form; but it is finally a *limited* exercise, and must not be blown out of proportion.**

That is one reason why I quoted Hamlet's final words. 'The rest is silence', as an epigraph to this chapter. You cannot do everything with and on a CV, and you shouldn't even try.

SELLING ONESELF: BASIC STRATEGIES AND HIDDEN DANGERS

Not to put too fine a point on it.

A CV is a selling document, and the product is you.

That might strike you as so obvious as to require an apology for even stating it! But such reductive crudity is once again highly deceptive.

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*Or sometimes a *subsequent* part. See Case Study 1, pp. 270–2 ff.

' ... the product is you'

As I sought to demonstrate in Chapter 8, there are more than a few ways to write a good essay or report; similarly, as you'll see later, there are several ways to construct an impressive and attractive CV. The two go together in another way too, and one that is pivotal:

> **All good writing, whatever its strategy, focus and structure, *pleases,* and two key ways in which it does that is through a clear sense of 'voice' and a careful and caring *awareness of its audience*. This is as true of a CV as of any continuous argumentative prose.**

However, you also need to take due note of an attendant paradox that points to a great potential danger:

> **The fact that you're selling yourself does not mean that you can afford to inhabit a universe of one. You must from the start *calculate your effect on others:* you need to see and hear yourself with as much ruthless objectivity as you can muster.**

Again, this will be fully explored as we go, with examples for you to evaluate. But that principles needs to be fixed in the mind from the beginning, as does this:

> **Just because something is important to you—or, even more precariously, makes you *feel* important—does not mean that others will automatically share that view.**

It is no part of my intention to damage your self-esteem or pour scorn on the things that you do and which matter to you. But we are all capable of falling into the trap wittily defined by Ambrose Bierce in his *Devil's Dictionary:*

***Self,* n. The most important person in the universe.**

You should always bear in mind the reader/recipient, which involves being constantly alert to how you may be 'coming across' for this or that post/concern. That in turn means that your CV needs to be tailored for each application that you make, and that in any given case you have to be fiercely on your guard about devoting precious space to things that may well be of minimal value or 'scoring power'.

With all that duly 'logged', let's move on to concrete details.

ESSENTIAL DO'S AND DON'TS

These obvious points are no less important for being obvious:

- Give all the information requested.
- Never make a prospective interviewer guess.
- Never bluff—or worse, lie!*
- Never repeat yourself.
- Pay strict attention to spelling and mechanical accuracy.
- Avoid corrections; especially avoid Tippex.

and finally—perhaps most vital of all:

- Take your time: a CV cannot/should not be hurried.

It is wise to write out your draft and then return to it a day later. In the meantime—as noted in several earlier chapters—your brain will automatically have been subconsciously chewing it over, sifting it, assessing it; when you do return to it you will be both surprised and pleased how much sharper you can make it, and perhaps in addition include things you should have thought of and delete some that no longer seem as strong or as relevant.

Furthermore, you want to

Make it easy for people to find the information they need.

If someone has to hunt all over the place through several sheets of paper, s/he is likely to lose patience and interest, even to the point of not bothering to continue with your application. Accordingly:

Try to include all the more 'stable' information on the first page.

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*To be followed up shortly.

This means details of your name, date of birth, address and so on, most of which will not change very often. In addition, all key qualifications should also appear here,* for they give a quick and illuminating thumbnail sketch of the applicant. With luck you won't have to alter anything on this page—except to add more qualifications!

LESS OBVIOUS/MORE PROBLEMATIC DO'S AND DON'TS

First, one already mentioned but in need of a detailed gloss:

Do not LIE!

This goes beyond, and is more intricate than, the invention of qualifications, degrees and so on: I assume you're too sensible and honourable to do that! No—something less tawdry, much subtler and very important:

Be as honest and informatively genuine as you possibly can.

You are your biggest asset. No matter how stressful job-hunting and job-changing may be, you are in charge: that's as true when compiling a formal CV as when privately studying. But

Do not put things down just to impress, because you think they look good, or—worst of all—because you think that is what 'they' are looking for.

Trying to second-guess an unknown employer or 'line manager' is as stupidly futile as trying to decide what an unknown examiner 'wants' you to say.

On to a related 'snare'. In UCAS applications in particular, one often comes across what I will term 'the *Blue Peter* disease' —the listing of hobbies and interests that are unmistakably worthy, safe and Politically Correct. *Improbably so,* in fact—and that is crucial. So many aspirant students list 'reading', 'going to the theatre', 'working with the community, especially old people' and 'charity work' that their very appearance can seem suspect, even in those cases where the information is entirely true. Therefore you need to be ruthlessly honest and very careful:

Bluff and claims that cannot be substantiated may be less morally disreputable than citing 'fantasy' qualifications, but they are actually much more dangerous to you.

I have O- and A-Levels, a Cambridge English degree, a post-graduate teaching certificate and a doctorate—and all the certificates to prove it. The fact remains that not once in the thirty years since I sat A-Levels have I been asked to produce a single one of these, and for all that my various employers, colleagues and contacts—including yourselves! — absolutely *know,* I could have invented the entire package. I ought to add that such non-checking is not invariable: I recently heard of a case where an employee of a leading merchant bank was asked to provide every conceivable piece of academic documentation *even though he*

*This is not universal practice: as we shall see later, there are times when other things should be logged first

' ... means you type fitfully with two fingers'

had already been appointed and was doing well. Nevertheless, that is the exception that proves the rule. In the main these things seem to be taken on trust, partly because of references and all that that system involves, of which more later.

So to return to the earlier point:

The apparently less sinful practice of claiming an interest or a skill that will not stand up to examination is a recipe for disaster.

It may take only one question to expose you—to reveal that your dedicated' interest in reading' amounts to a few magazines or the odd thriller, that your 'wide-ranging keyboard competence' means you type fitfully with two fingers. This is not only embarrassing for you (and the interviewer): it suggests that you are, if not a liar, unreliable, and in many cases your chances end right there.

A second don't is hardly less important, but it's also much trickier:

Do not make your CV/application too long

It's trickier because many applicants have a lot to say that is interesting and significant: they've done a lot, know a lot, are multi-talented and experienced people. But it's always worth remembering two important truths:

1. **People who *read* CVs and applications are, necessarily, very busy.**

Choosing suitable students/personnel is only one of many things they have to do on any given day or week, and they have neither the time nor the inclination to wade through a hefty chunk of self-advertisement. So they will be immediately grateful for a CV that is clear and snappy—grateful *and* impressed/well-disposed, which is a major 'plus'. And that leads me neatly to the second truth, already mentioned:

2. **The CV gets you the interview; the interview gets you the job.**

To reiterate: don't over-estimate what a CV can do and how much it can say—don't go into every minute detail. That's risky anyway because of the just-covered point about the reader's busyness; but it also takes no account of the separate role of the **interview,** including the simple but fundamental need to

Leave them something to ask you further about.

The interview is an in-depth process of exploration, of putting flesh and personality on the bones provided by the CV. The metaphor is a useful one: I used it when discussing key word noting in Chapter 7, and in a way the CV is another such 'skeleton', providing the key words/facts about you. To attempt to make it into a fully formed body is doomed— and usually irritating into the bargain.

On the other hand, do at least consider seriously the inclusion of items like Full Driving Licence, First Aid, Life Saving, Duke of Edinburgh Awards and Music Exams (Grade V upwards*). They will not always seem hugely appropriate to the task in hand, but they indicate two valuable qualities—that you have succeeded at things, and that you have broader interests than just college and work. Most employers and university teachers prefer to have interesting, variously talented people working for and with them than monolithic ones!

So much for all governing principles affecting the initial formation of a CV; it is now time to consider details of its composition, design and lay-out—the business of actually applying, in fact.

16.2
SUBMITTING AN APPLICATION: THE CV AND ATTENDANT FORMS

INTRODUCTION

As a way of illuminating what I've already covered and setting up what is to come, please look at Fig. 16.1. These comments were made by staff at the leading firm of accountants Peat Marwick after a number of sixth-formers had submitted written applications. It is improbable that all of them are of direct relevance to every reader's concerns and likely problems, but they do graphically illustrate the elementary ways in which even bright and committed applicants can damage their chances, and there are lessons there for everyone. All are revealing, but I would draw particular attention to numbers 5, 8, 9, 11 and, above all, 18.

I say, 'above all' because number 18 relates to something I want to discuss shortly—the **Personal Statement** or **Personal Profile**. But the others highlighted testify (in their absence!) to the importance of:

- **Careful planning.**
- **Attractive and thoughtful lay-out and style.**
- **Awareness of audience.**
- **A proper degree of pride and seriousness.**

That last is crucial: if you give even the slightest impression that you're 'not all that bothered' about your application, you cannot expect anyone else to take it seriously. Of course, hardly anyone sits down to

*This advice is probably more appropriate to students than to job applicants, though the latter may find the point worth considering.

APPLICATIONS: COMMON TRAPS AND MISTAKES

1. Head Teacher's name spelt wrong.
2. Two referees from the same source.
3. No qualitative assessment of how well s/he does things.
4. Personal history too brief.
5. Use of Tippex indicated no first draft made.
6. Varied personal history, but wasted here — not made sufficiently attractive to an employer.
7. Form neither signed nor dated.
8. Almost insultingly inadequate application: he only talked about sport, and it wasn't even tidily laid out.
9. Insufficient thought given to what to put in the various sections; on occasion ran out of space.
10. Personal circumstances put in an unfavourable light — sad but damaging.
11. Block capitals used throughout: ugly and hard to read, and perilous — some companies use graphologists.
12. No STD code given: a prospective employer would have trouble getting in contact.
13. Claims to be fluent in French: is she?
14. Personal history repeats much of the information given in the first part of the form.
15. Probable that all academic qualifications not given.
16. Phraseology under 'Interests' too terse. A capsule comment such as 'Stock Market' is not adequate.
17. Personal history contained no real information.
18. There was a measure of complacency in the application.

Fig. 16.1 Comments made by staff of a leading firm of accountants concerning applications received from sixth-formers.

complete such a form in a frivolous state of mind, but it's funny—and alarming— how easy it is to come across as too casual or just plain lazy.

Now to more complex matters.

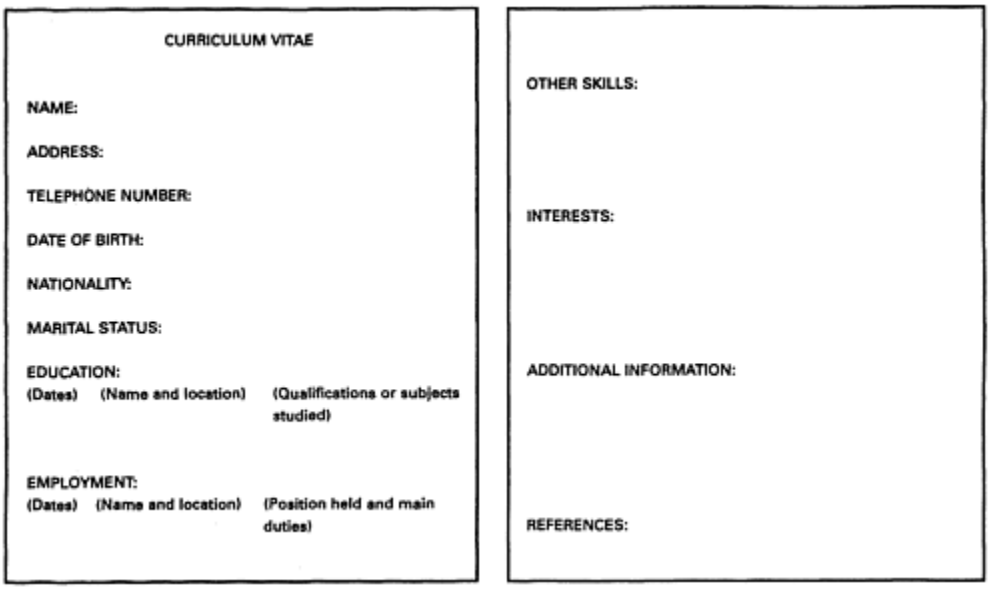
MAJOR CONSIDERATIONS AND AREAS OF CONTROVERSY

First, let me repeat an earlier observation:

> **There are few if any hard-and-fast rules when it comes to designing a CV or completing an application form.**

Secondly, I have to say that this is as much a problem as an advantage. Please look first at Fig. 16.2 and then at Fig. 16.3. Ideally, you should form some idea of what you think of each one before reading on.

