Workshop 2:
Some Characteristics of Various Types of Writing

The six articles that followed the "conversation" in Workshop 1 illustrated six different approaches to writing about a topic. To a large extent the articles were different because they were supposedly written by different people, each of whom had different content to work with. However, another large portion of the variation occurred because the writers had different purposes for writing. One writer wanted simply to give a report, another was trying to appeal to some readers, yet another was searching for the truth, and so forth. The principle involved is that one's purpose for writing controls not only the content of the piece (what is said) but also the style (how it is said), the order in which things are said, and many other matters. Readers who know what to look for; therefore, can usually determine a writer's purpose. And once you understand these characteristics and see how they are used by others, it will be easier for you to employ them yourself. And that is one of the important marks of a good writer—someone who knows what to do in a given communication situation and how to do it.

Although there are many aspects of writing which can help you to identify a writer's purpose, this workshop will concentrate on just four: (1) the type of language the writer used, (2) the amount of facts in the piece of writing, (3) the extent to which the writer has tried to prove something, and (4) the kind of relationship that the writer tries to set up with his/her readers. These have already been introduced to you in Workshop I, but here in Workshop II we will give names to these factors, show you how each factor may vary, and give you some practice in working with them.

I. Types of Language

Exercise A: Connotative and denotative language

Some words express feelings as well as information. For example, the terms "garbage collector" and "sanitation engineer" may mean the same thing informally, but to many people they reflect different biases. To call a person a garbage collector may be an insult, but to be called a sanitation worker is to show respect. In like manner to say that a horse "galloped" may mean the same thing as to say that he "ran," but the effect is different; "galloped" is more dramatic.

Language that is dramatic or shows biases we shall call connotative and language that is plain or ordinary we shall call denotative.

Directions: In the following pairs of sentences, check the one that is, in your opinion, more denotative.

_____1. Jim's wife nagged him to stop eating a Big Mac, shake, and fries every day for lunch.

_____2. Jim's wife asked him to stop eating a Big Mac, shake and fries every day for lunch.

_____3. The woman is small.

_____4. The woman is petite.

_____5. After a long search, Steve found work as a cop.

_____6. After a long search, Steven went to work as a policeman.
_____7. Congress passed revenue enhancement legislation as a means of reducing the federal deficit.

_____8. Congress enacted new taxes as a means of reducing the federal deficit.

_____9. Both students asked to retake the test.

_____10. Both students demanded to retake the test.

Summary: As is evident, connotative language can be either positive or negative. Positive language is often referred to as euphemism; for example, “revenue enhancement” is a euphemism for “raising taxes.” When connotative language is negative, we often say that it’s a smear; for example, to call an arrestee a “murderer” before he has been convicted is to smear him.

Exercise B: Measurement language

Measurement language consists of words or phrases that imply measurement against some sort of standard. Words such as “short,” “old,” “thin,” “large,” and “hot” are examples of measurement language. They aren’t very meaningful unless you know what is being measured. A “hot” day, for example, is not nearly as hot as a “hot” furnace. A “cold” day in July or August is not nearly as cold as a “cold” day in January or February. In other words, it’s all relative.

Directions: Underline the measurement language in the following sentences.

1. It was a cool day in late autumn.

2. Over the hill came a shaggy dog with long, floppy ears.

3. He dashed across a brook and ran into a small clump of trees.

4. A fat partridge flushed wildly ahead of him, zooming off through the trees.

5. The dog skidded to a stop and stared at the speedy bird.

6. Young Joe Fife, the dog’s diminutive master, whistled shrilly and the dog trotted back.

7. Joe patted his dog gently and then led him toward the distant farmhouse.

Exercise C: Tentative language

Many times we aren’t certain of the facts, and wishing to be honest about what we know or don’t know, we insert such phrases as “I think” or “It seems to me” or “may be.” This is called tentative language, and the terms themselves are called qualifiers. Qualifiers are supposed to indicate a person’s degree of confidence about what he or she says.

Directions: In the following paragraphs, underline the qualifiers, both phrases and individual words.

1. In the five year period 1991-96, scientists conducted a study to see whether a city could deter crime by increasing the number of police. Results were obtained suggesting that, while increased police manpower is
probably not very effective against certain types of crimes such as burglary and misdemeanors, it may be effective against other crimes such as robbery, grand larceny, and auto theft.

2. The science of statistics has begun to have some impact on the legal profession. It seems to be most popular in suits that involve issues of counting and measurement. In issues involving the Constitution, however, the law typically states issues in terms of principles that at least superficially appear to be less accessible to a statistical approach, but even here some progress is being made.