As it stands and appears, the format in Fig. 16.2 is, I think, inadequate. Its basic lay-out and chronology are all right—clear and quite comprehensive. But—partly because it's had to be designed to fit the page-size of this book! —it strikes me as simply too *small*. Virtually every section/box would require very cramped handwriting for anyone to log his/her essential details and achievements. That leads us to another major principle:


CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME:

ADDRESS:

TELEPHONE NUMBER:

DATE OF BIRTH:

NATIONALITY:

MARITAL STATUS:

EDUCATION:
(Dates) (Name and location) (Qualifications or subjects studied)

EMPLOYMENT:
(Dates) (Name and location) (Position held and main duties)

OTHER SKILLS:

INTERESTS:

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

REFERENCES:

Fig.16.2 A standard format CV.

Despite the earlier advice not to make your CV too *long,* do not be frightened of taking plenty of *space*. Cramped CVs* create an immediately unlovely impression, and are often irksome/tricky to read as well.

If we now turn to the Caroline Herman CV in Fig. 16.3, I hope you would agree that

It is clearly and professionally laid out, and it is easy to find the information needed.

However, those important strengths fully granted, there are a number of features and qualities here which are cause for doubt or concern.

First, the inclusion of **marital status**. Many women object to the inclusion of this item on an application forms, and they surely have a point— in my view an unanswerable one. Their professional ability has got nothing to do with their personal circumstances, and vice versa. All I would add is that it seems a touch sexist to imagine that only women might so object! The item is just as irrelevant if the applicant is male. Moreover, I would suggest that if it is legitimate to ask such personal questions, then that is a matter to be covered at **interview**—person to person, giving the interviewee the chance to object if s/he wishes, and to say why. If you're less brave than that (and I'd be with you!), then perhaps the best course is to omit such details unless they're specifically asked for, in which case you don't have much choice, short of that formal protest.

Now we move on to the most contentious issue of all:

*And letters too. See the next chapter.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Name:	Caroline Margaret HERMAN
Address:	42A Beechwood Drive, Balham, London SW12 8TN
Telephone:	0181 673 5792
Date of Birth:	4th March, 1972
Marital Status:	Single; no dependants

A confident communicator, I integrate easily into teams, though I am equally happy to work alone. I am a quick, logical thinker with an analytical mind and enjoy the stimulation of a challenge. I like variety and am adaptable in different situations, to which I respond with enthusiasm and a sense of humour. I am computer-literate and am always keen to learn something new.

QUALIFICATIONS

July 1995	BA (Hons) in French and Linguistic Science; Class II Division I
June 1990	'A' Levels in Mathematics (A) Latin (A) and French (B) 'S' Level in French (Merit)
June 1988	10 GCSEs in English Language, English Literature, French, Latin, Art, Religious Education, Mathematics, Physics, Biology and Chemistry

EDUCATION

Oct 91 – July 95	University of Reading (University of Tours, France 93/4)
Sept 90 – July 91	Private Dance Course
Sept 86 – July 90	Norwich High School

Fig. 16.3 An exemplar of a CV's first page.

Personal Statement/Profile: yes or no?

This is currently a fashionable and very 'okay' thing to do. I won't be coy with you: I *hate* it! It's a kind of individualized spin-off from those fatuous* Mission Statements that every company and institution under the sun seems obliged to furnish: they're more trouble than they're worth, and they're not worth much trouble. However, a defence of the practice might go:

The Personal Statement is evidence of your ability to be succinct and decisively self-aware. It 'speaks' directly to the reader in a way that mere statistical information cannot do, and thus offers a valuable early clue to your personality.

The opposing 'camp' might counter with:

The Personal Statement is invariably smug at best and a frenzy of self-advertisement at worst. It is unpleasantly pre-emptive in 'laying the truth' on the reader before s/he has even started to get to know the person; it also pre-empts the process of discover which is the core of the interview, and is therefore impertinent—in both senses! —on a CV.

There are no prizes for guessing which one I incline to! That said, there is another and different point to be made in favour of the **Personal Statement:** it gives you a chance to outline your hopes and ambitions, to address the *future*. A CV is by definition an *historical* document, logging what you've done, studied, learnt, and achieved. The Personal Statement allows you an early opportunity to say what attracts you about this projected move. Indeed, that feature is now part of 'Box 10' on the UCAS form, where applicants are encouraged to give reasons why they wish to pursue a particular course or line of study, and the practice may usefully be extended to professional applications. One could argue that this can be dealt within the **covering letter,** but as we shall see that medium has its own complications and pitfalls.*

In sum: the desirability or otherwise of the Personal Statement is likely to remain a matter of considerable controversy. But it is only right for me to say that, given that it *is* currently fashionable, you can't afford to be as dismissive as I have been in some of my observations above. You may think that it's a lot of posturing nonsense whose faddish life ought to be as brief as possible, but you also need to find out, if you can, whether the people you're applying to welcome or require such a statement, and proceed accordingly. The fact that they do/don't may tell you something about what *they* are like, and that's useful whatever the outcome. As Napoleon Bonaparte wisely observed

Time spent on reconnaissance is never wasted.

A further point about the CV shown in Fig. 16.3 concerns the number of times that 'I' appears—a mistake, I think, doing nothing to dispel the problem of egotistical over-drive! In addition, if I were to be brutal, it has that *Blue Peter* feel to it—all a bit squeaky-clean and determinedly nice. I don't think that is actually Caroline Herman's fault—such an unfortunate effect is virtually endemic to the PS format itself; however, it makes the general point that in applications, as in any and all writing

*And immensely time-consuming in terms of deliberation in committee. Pedantry Rules OK as everyone drafts, re-drafts and drafts again, invariably ending up with something as bland as a blancmange.

It's vital to get the *tone* as attractive and appropriate as you can.

Finally, you will notice in Fig. 16.3 that the most recent activity is recorded *first,* and that leads me to the next section.

A NEW PROBLEM: CHRONOLOGY

Until about ten years ago, the universal CV practice was to start literally at the beginning and work through to the present. Not any more: the norm these days (though not yet the 'only way') is to start with **the most recent** institution attended and qualifications secured, or with your current post, achievements and responsibilities, and work backwards. I call this a 'problem' because:

It seriously *relegates* what you've done before to almost incidental status.

From personal experience as a prospective 'hirer', I can say that with this new format I've at least half made up my mind by the time I've absorbed the applicant's current job, and that it takes something pretty special later on to make me sit up and take renewed or changed interest. Such behaviour may be down to the fact that I'm more accustomed to the 'ordinary chronology' model and that I will adjust as the newer one becomes ever-more familiar; I do think, however, that the former design was beneficial, allowing a more natural and coherent pattern to emerge.

Nevertheless, many people whom I respect do not agree, arguing that in most instances it *is* what you've been doing most recently that is of chief significance and that you should therefore hit the reader with it first. Despite my reservations above, I very much take that point. A relevant factor, perhaps, is *age*. For someone in their twenties, the 'reverse chronology' format is almost certainly best, since what s/he is currently doing is likely to be more substantial and more pertinent. For older applicants, things can be trickier. They may have done something more vigorous—or now, suddenly, more relevant to the post at issue—at an earlier stage, and that could be a central consideration when designing their submission.

As a way of dramatizing this debate, let us look at Case Study 1. It is authentic, though for obvious reasons I have rendered it anonymous and unidentifiable. It might help to know that:

- The CV exemplifies the format recommended/required by the Civil Service.
- It comprises pages *5 and 6* of a particular application. As you will see, the employment record stops at 11/91. Subsequent work has been for the Civil Service itself; the first four pages were devoted to that employment and to his application for a new CS post.

Now please read Case Study 1 carefully, and make a written or mental note of your reactions; then see if your evaluation matches mine.

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*See Chapter 17, pp. 295–6.

Case Study 1 Works Manager Male, mid-40s

Personal Profile

A well-organized, reliable and commercially aware manager with a wealth of experience in both large and small organizations, accustomed to working to tight budgets/schedules in a pressurized environment. Possessing a good sense of humour and the ability to develop and motivate others. Ability to communicate comfortably at all levels ensures that good teamwork will always achieve its goals.

CAREER HISTORY

1989– November 1991	**APEX Limited (Mowing Machine Manufacturers) Works Manager** Responsible for all production, warehousing and distribution for home and overseas orders. Forecasting, planning and achievement of output, capital purchasing decision. Industrial relations negotiations with TU officials on production, bonus incentive schemes and Health & Safety regulations. Recruitment and appointment of personnel. Control of 80 people on turning, milling and grinding. 100 on fabrication, welding and spraying, and 100 on assembly.
ACHIEVEMENTS	
	Introduced computer assisted stock control. Doubled production in three years. All production targets achieved on time. Reduction of industrial dispute stoppages from 7½% of working days. Labour turnover halved.
1979–1988	**THOMPSON-MORLEY UK LIMITED (Metal Rod Manufacturers) Assistant Works Manager** Responsible to the Works Manager for production activities, purchasing of materials, storage of spare production capacity and bottlenecks, recommending and implementing courses of action. Staff of 80.
ACHIEVEMENTS	
	Negotiated productivity agreements; achieved planned output targets and modernized stock control systems.
1978–1979	**GARNER PLC (Gardening Equipment) Assistant Works Manager** Working directly with manager and responsible to him.

1977	Training and direct supervision of apprentices. VSO. Responsible for developing mechanical disposal unit in West Africa.
1973–77	**R W FRANCIS LIMITED (Conveyor Manufacturers) Mechanical Engineering apprentice**
TRAINING	
1988 onwards	External management training course including effective time management. This assisted me in organizing the office more efficiently and sharpened my administrative skills.
	Apex Limited in-house personnel recruitment training course. Provided me with a basic appreciation of the recruitment process.
QUALIFICATIONS	
1970–73	BSc (Mech Eng) Class II.1—Leeds University
1966–70	5 GCE 'O' Levels; 3 'A' levels—Chemistry (B), Physics (B), Mathematics (C).
Professional	Member of the Institute of Mechanical Engineers
SPARE TIME ACTIVITIES	
	Committee member of golf club. Breeding and showing tropical birds. Gardening, especially rose culture and grafting.

Well, what do you think? I'd say it has four dear strengths:

- **Ideal length; format is neat and concise.**
- **The Personal Profile does its job well enough, I admit, although the last sentence is pretty vague.**
- **'Achievements' are deftly recorded; they also look quite impressive without seeming conceited.**
- **Spare time activities are sensibly logged, giving plenty to explore at interview if wished.**

I also have three criticisms/doubts; the first is probably a bit 'picky', but:

- **I don't care for the noteish form of the Personal Profile.**

I know it saves space, and he sensibly avoids all use of 'I'. But the incomplete grammar annoys me, quite apart from the illiterate use of 'pressurized', and as noted the last sentence is imprecise: is he making a personal claim or merely an observation about how important 'teamwork' is in general?

Secondly,

- **I'm not sure it's wise to leave his qualifications until the end.**

He is clearly able: universities do not throw 2:1s in Mechanical Engineering around. So why not mention it earlier? One could argue that it acquires added punch by being put at the end, but that's not the effect it had on me at first reading. In addition…

- **He left university with a II:1 and started his training as an *apprentice.***

This is rather unusual for an engineering graduate—a feature that is made more pronounced by the absence of any professional qualification other than his membership of the Institute of Mechanical Engineers: an employer might infer a lack of professional ambitions. However, in deference both to the format and the candidate himself, one could equally argue that his degree, although impressive and the foundation of all he has gone on to achieve, is no longer directly relevant to what he does as a Works Manager, and that his wisest course was to log his various posts first.

In addition, that delayed inclusion may have been partly determined by his obvious desire to stress his 'teamwork skills'. While I recognize that these are important, I've never believed they supersede *talent:* you can have all the 'team spirit' in the world, but if the individuals concerned are short on raw ability, you aren't going to get very far. So I find such implied priorities somewhat disturbing; nevertheless, for the purpose of this chapter I ought to emphasize that:

> **Like it or not, communal and teamwork skills are very highly rated at present, and you'd be advised to draw attention to such things as well as to your tangible achievements and qualifications.**

Overall, the CV presented in Case Study 1 is a document both solid and arresting, and it would be likely to serve its subject well. But— regardless of whether my specific 'pro' and 'anti' comments matched yours—I would imagine that you concluded that the format it employs is more a compromise than an ideal. That reservation voiced, the strengths of this CV derive from a serene clarity about what he was required to do and the order in which to do it—which introduces the next consideration.