3. It certainly seems to be true that no one is completely satisfied with the Consumer Price Index in its present form. Improvements can and probably will be made in many parts of the Index. It may even happen that some completely new approach to the construction of the Index may be developed, possibly through the use of new mathematical techniques. No matter what its form, however, the CPI undoubtedly will remain one of the main indicators of the state of the economy.

Exercise D: Figurative language

Sometimes, as when we say “That car is a real dog,” our words are not literally true. Such a phrases is a figure of speech, a metaphor in this case. For our purposes we simply call it figurative or non-literal language. Writers most commonly use this language in literature, but it may also appear in persuasive and expressive writing.

Directions: Underline some examples of figurative language in the following passages. Can you explain what makes the words or phrases non-literal?

a. Saturday morning had come, and all the summer world was bright and fresh, and brimming with life. There was a song in every heart; and if the heart was young the music issued at the lips. There was a cheer in every face and a spring in every step. The locust trees were in bloom and the fragrance of the blossoms filled the air. Cardiff Hill, beyond the village and above it, was green with vegetation, and it lay just far enough away to seem a Delectable Land, dreamy, reposeful, and inviting.

Tom appeared on the side-walk with a bucket of whitewash and a long-handled brush. He surveyed the fence, and all gladness left him and a deep melancholy settled down upon his spirit. Thirty yards of board-fence nine feet high. Life to him seemed hollow, and existence but a burden.

--from The Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain

b. This ceremony is held in the depth of winter, but by the words we speak and the faces we show the world, we force the spring. A spring reborn in the world’s oldest democracy that brings forth the vision and courage to reinvent America. . . . To renew America we must revitalize our democracy. This beautiful capital, like every capital since the dawn of civilization, is often a place of intrigue and calculation. Powerful people maneuver for position and worry endlessly about who is in and who is out, who is up and who is down, forgetting those people whose toil and sweat sends us here and pays our way. . . . From this joyful mountaintop of celebration we hear a call to service in the valley. We have heard the trumpets, we have changed the guard. And now each in our own way, and with God’s help, must answer the call.

    from President Clinton’s
    Inaugural Address

c. One in the morning, and in spite of the lamps Piccadilly is very grey. Most of the sightseers and the partygoers have gone home, and the long street is once again in the possession of the night people—the outcasts and the eccentrics, the profit seekers and the escapers, the buyers and the bought.
Across the road I can see the looming darkness of trees, overhung by a heavy autumn sky billowing with rain. The grass is another darkness, subtly different in texture, distinguishable only to eyes used to the night and with time to spare. Few people look into the shadows or step into the darkness, though. They keep determinedly to the paths civilized by electricity, walking a little faster through unlit alleys and the black, open spaces of the park, as if they would prefer to run.

--from Streetwalker (Anonymous)

Summary: As you no doubt discovered while doing the preceding exercises, these are very fuzzy categories. Figurative language is usually connotative, tentative language is often denotative, measurement language can either be denotative or connotative. How a word or phrase is to be classified depends on the context in which it is used, the personal backgrounds of the reader, the history of the words or phrase, and a host of other factors. In spite of this fuzziness, however, you will find, as we go along, that the concepts covered are often quite useful.

II. The Idea of Factuality

Philosophers and others often debate the definition of the word "fact," but for our purposes we will define fact as the journalist does: as a statement about something that the writer has seen or heard first hand. It's also necessary for factuality that statements are written in denotative language and with careful use of measurement language. In other words, factual statements should be written so that anyone who had witnessed the same event as the writer would agree that the writer had reported the event accurately and fairly.

Exercise E: Facts and Nonfacts

Directions: Label each statement as a "fact" (F) or a "nonfact" (NF).

(1) _____HE: The paper says Mr. Stone is dead.
(2) _____SHE: Living by himself for so many years must have made him very lonely.
(3) _____HE: Lonely, hell, he was just an odd-ball.
(4) _____SHE: You're just saying that because he never invited you out to his cabin.
(5) _____HE: Hmm, the paper also said that he had $3500 hidden in his mattress.
(6) _____SHE: Kind of weird, don't you think.
(7) _____SHE: He did lose $5000 in the Depression.
(8) _____HE: Well, he won't be worrying about somebody stealing his money any more.
(9) _____SHE: In his own peculiar way, he was really a nice man.
(10) _____HE: Mrs. Stevens told me he was born in 1905.
(11) _____SHE: He was over 90 years old; that's really ancient.
(12) _____HE: Well, at last his soul can rest in peace.
Exercise F: Questionable Facts

It would be nice if we could classify every sentence as definitely a fact or definitely a nonfact. However, a great many sentences are somewhere in between. In the following exercise label a sentence F (for “fact”) if it’s factual enough to be considered a statement of fact, NF (for “nonfact”) if it’s so far from being a fact that no responsible journalist would use such a sentence, or QF (for “questionable fact”) if it would be allowed as a fact in some contexts but not allowed in other contexts. For many of the sentences in this exercise there are no right or wrong answers. Your answers will serve as a basis for class discussion.