KNOWING WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO

You might think I should have included this earlier: after all, it's pretty basic! I've postponed it in order to 'mirror' the way applicants/form-fillers of *any* kind, myself included, all too often go about things. They jump straight in, filling in personal details, constructing the major 'bones' of the CV, only to find after some considerable time and effort that there's something they don't understand or something they should have done right at the start. That's unlikely to be disastrous: indeed, that half-hour or whatever is likely to have been spent on rough drafting and reconnaissance anyway. But when you come to the 'fair copy' and imminent submission stage, do ensure above all things that:

> **You know what you're required to do and what everything on the application form says and means.**

As an example, let me quote from the standard form issued by a major UK company to all employees seeking promotion or a change of duty:

> **…please give below examples of achievements from your career that demonstrate behaviour within the competencies required for the advertised role.**

To be candid, I have no idea what that means! And if I were going for such a post, there would be absolutely no point in writing another word unless and until I'd taken steps to *find out* what it means and, therefore, the kind of thing I ought to include in the section concerned. You may remember that in Chapter 7 I observed that

All notes unless accompanied by full understanding are useless.

In the same way, to fill in any section of an application form that you're not entirely clear about will probably prove very costly.

TAILORING THE CV

Whatever post or situation you're applying for, three things are paramount, and will thus bear repeating:

- **First and foremost, aim for clarity and brevity.**
- **To assist that, use a 'bullet-point' format. Make sure this is grammatically coherent.**
- **Distinguish *objective* importance from what is only *personally* important or makes you feel so.**

Those ensured, the rest of the operation becomes a 'horses for courses' one. I wish this weren't so: a favourite American maxim of mine is:

If it ain't broke, don't fix it

and that ought by rights to be true of a carefully constructed CV. I'm afraid the truth is that

Each job/post that you apply for is unique, and that means you'll need to re-fashion your CV each time.

The front page 'stable information' may need little or no adjusting, but the rest will: you'll need to **tailor** or **target** every single item with the precise specifications of the post at issue constantly at the forefront of your mind. It would be idle to pretend that this isn't a formidably time-consuming task; it is also surprisingly often—given that you're writing about yourself! —a boring one. But it has to be done, as I trust this second Case Study shows.

Case Study 2 has been kindly provided for this book by a very good friend and offers an instructive tale about how to tailor your CV; the italics are mine.

Case Study 2 Education Adviser Male, 40s

'In 1991, when my contract as Education Adviser to the Employment Department had only one more year to run, I applied for the post advertised through a management consultancy, of Education Director at a Midlands Training & Enterprise Council (TEC). Applicants were asked to send a CV.

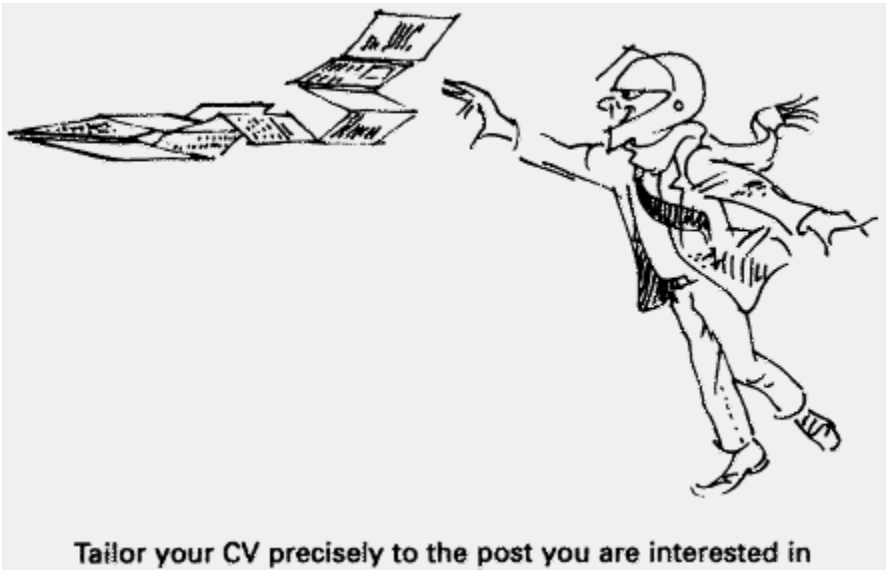
'In outline terms, my career to that point had been:

- 18 years working in secondary schools around the country.
- 4 years working with the Employment Department across the Midlands and East Anglia on developments in vocationally-related education.

'The post in the Midlands would have continued that vocational focus. However, *not having seriously thought before about compiling* a CV (job application forms are the norm in education) and having been advised to include as much information as possible, I produced a document that described my whole career in great detail.

'Not having heard from the management consultant for some time, I rang him and was told I was not short-listed because the majority of my career had been spent in school (i.e. academic education) and was therefore not relevant to the TEC post. I should point out here that the number of people with the appropriate experience to do the TEC job was quite small and I thus had a realistic expectation of being interviewed.

'Significantly, when about a year later I was appointed to a similar post in a London TEC, *my CV summarized my school career in about four lines and then included a wealth of relevant and carefully structured information about my work with the Employment Department*. Bear in mind that a management consultant may not know a great deal about the occupation he is recruiting for and will tend to use a check-list compiled with the help of the prospective employer. In that case, his approach to your application may well be mechanistic and *you will thus do well to tailor your CV precisely to the post you are interested in*.'



That story not only shows the wisdom of tailoring the CV but also endorses earlier points about knowing about what and whom you're dealing with, the need for careful drafting, and being able to detach yourself sufficiently to gauge the relevance of your qualities and career so far to the post in hand.

The final section, and our last study, focuses on something that by no means contradicts all that has gone before but does shed interesting new light upon it.

THE VIRTUES OF 'LATERAL THINKING'

Have a look at Case Study 3. Again, it is in narrative rather than CV form, but it is highly illuminating in terms of both specific and general strategy.

Case Study 3 Mature Student Teacher Female, 30

This woman decided to do a performing and teaching course in dance in her late 20s because she loved it so much, and on qualifying (very well) she looked around for dance teaching jobs. Her draft-application was entirely dance-focused, and while not unimpressive seemed rather narrow and inconsequential for someone of

that age and evident intelligence. She had in fact been a hairdresser, but had not included any reference to that on the grounds that it was irrelevant anyway and wouldn't say anything about her that would help.

She was quite wrong about that! Subsequent conversation revealed that she had run two salons for several years, done all the accounts, and been a trainer for the local FE college, in charge of several apprentices. Including that information—which she duly did in the finished version—showed a lot about her, that initial modesty notwithstanding. It revealed:

- a sound businesswoman;
- an experienced trainer;
- someone with tenacity through thick and thin.

Should would obviously bring the same dedication and wide-ranging expertise to her dance teaching, the more so because of her *passion* for it.

Unsurprisingly, she got the first job she applied for!

Two valuable lessons emerge from that story. The first has to do with misplaced modesty:

Don't be afraid to be 'different', and don't automatically discount your achievements because they seem inappropriate or insufficiently 'dignified'.

By way of another quick example: a few years ago a sixth-form tutee of mine was composing his UCCA form (as it was then). I knew that he was deeply interested in rock music; I also knew that by then he was already reviewing rock records for a national publication. No mention of either appeared on his draft form: when I asked why, he confessed to thinking that university Admissions Tutors would look down on such stuff. I persuaded him that this wasn't so anyway, and also that to be nationally published at the age of seventeen was a signal achievement that *must* be mentioned, and prominently so. Sure enough, it grabbed attention: he was admiringly quizzed about it on at least two subsequent interviews.

The second lesson is one that the subject of Case Study 3 managed to avoid in the end, but it's still important:

A CV can be as eloquent in its silences and absences as in its inclusions.

That is intimately related to the principles of calculating one's effect on others and being alert to what the post needs as well as to your own principal skills and talents.

But arguably the most important, and certainly the most positive, thing to emerge from the story of Case Study 3 (and my own brief additional example) is that it illustrates the virtues of 'strategic lateral thinking':

It is always helpful to have something that makes you stand out from a crowd. Yes, be sure it is relevant; but sometimes a talent or an interest that does not seem all that connected to the application in hand can in fact be eloquent of something important you could bring to it.

CONCLUSION

As is probably implicit throughout, the 'art' of constructing CVs and applications remains something of a mystery, for there is no real consensus on the topic. Before I sat down to write this chapter I did a lot of research, seeking to read every available guide on the subject I could find; eventually I abandoned such work, for it was clear to me that there was no more agreement amongst these written guides than amongst the professionals and colleagues I consulted. Those disagreements were— are—not usually major; sometimes they're merely questions of taste or emphasis. The fact remains, however, that:

> **There is no 'single way' to compile a CV/application, and there is no one 'expert' who can guarantee your success.**

I hope I have solved at least *some* puzzles and problems for you, and that as a result you will progress to the next stage—the interview. Before we examine that, however, a shortish chapter on the invaluable though often neglected skill of letter-writing, and the related matter of handwriting.

PRESENTING YOURSELF (II): LETTERS AND HANDWRITING
17

More than kisses, letters mingle souls; For thus friends absent speak.

John Donne

INTRODUCTION

That quotation may seem a bit grand and expansive to head a chapter that will be chiefly concerned with the writing of **business letters.** But Donne's words do illuminate a quality that characterizes *any* letter—directness. Letters presuppose a kind of conversation with the reader, or set out an agenda to be discussed. They are usually addressed to just one person (or to a family or committee as a unit, which amounts to the same thing), and they are written and sent for a precise, 'one-off' reason even if they also form part of a long correspondence. It is therefore very important that the writer gets as many things 'right' as possible.

My aim here is two-fold. The first is to offer a set of guidelines concerning the writing of any formal letter—a skill that a surprising number of otherwise able people are only moderate at. The second is to follow up the last chapter by considering the pros and cons of 'the covering letter' when submitting an application, including the question of whether it should be handwritten. However, the matter of format needs to be addressed before anything else.

LETTERS: BASIC LAY-OUT

The following three considerations apply to **all** letters:

- If hand-written, the address should ideally be placed in the top right-hand corner. With headed paper as used by businesses and many private individuals, it is now accepted practice to centre the address at the top.
- The date should be clearly stated, including the year.
- Careful attention should be paid to **spacing.** Many letter writers seem terrified of space and cramp their design in an ugly and reader-unfriendly way. You should work out in advance all that you want to say, and use the space accordingly.

In addition, these conventions apply to all formal or 'business' letters:

- The recipient's address should be printed on the left-hand side, above the greeting ('Dear so and so…').

- The greeting and closure follow one of two models:

  A. If you do not know the person, you begin 'Dear Sir' or 'Dear Madam' and conclude 'Yours faithfully'.
  B. If you do know the person's name—even if you haven't actually met—you begin 'Dear Mr Jones', 'Dear Ms Bates' or whatever, and you close 'Tours sincerely'.

As no doubt you'll realize, 'Yours sincerely' is much the most frequent closing device, for it covers every kind of letter between the first formal approach and the intimate 'code' one adopts with friends and loved ones.

Those are the main guidelines: to see how they take their place on the page, please look at Example 1, and then read my comments on it which follow.

Example 1 The letter: standardsesign and format

24, Faber Street,*
London,
ECIE 4PP

Joseph Gardiner Esq.,*
288, Biddenham Road,
Liverpool,
L23 6SX

May 5, 1996

Dear Mr Gardiner,
T
E
X
T

Yours sincerely,

E.S.Jennings (Dr)

1. The writer's address is placed in the top-right-hand corner. It is however not cramped in there but sensibly spaced.
2. The recipient's address is placed above the greeting; notice that it starts a little further down the page than the sender's address. This further attention to spacing gives the letter an attractive sense of shape.

*It is now common practice to use 'open' punctuation in business letters, i.e. the omission of commas and full stops in both the recipient's and the sender's address.

3. The date is clearly stated and occupies a space of its own. It could be placed on the left above the recipient's address, but where I've placed it is still standard practice. Such a minor point is however now a matter of taste rather than a 'rule'.
4. Although this could be a first contact (we have no way of knowing without the letter-text), the writer knows the recipient's name, so 'yours sincerely' is correct.
5. The writer prints his name, but leaves plenty of room for his signature. He also records his title: in this case it is Dr, but a woman writer might find it even more important to register her title—**Mrs, Miss** or **Ms.** In either case the title may be inserted after the writer's name, as shown in the example. All three features are essential: the recipient needs to know who has sent the letter—name, gender and title—and a signature on its own will not be enough: many are quite indecipherable! On the other hand, even an illegible scrawl introduces a needed 'personal touch'.
6. I have of course left the 'text' blank. All I'd say here is to repeat the need to work out in advance what you want to say, and **how much** you want to say. If the letter will extend to two pages or more, design it sensibly. Try not to leave yourself with a last page of just two lines or so: space out the previous one more generously so that the final sheet has at least one substantial paragraph.

THE LETTER'S TEXT: A STEP-BY-STEP CHECK-LIST

To augment and make more specific those guidelines, here is a set of 'rules' that should be borne in mind when writing any kind of business letter.

1.
Know what you want to say

You can't expect your correspondent to read your mind, only your letter. Therefore be clear about what you want to say and ensure that you cover all the points you need to. For all 'business' letters, it is wise to look over all previous correspondence before you start.

2.
Put your material into sequence

Once you've decided on all the points you wish to cover, you must now organize them into a logical sequence—logical from the reader's point of view.

3.
Make each step a separate paragraph

Your letter will be much easier to digest if each significant idea has a separate paragraph devoted to it. If one topic needs a lot of coverage, break it down into sub-paragraphs and number them if necessary. This will ensure greater clarity and comfort for the reader.

4.
Have an introduction and a conclusion

Make these brief but definite. You should ease the reader into your letter, and lead him/her graciously into your 'goodbye'.

5.
Identify the subject with a heading

In truth, this practice may not always be necessary or appropriate—you will have to be the judge of that. But if your letter is to cover a specific project or a particular financial matter (a tax claim, an insurance policy enquiry), 'titling' your material in this way will at once concentrate the reader's attention on your concerns. This is also the place to quote any policy, account or reference numbers.

6.
Make sure your correspondent knows what to do next

You can undo all your good work so far if your reader is left wondering, 'Where do I go from here?' Make sure that your conclusion is positive and indicates what, if any, response you want. Even if the matter is now dealt with and requires no response, say so.

7.
Write your letter out

Once you're clear about your material and its organization, write the letter out in full. Read it through, checking that you've obeyed rules 1 to 6 or all those that apply, that it makes sense and that it reads well.

As with all writing, the more experienced you become, the easier all this gets. You will soon automatically follow the rules; you won't need to jot everything down. If you're dictating, you'll probably be able to handle short letters without notes, although for longer letters it's always wise to list your main points, so as not to forget any.

8.
Always check the finished letter

Once you (or someone else) has typed the letter, check it thoroughly. (The same goes for any letter written in longhand.) Make sure it says what you intended, that there are no spelling or typing errors, and that any figures or information given are accurate. Ensure that anything you've promised to enclose is enclosed, and that 'enc.' has been typed at the bottom of the letter to let the recipient know. If the letter is particularly important to you, it is a good idea to ask someone else to proof-read it, or even read it backwards!

Finally, send the letter out as soon as possible: don't leave it lying around until it's out of date.

'THAT'S THE WAY TO DO IT' —AND THE WAY NOT TO

It is time to consider some examples. Three very different letters follow: the first is in my view excellent, the other two are dreadful in quite separate ways. Please read each one and see if you agree with my analysis.

Example 2

Well, I **would** choose that letter, wouldn't I! But I hope you'll agree it is a masterly performance:

1. The tone is measured and authoritative.
2. The letter is fairly long, but it develops a complex argument with admirable clarity. A lot of people reading it would want to engage the writers in discussion—perhaps to agree, perhaps to disagree, but anxious to 'talk'.
3. The voice is apparently plural, yet it has a unity and confidence that are comfortable to absorb.
4. The language is necessarily sophisticated, but the writers include from time to time a punchy phrase that stops the style from becoming over-abstract—'earn its daily bread', 'the birthright of every Briton' and the initial, powerful 'near-collapse in our schools' teaching of the syntax of English'.
5. The letter gives real **pleasure.** The language is cogent and elegant; the style is a splendid advertisement for what they are advocating. The professors' deep concern did not prevent them enjoying the letter's composition: one can 'hear' the satisfaction in a job well done.

Now for a little fun with two bad examples! First, the opening lines of Mr Casaubon's written marriage proposal to Dorothea in George Eliot's *Middlemarch,* Chapter 5. If you think it odd that I should include such an intimate communication in a chapter about business letters, just read it—it's got 'business' written all over it!

Example 3

My dear Miss Brooke,

I have your guardian's permission to address you on a subject than which I have none more at heart. I am not, I trust, mistaken in the recognition of some deeper correspondence than that of date in the fact that a consciousness of need in my own life has arisen contemporaneously with the possibility of my becoming acquainted with you. For in the first hour of meeting you, I had an impression of your eminent and perhaps exclusive fitness to supply that need (connected, I may say, with such activity of the affections as even the preoccupations of a work too special to be abdicated could not uninterruptedly dissimulate); and each succeeding opportunity for observation has given the impression of an added depth…

There is no need to go on—although the letter does, for three times that length! I ought perhaps to point out that this is a superb performance on *George Eliot's* part: we are supposed to react with hostility,

even cringeing dislike. Casaubon's style is headache-inducing within a few lines; one has to work very hard to decipher it, and in addition our instincts are surely chilled when we remember that this is offered as a love letter!

Perhaps the most frightening thing about this is that it is not, in one sense, 'unnatural'. Casaubon is not being pompous: he has not adopted this tone and style in order to impress or dissemble. As we have confirmed when they are (disastrously) married, he really does think like that and in those structures. But in another sense, it of course strikes us as unnatural—grotesquely so. What is

supposed to be a proposal of marriage resembles a particularly forbidding letter from a banker or solicitor, disagreeable in tone and a nightmare to understand. At the end, Dorothea responds by sobbing with joy; we feel that she should have 'binned' it at once! That disparity in reaction prepares us for the misery we know will overtake her later.

However, one can be *too* natural as well; or rather, a proper sense of voice must be accompanied by care and thoughtfulness. Here is a worried, somewhat irate letter from a parent to his daughter's school. Count the technical errors, and see what else you think is wrong with it.

Example 4

86, Peterson Road,
Milton Keynes

Dear Mrs Josephs,

I was a little surprised that I have this morning recieved the Invoice for Margarets Autumn term fees, since I was given to understand from your last letter that you felt it may be better to place Margaret at another school and this seemed to be confirmed by the school solicitor being involved to collect the outstanding £300, all this despite the fact that both I and later my wife on the telephone assured you that all will be cleared before the begining of the September term and that we were only waiting for the proceeds of of our house which had been sold. We have as you implied now made other arrangements for Margaret as we could not wait until now to find out shecould still have attended the school.

My wife and I would non the less like to thankyou for your help in the past and perhaps without knowing all the facts it must have been difficult for you to come to terms with our problems.

May we wish you and the school continued sucess,

Yours sincerely,

Not very good, is it?!

1. There are five spelling mistakes: recieve, Margarets (apostrophe required), begining, non the less, sucess.
2. There are three errors in composition and spacing: of is repeated in line 9 and **shecould** and **thankyou** are run together.
3. There are two technical omissions: no date, and no printed name. The latter is serious, because the signature resembles a squashed insect rather than anything legibly human.

Flowery English

More subtle but no less important flaws hinge on the letter's frantic quality.

4. Insufficient thought has been given to what he wants to say. In the large first paragraph his thoughts just tumble out and over each other. To be fair, he is confused: the school has, it seems, failed to make the full position sufficiently clear to him. But he compounds that confusion by mixing up too many separate points: notice that there is no full stop until line 9!
5. He seems to have a genuine grievance and yet abruptly switches tone in the two concluding paragraphs. One could see this as gracious; on the other hand, his penultimate sentence takes most of the sting and point away from his earlier complaints.

Incidentally, the original letter was if anything worse! His typewriter-ribbon was worn and he used cheap paper.

Examples 3 and 4 are extremes of bad practice, but in each case the problem is not illiteracy or poor writing as such: in a way Casaubon is almost forbiddingly accomplished, while the author of Example 4 could and would have produced a much classier effort if he'd calmed down for five minutes. But both are spectacular examples of what can go wrong if you don't get the tone right, or if your state of mind is impaired when you write: the voice in each one is unfortunate, if not positively disagreeable. The lesson they teach is that you should try always to 'hear' what you're writing, and perhaps also 'see' or somehow envisage the person you're writing to.

There are other things that you need to avoid or bear in mind, no less dangerous for being a little more mundane than the disasters we've just analysed!

PITFALLS

'Business English' and flowery phrases

There used to be a style of writing for business letters that was ornate and pretentious. (An example follows shortly.) It is now as outdated as the clerk's periwig or the schoolmaster's gown, and will inspire irritation or derision rather than respect. Use modern and natural phrasing wherever possible.

2.
Long words

Writing as if you've swallowed a dictionary is equally likely to cause annoyance and ridicule. Keep it clear and simple whenever you can. Good writers seek primarily to express, not impress.

3.
Gobbledegook sentences

Anyone who has ever had to complete a tax form or an insurance claim will be well versed in gobbledegook. That lovely word refers to those seemingly endless sentences that congeal on the page, stagnantly incomprehensible. Keep your sentences short, or at least crisp; this will ensure that your letters are quickly understood. Indeed, it will ensure that they are actually read rather than tossed aside in disgust!

4.
Kaleidoscope sentences

If you keep your sentences tolerably short, you are unlikely to fall into the additional trap of taking on too many ideas within a single sentence. (See Example 4 above.) Use one sentence for each specific point.

5.
Jargon and 'buzz' words

Avoid these unless there really is no alternative, or unless you're certain that your reader will fully understand what you're talking about. A good rule to follow, especially if your subject is technically sophisticated, is to write as if to an intelligent layperson. I admit that this will not always be possible, but just attempting it will do your style a lot of good.

6.
Ambiguity

It's all too easy to think that you've said what you mean, but it may be that you've in fact said something very different. Check this ruthlessly: it's often a good idea to read your work as if you were someone else seeing it for the first time.

7.
The passive voice

Avoid this unless you have no alternative. 'You should send the premium' is nearly always preferable to 'the premium should be sent', and in at least 90% of cases one can find a way to use the active voice. However, the passive can be a wise choice if you are convinced that the occasion demands delicacy or diplomacy!

8.
Punctuation

It would be silly to attempt cover-all advice on this in a couple of sentences. But punctuation is a fundamental skill and no less important in letters than anywhere else. If you are not sure about your competence, the best guide ever remains G.V.Carey's *Mind the Stop,* still readily available in bookshops.*

As a little confirmatory exercise before we move on to the separate matter of handwriting, please read Examples 5 and 6. Which is the better letter, and why?

Example 5

JOHN SMITH INSURANCE BROKERS
The Crescent
Abbeyville
Wessex

19th May 1932

R.R.James Esq.,
The Lodge,
Abbeyville,
Wessex.

Dear Sir,

Your letter of the 14th ultimo, which was received at this office on 3rd inst., does not attend to the matters arising in ours of the 3rd ultimo, and as this information is necessary for the preparation of the appropriate endorsement, we kindly request your urgent advices.

Furthermore, we regret to observe you have not yet forwarded your letter, so that cover cannot be enforced until such time as we are in receipt of said remittance and the responses to question 7a and 9c from the proposal form as dealt with in our letter of 3rd ultimo.

We respectfully request you give these matters your urgent attention and await your earliest advices.

We beg to remain your most obedient servant,

J.Smith

Example 6

JOHN SMITH INSURANCE BROKERS
The Crescent
Abbeyville

*Carey, G.V. (1971) *Mind the Stop*. Penguin, London.

Wessex
Phone: 0123 98765/4/3

Date: 19th May 1992
Our Ref: AIO/PI/JS
Your Ref:
Ask for: John Smith

Mr. R.R.James
The Lodge
Abbeyville
Wessex

Dear Mr James
Policy no. MC 456789—additional cover for Miss A.James
Thank you for your letter of the 14th April, which we received on the 3rd May.
Unfortunately, we are still missing the following:

1. A reply to questions 7a and 9c of the proposal form, i.e. the name of Miss James's previous insurers and her occupation.
2. The premium of £25 for the additional cover.