____1. Well, Al, it’s a beautiful evening for football here in Buffalo’s Rich Stadium.

____2. Right, Terry, and it should be a fine game tonight between the Bills and the Miami Dolphins.

____3. Yes, Al, the Bills are leading the Dolphins by one-half game with an 8-2-2 record.

____4. Al: But a win here by the Dolphins would reverse that as the Dolphins would pick up a full game on the Bills.

____5. Terry: I predict they can’t do it, Al; the Bills are too tough this season. The Bills have the best defense in pro football this year.

____6. Terry: Makes no difference, Al

____7. Al: Well, the game is just about ready to begin.

____8. Terry. The Dolphins won the toss and have elected to receive.

____9 Al: The Bills are set to kick off from the north goal—to the right of our TV booth.

____10. Terry: A slight wind is blowing out of the north, Dan.

____11. Al: But it shouldn’t have much effect on the game.

____12. Terry: The kickoff is a long one, coming down beyond the end zone; there will be no run-back on this one.

____13. Al: That kicker is sure some kind of ball player.
Exercise G: The Factuality of Quotations

Generally speaking, a direct quotation is considered a fact regardless of how nonfactual the material is within the quotation. However, the speaker tag needs to be written in a reasonable manner. “You stink,” John snarled becomes questionable as a factual statement because the writer has used connotative language to describe how John was speaking.

Directions: Label each of the following sentences as a fact (F), questionable fact (QF) or non-fact (NF).

1. More than 300 Groveland residents attended a public hearing last night concerning the Groveland City School.

2. At the opening of the meeting, Superintendent James Mackin presented a budget of $12,350,000 for the 1996-97 school year. The proposed budget is seven percent higher than last year's.

3. In making his presentation, Groveland’s pugnacious superintendent claimed that the higher budget would not mean higher property taxes. “Rising property values will easily provide increased monies to meet this new budget,” Mackin said.

4. However, Mackin admitted under questioning that final tax rates would not be known until shortly before the first tax bills are sent out next month. But he again asserted stoutly that tax rates would not rise.

5. Mackin’s announcement was opposed by Clarence Gaslin, a city resident. Mackin, Gaslin said, was “grossly overestimating” growth of property values. “It’s just another example of the way the school district hoodwinks us taxpayers every year,” Gaslin charged.

6. Another city resident, John Assen, asked Mackin why cuts could not be made in the school budget.

7. Losing his temper, Superintendent Mackin pounded the rostrum and angrily ruled the speakers out of order.

8. “I’ll not have anyone challenging the reputation of this school district,” Mackin snarled.

9. In closing the meeting, Mackin cited figures that he said “proved conclusively” that the school district was already under-financed.

10. Whether the taxpayers really do get a break for a change will be seen next month.
Exercise H: Analysis of a New Story

Directions: Analyze the following news story. Unless your instructor gives different directions, label each sentence as Fact, Non-fact or Questionable Fact. Although it is important that you understand the differences between a statement of fact and a non-fact, not everyone will agree on whether statements are questionable facts or non-facts. Admittedly, there are shades of gray. But in anticipation of class discussion, you need to be prepared to defend your answer.