As soon as we receive the above, together with the attached remittance slip, we will send you the updated policy document.

Yours sincerely
J.Smith

I hope you agree that it's no contest—Example 6 wins by a street. Example 5 is interesting, in that it uses the kind of language and conventions that many people think they ought to adopt when writing formally. This is a foolish myth. All that ghastly '14th ultimo' and '3rd inst.' stuff* serves no purpose whatever, unless it is the nasty and presumptuous one of intimidating the reader. It's a bad letter, too, in its lofty assumption that the reader has all previous correspondence instantly to hand: the second paragraph can make no sense without reference to the firm's previous letter. Example 6 spells out identical matters in a firm but courteous way.

In addition, the *visual* effect of each is very different. Example 6 is sensibly and pleasantly spaced; that, just as much as its unfussy style, ensures rapid understanding. Example 5, on the other hand, compounds its appalling style with a cramped and stingy design. Though short it is very hard work for eyes and brain—the last thing an 'urgent' letter ought to be.

Speaking of urgency, it amuses me that in both cases the correspondents took an awfully long time to write, or at any rate post, their letters! Mr James needed three weeks to mail his and the brokers a further fortnight to reply. This is sloppy practice: avoid it. Finally, don't be fooled by the 1932 date on Example 5.

*For the record, 'ultimo' means 'last month' and 'inst.' denotes 'this current month'. Bloated rubbish: why didn't they just cite 'April' and 'May' or whatever they were? This is a good example of the tawdry 'code' institutions can adopt in order to make you feel small or ignorant.

'... the fingers and wrist don't seem to obey as they once did'

It is genuine, as is the letter itself; but as I've said, many people still write business letters in this way. Such presentation is silly and unnecessary, and Example 6 is a decisively superior model.

Letter-writing is a major social and commercial skill. In some respects it is also an art, for letters directly express the writer's personality. And while there are particular conventions that you should always attend to, a good letter will achieve those qualities that characterize good writing of any kind—**clarity; appropriateness; elegance**.

HANDWRITING: VIRTUE OR DANGER?

In one way I don't like that sub-title at all. As both Bob Eadie and I commented in our chapters on **Computers,** dear and fluent handwriting is *always* a virtue (as well as a necessity still, especially in exams) and one of today's problems is that people are getting so used to using a PC that their handwriting skills become rusty, even near-defunct. Like Bob,

I am myself so accustomed now to doing nearly all my writing via some sort of machine that I find handwriting something of any length physically quite arduous: the fingers and wrist don't seem to obey as they once did!

That is a contemporary problem; a more timeless one is that writing a formal letter to someone in authority whom we don't know is a decidedly nervy task—doubly so if anything important hinges on it. And in those circumstances it is a common experience to 'freeze', to wonder if in addition to everything else we want to risk the recipient's derision at our nasty spidery hand. I am not being facetious: most people privately think their handwriting is ugly or inferior. Not the least stressful aspect of submitting a piece of work at school or college is that one's writing is under scrutiny as well one's content: for many of us that is as embarrassing as hearing our voice on tape or watching ourselves on video.

All that is both natural and rather charming; it is also usually uncalled-for and therefore a potential impediment. The key here is that

You need to be sensible and honest about your handwriting—*both* ways.

Very often one's handwriting is a great deal better than one imagines, provided it is clear, fluent and controlled, it will not only satisfy but give pleasure. You don't have to go along with graphology—the alleged 'science' of determining character and personality through handwriting —to appreciate that something written in an individual hand is always going to be more interesting than typescript, and provided that hand is not too eccentric or difficult, it is therefore likely to be a 'plus'. If on the other hand your writing is clumsy, ugly or lacks any kind of 'style' —and if that is the case you will almost certainly have been told about it! —then it's probably wisest to use typescript whenever and wherever you can.

Sometimes, however, you don't have a choice. Quite a number of application forms I've seen can't be typed upon: there simply isn't enough room. You can squeeze up handwriting more than type, and as long as your words are clear and neat, they will look fine. One major warning, though:

DON'T USE BLOCK CAPITALS!

A lot of 'official' forms require or request you to do this, and I've never understood why. It may make the spelling of essential details (name, address) clearer, although ordinary, neatly printed letters are surely just as good. But it is a crucial truth that

Block capitals are *immensely* tiring to read.

One short sentence in such a format is about all I can take before things start getting blurry and oppressive. And even if not everyone will be as hypochondriac as I am not the matter, you would be wise to bear in mind that such an *unnatural* form (nobody writes like that normally) is likely to cause mild irritation at least; that can cause problems of concentration, which is not you want if the thing being concentrated on is you!

The use of block capitals carries a further danger: the reader may decide that either your ordinary writing is horrible or that you haven't yet learned 'joined-up writing!* Again, I'm not being facetious: as I remarked during the Chapter on **Examinations** and shall be doing so again shortly, first impressions really do count, and I cannot think of any way in which a remorseless chunk of block-capitalled prose will help you in that regard.

So, in sum:

Don't be frightened of your handwriting or undervalue it.

I mentioned graphology just now, and you ought to know that during the 'eighties there was a trend amongst some firms to bring in a graphologist to help judge and sift applications, both internal and external. So far as I know, this practice is now on the decline, as are the equally marginal—and often bogus—'personality tests' that used to be all the rage with certain large corporations. Nevertheless, your handwriting *will* be assessed—naturally and automatically. There is no reason why that should be bad news for you, something that will decrease your chances. On the contrary, a dear and confident hand may say all kinds of positive things about you that mere typescript can never achieve.

On now to my last major topic in this chapter.

THE COVERING LETTER: YES OR NO?

It has come to my notice recently that some institutions and companies actually 'forbid' the submission of a covering letter. On the surface this is puzzling. It would seem to make sense to include a courteous and brief note—very possibly in one's own hand-writing—to 'introduce' things and/or to 'round off' the entire package. Well, yes; the reason, I would guess, why those firms have slapped an embargo on the practice is that a lot of covering letters *aren't* brief, nor in effect are they particularly courteous. They ramble on and one, often repeating or unwisely pre-empting information logged in the application itself, or else delivering a lengthy 'Personal Statement' that both annoys and bores. And I can assure you that the preceding sentence is not a guess: a few months ago I had to wade through over thirty applications for a post in my Department, and well over half featured damagingly bloated and unnecessary preambles.

That is not, however, to say that a covering letter is valueless: I would still recommend it, for reasons outlined above. But for goodness' sake

Keep it short.

In my view anything over a page is too long, and three-plus is a disaster. One page is quite sufficient to record any particular reasons why you want this job or course, and it will also serve as an informal indication of your personality. With those twin targets in mind, you should then

- **Draft the letter first**

As with any writing that matters, you want to arrange the necessary information before committing yourself publicly. This will also ensure that the 'one page rule' is obeyed.

- **Try to write as you would speak.**

That way you'll do yourself most justice. As noted in the sections and Examples above, people can dig instant graves for themselves by trying to be *too* formal, using a business-style language that doesn't really mean anything. On the other hand…

- **Don't be too 'chatty'.**

A vivacious and direct approach is fine—very good, in fact. But don't get over-enthusiastic (the reader may think you're crawling!), and guard against slang expressions and jokes. Jokes are wonderful things, but there's a time and place even for them, and neither adheres to a covering letter.

- **Don't write too much.**

I've said this already, of course. I repeat it in order to make again a fundamental point highlighted in the previous chapter—**leave them something to ask you at interview.** Finally

- **Keep a copy of everything you send.**

---

*Nowadays, for reasons best known to those who designed the National Curriculum, this is known as 'cursive script'.

This is good 'archivism' or record-keeping anyway—always useful. But more immediately it provides a secure reminder of exactly what you've claimed and said! It's surprising how quickly and easily you can forget that, and you'll want to be clear on it when you go in for your interview.

POSTSCRIPT: THE 'ULTRA-FORMAL REPLY'

This brief section has nothing to do with business letters or applications, really. I've included it simply because a lot of my students have asked me about it over the years, and I don't know of any publication that deals specifically with it.

The 'ultra-formal reply' comes into play when you're invited to a wedding, a coming-of-age party, a banquet (lucky old you!) or anything similarly grand and formal—the kind of occasion where a reply like

> **'Cheers for the invite—love to come'**

doesn't seem quite right! The convention instead is to answer in the third person:

> **Mr and Mrs Perkins thank Lord and Lady Culpepper for their kind invitation to the Graffingham Hunt Ball and are delighted to accept.**

If you have to decline the invitation, the pattern is

> **Raymond Lee thanks Mr and Mrs Newton for their kind invitation to their daughter Felicity's wedding, but must regretfully decline owing to a previous engagement.**

You won't have to use these formats very often, perhaps; but if your applications are successful, you may move in such circles yet! Now on to the last stage of the process—the **interview.**

PRESENTING YOURSELF (III): THE INTERVIEW
18

> *Interview,* n. A confessional where vulgar impudence bends an ear to the follies of vanity and ambition
>
> *Ambrose Bierce*

> It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances
>
> *Oscar Wilde*

INTRODUCTION

To launch this chapter, here is an extract from Martin Amis's first novel, *The Rachel Papers*. Charles Heighway is preparing himself for an interview at an Oxford University College.

> With featherlight fingertips I skimmed the pages of my Interview Folder. After three-quarters of an hour I had memorized *Sonorous Generalizations, Portent but no Content,* and the paragraph on 'Inarticulate sincerity'. I then turned to *Appearance Change Midway*. It ended:
>
> 17. Enter without glasses on: put them on a) if don over 50, b) if don wearing glasses.
> 18. Jacket unbuttoned; if old turd, do up *middle one* on way in.
> 19. Hair over ears: if old turd, smooth behind ears on entry?
>
> A footnote referred me to *Accents 7*. There I read:
>
> Adapt slowly. If wildly out (posh vs. regional) cough at beginning of second sentence and say 'Sorry, I'm a bit nervous' in voice identical to don's.
>
> I chewed on my lip… Of course! Dons were all queer, weren't they? Perhaps I should take a chance —leave my clothes in a neat pile outside the door and go in naked…

I hope that amused you as much as it does me. But my main point in quoting it was to stress—as indeed Amis's subsequent narrative does*— how fatuous, unnecessary and wildly wrong-headed it all is. Success at

---

*Amis, M. (1973) *The Rachel Papers*. Cape, London. The extract I quoted is on pp. 195–6 of the 1976 Panther edition, and if you're interested in what happens at the interview itself, consult pp. 209–11.

In all probability the interviewer will be just as nervous as you are

interview no more hinges on smart alec tricks and carefully engineered behaviour than does success in an examination, and the sooner you can demythologize the whole thing the happier and better you'lll be.

BASIC PRINCIPLES AND CONSIDERATIONS

The first thing to bear in mind is that:

In all probability the interviewer will be just as nervous as you are.

Most people do not interview very often; even with the recent growth in management consultancies and intermediaries, there aren't too many full-time professional interviewers around. For most of us it's something we do as part of our overall work; furthermore, even for those who are both good at it and highly experienced, it is usually more difficult than it looks as if it's going to be to get the information you want in a short space of time. Accordingly…

Try to have it clear in your mind why you are going for the job/course before you start talking/ even arrive.

You won't have long to make your point(s), and you'll do so much more convincingly if you've got a sharply focused mental base to work from.

Next, an always-thorny problem:

What should you wear?

Naturally you want to look good; in addition, you want to indicate respect, that you take the interview seriously. So even in this leisure-wear-saturated time, I advise against any kind of casual dress. It can imply

What should you wear?

—perhaps unfairly, but you haven't got either the time or the opportunity to argue—a frivolous or uncaring attitude, and as such may create a highly unfavourable first impression.

On the other hand, you don't want to overdo it, let alone come across as 'flash'. Something smart but conservative is best; also, try to choose something *comfortable*. A beautiful new suit is no good if it makes you feel—and maybe look—like a stuffed penguin! Finally in this 'rudiments' section:

Be punctual!

That means be neither late or too early. I know such instruction is almost insultingly obvious; I also know how many people fail to observe it. Getting there too soon may seem—probably is—the lesser evil, but it's unwise on two counts. It is likely to irritate receiving staff who are nowhere near ready for you, and it presents you with an arid limbo in which you get bored, edgy or both—hardly ideal preparation for an important performance.

Nevertheless, being late is worse—and I'm afraid it very rarely matters how 'innocent' you are. Interviewers work to a precise, intricately organized schedule, and most of them understandably resent being kept hanging about or forced to alter their arrangements; consequently, they will conclude that however unfortunate your circumstances may be—that cancelled train, that dearth of taxis, those sudden road-works on the outskirts of town—it's your fault, nobody else's. So be bomb-proof; failing that, if you suspect you *are* going to be late, try to telephone them as soon as you can. And that means you must remember to take with you a written record of a name and contact number, just in case!

THE INTERVIEW ITSELF

Much of the advice that follows is a matter of common sense. But as I've observed on several occasions already, there's nothing like an important 'big deal' occasion for catapulting that virtue right out of the window! Most of my points hinge on a kind of cousin of common sense—

the ability to stay both calm and alert.

It is also important that you try to *enjoy* yourself. A good way of starting on that path, and a good thing to do anyway, is to

- Smile!

Don't overdo that, either: nobody is going to be impressed by—or feel very safe with—someone who beams every other moment like a demented Cheshire cat! But your smile is a vital part of your 'armoury': nearly everyone looks nicer smiling than sunk in nervous introspection, and the warmth and 'feel-good factor' that a smile indicates can be very infectious.

- **Neither ramble nor give monosyllabic answers.**

Both are equally annoying or unsatisfactory in their opposite ways. Answer as crisply and comprehensively as you're able, and then shut up. Two further points arise out of that…

- **Don't feel you have to answer *at once*.**

Again, don't overdo this: if you pause too long, they may think you're deaf, or even dead! But it is a mistake anyway to rush into an answer without thinking; moreover, it is a compliment to any question to consider it seriously before replying, and your interviewer will almost certainly be both gratified and impressed if you do. At the other end of the reply…

- **Guard against embroidering your answers.**

It is all too easy to get carried away and say that you can do something that you can't, or dive into an area where you don't really know what you're talking. Stick to what you're sound on, and then, as just instructed, shut up. If they want to pursue the matter, they will—via a fresh question which you can once more think properly about before replying.

- **Adopt a relaxed but fully alert posture.**

Your ideal is a 'middle way' between over-naturalness (lying across the armchair or kneeling on the floor) and a kind of ramrod-stiff intensity that is uncomfortable both for you and for the interviewer to witness. Above all, *don't get too close,* or if you are unable to prevent that because of the seating arrangements, *don't lean forward*. One of the 'hidden agendas' in any interview is territory, and you don't want to seem invasive or aggressive.

- **Don't fidget—especially with your face.**

We all are prone to this, and beyond a certain point we cannot control it - our mannerisms are as much a part of us as the way we walk. But face-fidgeting is a serious drawback in any interview. Not only is it

Never lose your temper!

unattractive or distracting: in extreme cases it can actually blot out what you're saying! Because our habits *are* deeply engrained, you need to think beforehand about which ones you need to have in mind to avoid, and here you can enlist some help.

It's a good idea anyway to get someone to give you a 'mock' interview a day or so before, with instructions to be as tough as s/he likes, on a 'worse possible scenario' basis. But more specifically, it's also a very good idea to button-hole a couple of people you love, or like very much and trust, and get them to cite any mannerism or habit of yours that drives them crazy! That laugh that sounds like exiting bathwater in serious pain, that sudden karate-chop flurry with your hands—if such foibles annoy your loved ones, what effect might they have on a stranger?! And it's worth being thus forewarned, for up to a point you *can* control and avoid them if your mind is 'primed'.

- **Be interested in everything said to you, but not slavish.**

If they've called you to interview, they're interested in you: *you*. They want to find out what you're like, what you are most interested and believe in, and that means your best course is to be honest.

It is possible, yes, to 'spin a line' and get the job thereby; but it's not a very bright thing to do—because sooner or later your *real* self and opinions are bound to surface, and then everyone's going to be unhappy, especially you. So take what they ask and say seriously, and always be courteous; but, ultimately say what you think.

- **Never lose your temper!**

The chances of this happening are admittedly slight, but it can happen, those occasions when you feel your time is being utterly wasted, or that the way the interview is being conducted is unfair and hostile. There can be times when that is indeed the case, but it's very unwise to say so, especially heatedly. You may not want this job, or anything more to do with the institution concerned; but 'the word' can travel, and you could just possibly get a reputation on the circuit you're dealing with. Besides, it's unnecessary: if you really do feel

the whole thing has become a 'no-no', for whatever reasons, just get up and excuse yourself with quiet dignity.

- **Don't be afraid to ask questions—but never do so just for the sake of it.**

If you don't understand a question of theirs, say so and get them to repeat/rephrase it. And when asked at the end if there's anything you'd like to ask, then go ahead if you do have a genuine query or need some important information. Be careful about this, however: make sure your question is appropriate to the people present. It's pointless—and damagingly silly—to ask a Physics Tutor what time college meals are, or a line manager what the arrangements for sick leave might be. Such information will be easily found elsewhere, and asking about them can tarnish the impression you've worked hard to achieve.

Finally:

- **Don't be afraid to say you don't want the job/place.**

Near the beginning of this 'Study Skills and Employment' survey, I remarked that from the very outset of any application you are assessing as well as being assessed, and that is especially true of this last stage.

After all, if you take the job, you're going to spend a considerable chunk of the next part of your life there, and it's rather important that such a prospect genuinely attracts you! If it doesn't or if for any other reason you feel that this is not for you, you'll save everyone a lot of time and hassle if you say so politely and pull out.

POSTSCRIPT: REFEREES/REFERENCES

I honestly still do not know how important these really are. I'm not suggesting they're negligible—of course not. But how much do they truly count? Personally, when I'm choosing applicants and then deciding on which one I want, I tend largely to make up my own mind and trust my 'live' experience of the application and the interview itself. And I don't think that's unduly conceited of me, or out of the ordinary: the great majority of prospective employers/assessors I've spoken to say the same.

On the other hand, there is little doubt that two kinds of reference can have a decisive impact. One is the glowing reference—the one that makes you sound like the best thing since sliced bread: that is almost certainly going to help you, both before and during the interview. (We will discount the possibility that you've been written up in this way because your current employer is dying to palm you off on some other poor soul!) The second is the reference that expresses significant reservations and/or actively identifies any perceived shortcomings. That won't necessarily finish you—a surprising number of bosses have a sneaking belief that they can 'make something' of someone where others have failed—but it's self-evidently far from ideal.

In the light of the above, you'd be advised to follow three basic guidelines.

1.
Choose referees who like and regard you, and know your work well.

They will invariably be anxious to help you as much as they can, and will speak of you with both warmth and authority.

2.

Try not to quote two referees from the same source.

When you're young and just starting, you may not have any choice, I know, since your institutional experience is likely to have been narrow, even singular. However, at least try to make sure they address different aspects of your work and nature, so that the recipient acquires two portraits that are distinct, not self-duplicating.

3.

Ask your referees for permission to cite them, and do so in plenty of time.

The former principle is a matter of courtesy, but quite an important one: nobody likes being taken for granted as an unpaid advertiser! The latter could be crucial: the world of applications and appointments is a time-intensive one, and even if that reference *isn't* going to be utterly crucial, it's still just as well if it's on the interviewer's desk in time.

One last thing: good luck—and as always, try to enjoy it all!

APPENDIX A
SOME NOTES ON STYLE

> When one finds a natural style, one is amazed and delighted; for where one expected to see an author, one discovers a man.
>
> *Blaise Pascal*

Throughout this book, I've urged you to stay yourself as far as possible, in all things. And as Pascal suggests above, it will be a notable strength if you can extend this principle to the way you write.

Why one person should write well where another (of equal intelligence) writes badly is often exceptionally difficult to say; and I could not hope to cover all or even most of the reasons in these few pages. What I do want to do is suggest *one* reason, examine it briefly, and then move on to some specific tips or guidelines that will help you to write well— or at least prevent you from certain common kinds of *bad* writing.

A good style takes many years to acquire. And I'm becoming more and more convinced that one reason why is that it takes many of us several years to *unlearn* the dreadful stylistic habits we begin to form at the onset of adolescence—at the time, that is, when we lose (sometimes for ever) the natural unselfconsciousness of childhood.

Small children are of course limited writers; but their style is invariably appealing, often very funny, and usually clear and sharp. That judgement owes nothing to sentimentality. Children write in such a fresh way because language, like most other experience, is still fresh for *them*. They may not know many words; because of this, the words they *do* know have a huge charm—almost a touch of magic—and the pleasure they get in using them results in a direct and natural expression that is itself a pleasure to experience.

Once we get used to language, its charm can fade; and this decline often coincides with the time (adolescence) when we suddenly start to feel awkward and hesitant, when we are acutely aware of others' awareness of us, and determined above all things not to look foolish. It is at this stage that we start to develop 'protective layers' of personality, or what the German psychologist Wilhelm Reich beautifully defined as 'character armour'. And one of the most formidable pieces of this armour is our language and how we deploy it. Whereas the child is quite unthinking and natural in giving tongue, the adolescent is cautious, wary, and very self-conscious. Often silence is preferred; otherwise, something non-committal, deliberately vague or positively obstructive.

It is as adolescents that we first learn to use language to *disguise* or *hide* our meaning rather than express it. And it is then too that we start to come under the influence of public *modes* of language. We become aware, however vaguely, of the ways in which politicians and other public figures express themselves; we recognize more and more the properties of 'formal' speech and writing; we become accustomed, in short, to adult language. And the point I want to emphasize is that

A great deal of 'adult' or 'formal' language is ugly, dull and obscure.

Of course, at any given time there are countless exceptions to this: I am not as arrogant or as élitist as that remark might imply. But next time you watch TV news, or listen to a current affairs programme, make a point of noting the language that is used. I bet you will hear several of these expressions:

1. **'In this day and age'**
2. **'At this moment in time'**
3. **'Whys and wherefores'**
4. **'Obtaining maximum potential advantage'**
5. **'My members' material aspirations have been betrayed'**
6. **'Industrial action'**
7. **'We have made it absolutely clear that…'**
8. **'It is a well-known fact that…'**
9. **'The site has been rationalized'**
10. **'Strike potential'**

I have heard all ten used during TV news over the last few months. They share a common ghastliness that I discuss in a moment; but they also fall into four distinct groups, each of which exhibits a separate vice.

(1), (2) and (3) are simply illiterate. They either indulge a needless repetition ('why' *means* 'wherefore') or, as in (2)'s case, solemnly imply a ludicrous distinction (as if it were somehow possible to have 'a moment' that *wasn't* 'in time'—in *space,* perhaps?).

(4) and (5) are pompous, ugly inflations of simple phrases. (4) means 'doing one's best', while (5) is a rotund (and therefore dishonest) way of saying 'my members haven't been given the money they wanted'.

(6), (7) and (8) mean the exact *opposite* of what they claim to say. (6) means 'on strike'; (7) is the invariable preamble to the revelation of a policy or opinion that is news to everyone; and (8) almost always prefaces something that is neither well known nor a fact.

(9) and (10) are cynical euphemisms. (9) was used as a curious way of informing us that a number of buildings had been demolished; while (10), of course, is a standard phrase of nuke-speak—the language of nuclear weaponry: it means the ability to kill *x* millions of people within a few minutes.

I said they share one ghastly feature: it is that they are all clichés. They are all irreducibly *boring*—stale, plodding, and so predictable that, once the first word is articulated, the rest follow as if hyphenated, or part of a magnetized sequence. They are empty formulae, used either by people who have no relation to what they're saying, or else who want to disguise and distort its true nature.

Our language, regrettably, teems with expressions like those. And the insidious thing about them is their apparent respectability, and the belief—connived at by people who ought to know better—that there's something weighty and impressive about them. Many people who use that loathsome expression, 'on-going situation', don't do so because they have no feeling for language, or because they really think it's a crisp and useful phrase: they do it because they imagine it's the right thing to do, having heard distinguished (or at least public) figures use it.

This is even more likely to be a problem for those of you who are *already* adults. Because you hear your peers, many of them distinguished, using certain phrases and styles of speech, you may feel that they offer admirable contemporary models. While the eighteen-year-old apes such linguistic behaviour under the impression that it will make him seem *more* adult, the older student does so because he is wary of departing from what he hears and sees to be established practice.