Board Of Trustees Takes Over Student Funds

(1) The Groveland Community College Trustees have finally clamped down on the student government’s penchant for excessive spending to hire rap groups.
(2) The Board of Trustees announced last night a complete take-over of the funds of GCC Student Government Council (SGC). (3) "This move is allowed under State law but has been used only twice since the law was passed," reported Karl Sims, president of the Trustees.
(4) The Trustees have been under increasing pressure from older students, who make up more than a quarter of the GCC student body, and from other student groups opposed to expenditures on concerts by rap groups. (5) These opponents charged the SGC with using money collected from all students to cater to the interests of a minority of GCC students.
(6) At a raucous public hearing last night, Trustees asked SGC leaders to cancel most of the rap concerts scheduled for the rest of the year. (7) "You can go ahead with the Insane Clown Posse concert which is already contracted for," said Sims, "but no more."
(8) "I would not sell out the students by agreeing to any such thing," replied David Gernman, president of the SGC. (9) Gernman demanded that students be left alone to work out their own problems.
(10) After considerable debate, Trustees voted to cancel the SGC’s authorization to sign contracts in the college’s name or to write checks on the SGC account. (11) The College business manager was directed to transfer all funds from the student account to another account controlled by the business office.
(12) "This will not mean any drastic change in student activities," promised Board President Sims. (13) "Clubs, sports teams, and so forth can still spend money as originally budgeted, and the college business office will write checks to cover expenses."
(14) The SGC Executive Committee was scheduled to meet today to look for some way to counteract the takeover of its funds by the Board. (15) Among the actions to be considered will probably be a threat by SGC President Gernman to refuse to levy a student activity fee for next semester. (16) This could bring all extra-curricular activities to a halt since, by State Law, only student governments have the authority to levy mandatory student fees.
(17) Informed observers say that most GCC students would oppose a move to end extra-curricular activities since such a move would amount to “throwing out the baby with the bath.”
Directions: Read the following news story and then in short paragraphs, analyze five selected sentences, chosen by your instructor, for their factuality. If the sentence is factual, explain why you think so. If it’s not factual or only partially factual, explain.

Election of College Students to City Commission Causes Dismay

(Groveland - Nov. 5) (1) The election of three Groveland Community College students to the City Council may have brought joy to Groveland students, but many older residents are viewing the situation with dismay.

(2) Carl Swenson, retired farmer and defeated candidate for a commission seat, called the election “a disgraceful example of outsiders interfering in local affairs.” (3) Swenson attributed his defeat to a new law passed last year by the State Legislature.

(4) In September of 1991, the Legislature approved a bill allowing college students to vote in college towns. (5) Under the old law, which required students to vote in their hometowns, 18-21 year-olds comprised only 15 percent of Groveland’s registered voters. (6) With out-of-town students now allowed to vote in Groveland, 18-21 year-olds comprise 45 percent of the total registered voters.

(7) The students’ campaign for the City Commission seats had its roots in a stormy Commission meeting last spring when a delegation of GCC students accused city police of harassing long-haired young men. (8) The students also demanded a rent-control law to curb what they claimed are excessively high rents for apartments and rooms in the city.

(9) When the Commission refused to take the demands seriously, the GCC delegation vowed revenge.

(10) “We’re going to take over this city,” threatened one long-haired young man in a black leather jacket.

(11) When fall came and the students appeared ready to carry out their threat, older permanent residents of Groveland rallied to form a Citizens Committee to stop them. (12) The Committee organized a get-out-the-vote campaign aimed at over 21 residents and attempted to woo Groveland’s own sons and daughters into supporting local candidates.

(13) Final vote tallies showed student victories in Wards 3, 5, and 6. (14) The College is located in Ward 3, and Wards 5 and 6 are adjacent to it.

(15) Candidates backed by the Citizens Committee won in the other four wards, thus giving the older residents a 4-3 majority on the City Commission.

(16) Whether the students can wield enough influence to change the city to their liking will be seen next year. (17) In the meantime, oldsters are shaking their heads at the thought of blue jeans and long hair in the Commission chambers.
Workshop II - Quiz - Form B

Directions: Read the following news story and then in short paragraphs, analyze five selected sentences, chosen by your instructor, for their factuality. If the sentence is factual, explain why you think so. If it’s not factual or only partially factual, explain.

Protest March Blocks City Intersection

(1) Incited by Henri LaFontaine, a Haitian activist and student at Groveland Community College, a band of Groveland students took to the streets yesterday in a protest march that was supposed to be peaceful but didn’t turn out that way.

(2) Although no one was hurt in the march—supposedly held to protest the U.S. Government’s reluctance to interfere in Haitian politics—hundreds of students clogged Main Street in Groveland until dispersed by Sheriff’s deputies. (3) For over two hours they stopped traffic and shouted obscenities at passers-by.

(4) The march began following LaFontaine’s afternoon speech, when a crowd of from 300 to 500 students left the GCC campus and marched into town. (5) Predictably, most of the marchers were characterized by heavy metal t-shirts, strange haircuts, and tattered jeans.

(6) When they reached the intersection of Main and Elmwood, the mob sat down and refused police requests to leave. (7) Shouting such phrases as “Down with the Haitian fascists” and “Let’s kick out the Haitian army,” they linked arms and completely blocked the intersection, backing up traffic for nearly two miles on Routes 96 and 113.

(8) Finally, when city police were not able to persuade the students to move, a special squad of deputies from Groveland, Onata, and Serentos counties moved in. (9) Within ten minutes ten students had been arrested and the rest had fled.