I believe this is why so many students have so much trouble forging a clear and efficient style. Their sense of *what* they want to say is, far more often than not in my experience, good; but they are confused about *how* they should say it. Faced with the apparent model provided by adults in the public eye (and quite a lot of adults who aren't), they set about acquiring the 'correct' approach, the 'right' phrases, the 'impressive' expressions that will guarantee them suitable stylistic maturity and *gravitas*. This is both sad and damaging. The desire to be orthodox, or just acceptably articulate, leads to a denial of natural instincts, replaced by a stuffy and above all wasteful stodge.

You see, a lot of adults, particularly those in public life, spend a lot of time deliberately saying nothing in a good many words. You can prove this to yourself next time you watch the news. Make a note of how many times a reporter takes one minute of fast talking to say virtually nothing. Listen to the number of politicians or diplomats who trot out fluent sentences that mean absolutely nothing, or else suggest the opposite of what the words seem to say. I'm not saying the news is either valueless or illiterate; but it is both instructive and richly comic to discover how much pure *waffle* it contains.

As a student, you must be one your guard against aping the examples that surround you. Go for the simple phrase always; when in doubt choose the most direct word possible; and above all try to

***Listen* to what you write.**

I don't mean you need to *recite* it (although this isn't a bad idea), but that you should try to hear with your 'inner ear' what you're writing. A couple of excellent, simple guidelines are worth bearing in mind:

If it *feels* good, it very probably *is* good: keep it.

and conversely

If it *sounds* odd, it very probably *is* odd—and unclear as well: change it.

Perhaps most of all, *don't waffle*. Politicians waffle because they're 'on the spot': they need either to disguise the fact that they don't altogether know what they're talking about, or to prevent the interviewer penetrating their *real* motives, activities, and achievements. Up to a point, that's fair enough: it's part of the 'game' they involve themselves in with the media (who are often equally vacuous). But it's no part of a student's 'game' to be vague, distortive or just plain empty. Be sure that

When you've nothing to say, don't say it. And if you *have* got something to say, do so in as unadorned and direct a way as you can.

There are certain limits, of course. I don't advise you to start peppering your essays with obscenities or street-slang—that's a bit *too* direct! In fact, as you've no doubt been advised, slang of most kinds is probably best avoided. However, I'm sure I'm not alone in thinking that a few 'slips' into refreshing slang are much to be preferred to the kind of turgid, more 'respectable' level of expression that I discuss above.

New students, whatever their actual age, are bound to feel a touch adolescent. This is natural and in many respects nice: it brings a youth-fulness back to you, and with it the kind of energy and enquiring interest that are commonly associated with being young. But all adolescents, whether actual or 'symbolic', feel a great need for some kind of uniformity, or indeed a uniform: what seems to be 'rebellion' or 'rejection' in teenagers, for example, is very often only a desire to find a *different* uniform from others, one that is distinct

from their parents but gives them unity elsewhere. (This explains, for instance, why ostensibly rebellious movements like Punk, New Romantics, and all the rest acquire a recognizable 'uniform' which itself becomes a 'fashion' mobilized by market forces.) Don't, however, let this natural inclination extend to your writing. Hold on to all that is most you in your style, all that is most natural and most deeply formed. To help you do this, there now follow some short sections on phrases to avoid and useful approaches to adopt.

1.
DEAD EXPRESSIONS (I): PADDING

It's a good rule of thumb not to 'apologize' for what you're about to say or 'wind yourself up' into it, but just to say it. So avoid the kind of expressions that follow below, noting why they are so unhelpful:

It is interesting to note that…	This remark kills all interest at once.
It may perhaps be said that…	Well, why shouldn't it be?
It is worthy of note that…	Pompous; and it often prefaces obvious remarks.
We can safely say that…	If it's *that* safe, why not just say it?
From certain points of view…	*Whose* point of view? Looks merely vague and timid.

Most such remarks are useless. They create an impression both flabby and over-cautious, and they fall dully on the eye. Reserve them for those times when there really is a doubt, when you truly *are* advancing an idea that is unusual or controversial, or when something out of the common run is at issue. Otherwise, just trust yourself: if your knowledge and thinking are sound, you don't need to 'stutter' in this way.

Similarly, avoid such compounds as:

The poet succeeds in creating an arresting picture…
Dickens manages to convince us…
Shakespeare is trying to put over the point that…

In the first place they are clumsy; in the second place they are flabby (the slim-line 'creates', 'convinces' and 'puts over' will do just as well, and do it more tautly); and in the third place they are all faintly disagreeable:

'Succeeds in dreating …'	suggests that the poor old poet had a hell of a time getting his work up to standard.
'Manages to convince …'	is rather patronizing, as of one's giving him a Good Mark ('Well done, Dickens, old chap').
'Shakespeare is trying to …'	is nearly always inaccurate, and in an unfortunate way. it's not Shakespeare who's making the effort, but you– you're struggling to put your ideas down, whereas he managed it rather well several centuries ago.

So search ruthlessly for such padding. Happily, it's fairly easy to spot, even early on; and once you've trained yourself to seek it out and get rid of it, you should find that after a while it drops away from your style quite naturally.

2.
DEAD EXPRESSIONS (II): CLICHÉS

One could devote a whole book to this subject; indeed, many have. All I can do, or want to do, in this brief section is to get you to be fiercely on the look-out in your style for expressions that have been around too long and used too often to retain any currency at all. There are literally thousands of examples, from which I offer you these few—on the basis that they always make me cringe:

Achilles' heel; acid test; thin end of the wedge; cart before the horse; letting his heart rule his head; moment of truth; meltingpot; everything at sixes and sevens; like looking for a needle in a haystack; nose to the grindstone; toe the line; ring the changes; head-over-heels in love; cat among the pigeons; nigger in the woodpile

and so on. Even if you don't actively dislike these expressions as I do, I hope you can see that they have all become obsolescent through over-use. Even those that once were powerful and even poetic— 'moment of truth', 'needle and haystack', for example—are simply boring now; while others were never very good from the start ('nigger in the woodpile', for instance, has the double disadvantage of being both incomprehensible and offensive) and are yawn-inspiring today.

This is even more true of Proverbs. I suppose they have their uses, though I've always found it hard to see them: the kind of person who quotes a proverb to sum up an individual human experience is the kind of person I'd emigrate to avoid. But on no account should you let them infect your written style. There is almost nothing more dismal than encountering in mid-argument a bromidish phrase like:

Don't cross your bridges until you come to them.
He should have looked before he leapt.
Fair words butter no parsnips.
Still waters run deep.

The first two are bad enough, but at least they're only boring. I've never found anyone who could give me an adequate explanation of the third, while the fourth is, of course, illiterate—the point about still waters is that they don't run *at all*—that's why they're *still*.

I rather *like* getting annoyed about proverbs, as you may have gathered! But I'm convinced that they have about as legitimate a place in your style as illiteracies like 'ain't', 'could of done', or that modern illiteracy, the all-purpose use of 'situation' (as in 'riot-situation' when you mean 'riot', or, as I read in a recent undergraduate essay, 'Hamlet's eyeball-to-eyeball situation with his mother').

3.
DEAD WORDS

There will be times when you wish to qualify your statements with an adverb. But don't do it too often: you must trust your material enough to state it plainly at times. So be sparing in your use of these:

Very; quite; extremely; absolutely; utterly; rather; really; completely; totally.

Save them for times when they're essential. Rid yourself of such flabby expressions as *'very true'* (after all, a thing's either true or it isn't—you can't have superlative versions of truth), *'completely and utterly*

defeated', 'rather wicked', 'quite evil', and so on. Certain words cannot be qualified, and others need it less often than you might think. Once again, too much qualifying creates an impression of timidity as well as padding, and both are damaging to your style.

4.
'DEFINITELY'

I would advise you *never* to use this word. Curiously, rather than *endorsing* a perception, it *undermines* it. If you say something like:

'Charles II was definitely a good king'
'Macbeth is definitely a tragic hero'
'Chaucer was definitely a genius'

one somehow gets the impression that the matter is in doubt—as if it's quite possible that Charles II was a *bad* king, Macbeth is neither a hero nor tragic, or that Chaucer was a fourteenth-century hack. Alternatively (or additionally) it suggests childish triumph—'Yah sucks boo! I've made up my mind about *that,* so there!'. Leave it out: it's hardly ever useful anyway, and looks amateurish.

PS. If you *must* use it, then at least spell it right! It is alarming how many students think it's spelt 'definitely'!

5.
OVER-USE OF 'I'

You are writing an essay; *you* know you're writing the essay; the *reader* knows you're writing the essay. So why keep saying 'I think', 'in my opinion', 'it seems to me', 'I find', and so on? It's obvious that the opinions are yours, the thinking, the argument. So in the normal run of things, omit all such unnecessary reminders.

It is especially important to do this because there *are* times when you need to stress that it is your opinion and not another's. If you're making a point that is unusual or controversial, it makes sense to let the reader know that you're aware of its status. 'In my view' is a legitimate opening if you suspect that what follows will not meet with universal agreement; but it's mere irritating padding if it introduces something sound but unremarkable which most readers would accept.

6.
TAUTOLOGY

A tautology is an expression where at least one of the words is redundant. Two obvious, comic examples would be:

'a dead corpse'; 'a round circle'.

Most tautologies are more subtle than those, however—and more dangerous to you as a result. O.M.Thomson, in his excellent book, *A Matter of Style,** lists a number of common tautologies that he frequently encountered as an examiner: I've italicized the redundancy.

'Throughout the *whole* chapter…'
'The *final* incident with which the chapter ends…'
'These factors combined *together* to produce…'
'It was no more than a *mere* passing thought
'*But* after a while, however, he realized…'
'He can do no more than *just* follow blindly…'

Of course, we all do this in *conversation,* and it can creep into our written style because we are attempting (laudably) to achieve a natural and fluent ease such as we have when talking. But such moments must be watched for: their comic potential undermines your authority, and they also waste time.

7.
ORGANIZATION: PARAGRAPHS AND SENTENCE-LENGTH

I'm surprised by how many able students reduce the impact of their work by forgetting about such basic things as paragraphs. It is hard to generalize effectively; but I would say that a page of A4 ought to have at least two and probably three paragraphs on average.

There are two good reasons for this. Firstly, if your paragraphs run to over a page, it's almost certain that you're running too many separate points or even arguments into each other, and you need to pause and think out the structure of your material more clearly. And secondly, the consequent absence of any indentation makes the reader's heart sink. His eye notes balefully that it's going to be a long time before it can take a rest; and this can make him quite out-of-sorts with your performance. Too many *short* paragraphs create a sense of scrappiness and superficiality; but too few paragraphs will make your essays very hard work to read, as well as running the risk of getting bogged down.

Sentence-length is a more subtle matter. Ideally, you should vary your sentences. A good snappy sentence is often an excellent tonic to the reader—especially after two or three complex ones. If you include too many short ones, your style will start to resemble a bad parody of Ernest Hemingway; but it's sensible to ensure that the reader has some comfortable moments from time to time. As with all things to do with style, once you start *thinking* about your sentences properly, a natural and pleasing rhythm should follow fairly soon. At all costs, beware of *rambling*—the kind of sentence that goes on and on, flitting from point to point. A good sentence, however complex, never *loses* the reader: it guides him clearly and confidently over the ground. If you keep that in mind, you should have few problems.

CONCLUSION

Norman Mailer has written, in what could well be considered a kind of paraphrase of Pascal's remark that heads this Appendix: 'Style is character'.* It takes a long time for people to become fully aware of their own nature; and it also takes a long time to achieve an enviable and natural style. But both processes can be accelerated if you keep aware of yourself. If you just *write,* with no sense of yourself, and with only a vague awareness of which words you're choosing and of how the argument is to progress, your style will almost certainly be by turns awkward, obscure, and flabby. If, however, you trust yourself and are fully alert to the

*Thomson, O.M. (1973) *A Matter of Style*. Hutchinson, London, pp. 27–9.

sound and meaning of each phrase you write, you will find that most of the flaws I've discussed will pass you by. Most good students damage their style by trying to take on another 'voice' from their own: they produce phrases not because they *feel* them, but because they imagine they're 'right' or 'weighty'. There's no need to do that. Your mind's done the work; so let your own voice tell us about it.

* Mailer, N. (1967) *Cannibals and Christians*. Deutsch, London, p. 210.

APPENDIX B
READING NOVELS AND CREATIVE LITERATURE*

It is, I think, obvious why my six-point speed-reading programme is unsatisfactory for works of literature. Novels, plays, and poetry cannot be dealt with in this manner—not because there's anything 'holy' about them, but because it simply doesn't work. If you dart through a novel or a Shakespeare play employing the first four 'points' I suggest, you end up precisely where you started, and annoyed to boot. The main reason, of course, is that literary works don't *have* summaries, graphs, illustrations or even chapter headings. And their introductory and concluding sections work in a different, less straightforward, way.

So how can you increase your rate of coverage if the central part of your course is literature? To come to terms with a major play takes a lot of time. Even more arduous is a text the length of *Jane Eyre* or *Our Mutual Friend* (both frequent choices for A-Level and undergraduate courses). When you remember that reading the text is only the first stage —you've then got to discuss, analyse and absorb it—the task can seem forbidding.

One answer is to cultivate 'skip-reading', which I've looked at already. This provides useful 'ignition', which is important; but, clearly, it won't do much *more* than get you started, especially if you're missing out twenty pages at a time. By all means use it to kick you off; but you need something else as well.

LETTING THE BOOK DO THE WORK

I haven't yet mentioned the simplest kind of 'speed-reading' of all—that of reading the book very fast, without pausing to mull anything over, and not being at all concerned at the bits that make no sense or seem dull.

I have found this method consistently valuable ever since I started A-Levels thirty years ago. When I read in this way, I don't *consciously* ignore anything, as I would if 'skip-reading'. This method is more passive. I make no decisions, no choices, no clever short-cuts. I let the *book* do the work, not me—I let it wash over me, leaving the *book* to determine which bits 'stick'.

Let me give an example. My favourite novel is *Anna Karenina*—hardly an original judgement, as most lovers of literature would consider it among the greatest works ever written. One of its major features is its length—over 850 pages in my Penguin edition. It is doubly daunting to pick up such a tome knowing it to be not only very long but also one of the greatest aesthetic achievements of all time. How, one asks oneself, am I going even to *begin* to cope with something like this?

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*This section is primarily meant for students specializing in Literature.

When I first read the novel at the age of seventeen, I covered it in two days. I positively *belted* through it, determined to get to the end as quickly as I could. This was not because I disliked it—quite the reverse. I was hoping to acquire, as fast as possible, a *sense* of its majesty, and a kind of 'skeletal' idea of its plot, style and characters. And I believe I achieved this. I had an at least basic knowledge of the plot (or rather, the *plots*), and some sense of how these separate narrative strands were interwoven. I knew something about all the major characters; and I had an awed awareness of the grandeur of the writing. I could see, however vaguely, that Tolstoy was equally masterly whether describing the subtlest emotions, the most vigorous physical activities, or the feel of the ever-changing landscape. In short, I knew something of what the book was about, and a little bit about why it has such a reputation.

I've read *Anna Karenina* probably twenty times since then. I still don't feel I 'know' it really well, and I imagine I won't feel that even when I've read it a further twenty times—it's that kind of book. And that is very much the point. As I said at the start of this chapter, *any* significant work of literature (and it's unlikely you'll be asked to centre your studies on anything less) has a richness and variety that will continue to yield new pleasures on the tenth, twentieth or umpteenth reading; and nobody will expect you to plumb all its depths in a mere two or three years. With this in mind, a tearaway first reading is perfectly sensible, and will very probably encourage you to make an early and more sober return to the text. The alternative—plodding haltingly through it over a period of weeks—is unlikely to be more efficient in terms of retention. Your response will be less vibrant if you plod, and you may end up hoping to God you never have to open the book again. Not a very productive attitude for a student faced with a set text.

THINK OF A NOVEL AS A PAINTING OR A PIECE OF MUSIC

When we first look at a painting, we take in a general, overall impression. We note the subject, the colour, the size, the 'feeling' it radiates. Later, returning to it, we start to notice details: the *blending* and *number* of colours, the way the eye is drawn this way and that by the picture's *line,* the perspective, and other subtler things. Still later, we may see evidence of particular techniques, acquire a full sense of the picture's structure, and be able to say with some authority and analytic prowess what the picture *does* and why it is impressive.

Similarly with a piece of music. At first we will merely be aware of tunes, the instruments used, and the 'atmosphere' engendered. Subsequently, we will start to realize how the tunes relate to each other, precisely how the composer deploys the various instruments and why, and how he uses dynamics and even silence. Eventually, our appreciation will grow to include grasp of structure, and a familiarity with its themes/tunes that makes proper sense of individual phrases.

A novel can be approached in much the same way. First time round, you will get an overall sense of its structure and subject, plus a general ideal of its style, pace, and characters. Just as the painting and the music are not *studied* in detail at first, so should you 'glance' at your novel, establishing a pleasant, undemanding acquaintance. The study comes later—when you're in shape for it.

Works of art are complex, profoundly intricate things. No one can understand them quickly, however clever they may be. The person who expects to achieve adequate mastery through one laborious 'go' at a novel not only understands nothing about how literature works: he knows very little about how his own mind operates. By now I hope you are not such a person! So read as fast and as 'superficially' as you like: the detailed digging that has to be done later will be all the easier and more successful as a result.

APPENDIX C
SOME SIMPLE RELAXATION AND FITNESS EXERCISES

There are few things more maddening than being cheerily told ‘Relax!’ when you’re feeling like an over-wound watch-spring. It usually seems about as sensible and tactful as telling someone who’s depressed to ‘cheer up!’. Nevertheless, there are ways in which you can reduce *physical* tension at least; and that can often ease the mind’s jangling as well. So here’s a simple routine that you will find calms you down quite effectively and pleasantly.

1. Lie down on your back, or sit in a chair which fully supports your back.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Think about your head. Feel the forehead-muscles relaxing. Relax your eyelids, and let your jaw go slack. Let your tongue fall to the bottom of your mouth. Start to take deep breaths.
4. Now move down to your shoulders. Let them go loose, and allow your arms to go limp.
5. Relax your neck: let your head roll gently until you find an agreeable position.
6. Let your stomach go slack. It is probably the tensest part of you at such times, so take your time. Concentrate on smoothing away all the creases that seem to line it inside.
7. Tense and relax your right arm, several times. Then tense it once more, and *slowly* relax it from the top of the shoulder to the finger-tips.
8. Do the same with your left arm.
9. Tense and relax your right leg several times.Then tense it once more, and slowly let the tension go, from hip down to toes.
10. Do the same with your left leg.
11. Now listen to any sound from within your body—heartbeat, breathing, stomach. Pick one such sound and focus on it. Block out all other sounds and thoughts.
12. Tense and relax your whole body, at five-second intervals. Do this twice more. Then, slowly open your eyes and sit upright. Take a long slow ‘stretch’.

You can even use these at an exam desk, and certainly anywhere else. They soften tension through being physically pleasant; and for a valuable five minutes they reduce all that mental ‘buzzing’—or at least reduce your anxious concentration on it.

Everyday fitness exercises are also good for sharpening your muscle tone and general alertness. If in doubt about your physical state, consult your doctor first; but I wouldn’t imagine these will over-tax many of you.

1. Toe touching. With feet apart; then with feet together. You can also try touching each foot with the opposite hand. Keep your legs straight, or as straight as you can bear!
2. Press-ups. Excellent for toning you up and controlling the breathing. Women sometimes find these hard, and should be prepared to improvise.
3. Sit-ups. Lie on your back, and if possible hook your toes under something solid (i.e. unlikely to move). Clasp your hands behind your neck; and then haul yourself up to a sitting position. Real masochists can try to bring their head down to meet their knees! Repeat 5–10 times, or until the stomach muscles lodge a formal protest!
4. 'Cycling.' Lie on your back; raise your legs about 2 feet; then 'pedal' as smoothly as you can. Regulate pace according to taste/pain level.
5. The straight leg-lift. Lie on your back, legs together. Raise them six inches. Hold that position for 5 seconds. Lower. Repeat 5 times. Then repeat, but, after raising, splay each leg to the side, maintaining a 6-inch distance off the ground. Do this three times, then return to together-position and lower.

Of course, if you're keen to get truly fit in a more athletic sense, these would qualify only as warm-up exercises. But for the less vigorous, they will keep your body quite freshly tuned in about fifteen minutes a day. And the better you feel physically, the more alert and 'bright' you will be in your study.

APPENDIX D
ANSWERS TO PRECIS EXERCISES

EXERCISE A

The Government's action is justified.

EXERCISE B

He escaped by abseiling 60 feet from window to ground, using a waist-attached rope that he had weighted and thrown over a nearby branch.

25 words

EXERCISE C

Benefits of Team Games

A movement against inter-school fixtures is gathering momentum and its advocates have mustered some cogent arguments. There is a place for individual sports, but they must remain subordinate to team games for moral and philosophical reasons.

Team sports induce discipline in an individual: initially imposed, it becomes **self**-discipline—cooperation underpinned by regular physical training. In some cases such strength, and its consequent moral uplift, can prevent an otherwise prevalent tendency to delinquency.

Team sports also create pride and a sense of the school as a genuine community; these often blossom into a wider response from the town, which has social and material benefits. Staff-student relationships also benefit through greater mutual involvement and understanding; so as a result does school discipline. And team sports are much cheaper to effect than all individual sports.

135 words

Single-sentence summary

Team sports are superior to solo sports because they inculcate discipline, raise school and social morale, and are cheaper to effect.

21 words

EXERCISE D

Test Career Dies as Gatting Flies

This is an obituary: not for a person but for a Test career. Today Mike Gatting will lead fellow-rebels onto a South Africa-bound plane into Test cricket wilderness. He will be 41 when that ends: the finest Middlesex batsman since Compton will never represent England again.

I find that dreadfully sad. For nobody values playing for his country more. He is a proud man and a class player, a master-butcher whose occasional delicacy also delights. At his best he devastates, exemplified by the 79 pillaging runs he enragedly took off Pakistan's previously dominant attack in Faisalabad.

He took 6 years and 52 innings to make his first hundred; when he achieved it in Bombay, the English press rose in applause. Seldom has he given short measure since; but watching him recently decline into premature weariness has been painful. His Australian zenith led to rapid downfall with the infamous Sankoor Rana incident. Team discipline collapsed; performances followed suit. That, and subsequent transgressions in New Zealand, should arguably have cost him the captaincy; instead he was fired for his tabloid-fanned supposed dalliance with a barmaid.

Henceforth Gatting became sour about the Test and County Cricket Board—a condition aggravated by injury, loss of form and bereavement. Yet he could have been won back: he sounded out the TCCB, looking for encouragement. None was forthcoming, so off he goes.

It would be nice if Gatting were remembered for his imperious batsmanship; probably he will be chronicled as a rebellious, ignorant pawn who foundered in games beyond his ken.

Soon to be richer by £200,000, Mike Gatting neither needs nor would seek my sympathy. But he's got it.

278 words

EXERCISE E

Watching the Planet Peeled Alive

Channel 4's 'Vietnam—After The Fire', examining the nation's attempted reconstruction since America's 1975 withdrawal, documented a catastrophe comparable to nuclear apocalypse. More bombs were dropped here than were used throughout WWII; their craters still perforate a satanic landscape additionally ossified by Agent Orange. Even President Nixon drew the line when he learnt of the latter's effects; but by then the planet-peeling damage had been done. Deformity and devastation rule still; the natives, deracinated and plagued, exhibit stoic bewilderment as they forlornly go about rebuilding a land whose entire eco-system has been savaged. Hope springs eternal, even in purgatory.

100 words exactly

BIBLIOGRAPHY

When I wrote the first edition of this book in 1984, the field of Study Skills and Study Aids was a rapidly expanding one. It is now colossal: a comprehensive bibliography would be the size of this new edition and more. Furthermore, as those who have read my 'Study Aid Tirade' earlier (pp. 92–95) will be aware, I have no desire to send readers in the direction of the many tawdry and frankly damaging publications that abound. Instead I offer a selective bibliography of books I admire, have found helpful and know that students have benefited from.

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See also Chapter 10, *Sources and Resources,* where a number of invaluable works of reference are listed and discussed.

AUTHORS, SOURCES AND NAMED REFERENCES

SUBJECT INDEX

Page numbers in **bold** type refer to an entire section devoted to that topic.