

Robert F. Moss

USING TV NEWS IN BASIC WRITING CLASSES

"Pursue your studies," said the tall, handsome Black man at the podium, his voice a sonorous instrument echoing through the auditorium. "Prepare yourselves to be teachers, lawyers, architects. But always be open to new avenues and possibilities too. You might wind up in the fields you've chosen or, like me, you might wind up on *Eyewitness News*."

The speaker was John Johnson, a veteran ABC newsman and member of New York's WABC-TV news team. The place was Hunter College in New York City and the sponsor was SEEK, a citywide program whose enrollment is principally made up of students from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds. The occasion was SEEK's annual Honors Day ceremony, a celebration of student achievement in academics and school service, and Johnson was the featured guest. He was about as attractive a role model as one could imagine, and his remarks brought laughter and applause from the audience, many of whom no doubt relished the image of themselves as members of a glamorous industry, their faces smiling out of the nation's TV sets, their viewers in the millions and their salaries not far behind. Johnson captivated his listeners from the moment he began his address not only because of his striking physical appearance and well-honed speaking skills but because of the industry he represents. In a more impromptu address a few years before, Chee Chee Williams, a Black newswoman who is a colleague of Johnson's at ABC, had excited our students in much the same way.

Student elation at the sight of a television reporter was not hard to comprehend. The average graduating high school senior has watched an estimated 15-18,000 hours of TV, while having spent only 11,000 hours in the classroom. Nor do students seem to grow any less enthralled by

Robert F. Moss, assistant professor, Department of Academic Skills, Hunter College, CUNY, is the author of four books on different aspects of popular culture, and numerous articles for mass circulation periodicals. He has also published several articles in education journals.

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the magic box and the electronic kingdom within when they enter college. For them, as for most Americans, it seems to be a realm whose inhabitants all belong to a royal family, inspiring awe and worship, giving off a godlike aura. As in Edwin Arlington Robinson's, *Richard Corey*, they "glitter when they walk." Harold M. Foster, Michael Novak, Robert Rutherford Smith, and others have studied the deification process television effortlessly engenders. Foster calls the medium a "prime conveyor of modern mythology" (26). Novak writes of the urgent need to "understand all the ways in which the medium has altered us, particularly our inner selves: the perceiving, mythic, symbolic, and the judging, critical parts of ourselves" (9). Smith remarks that "television is one of the media used for the transmission and reinforcement of the myths of our time" (82). Those who find these characterizations hyperbolic would drop their objections if they could see the reception Johnson and Williams received at Hunter, though they only rank as lesser nobility in the TV pantheon.

The academic who, by definition, is usually a person who has devoted himself to the life of the mind, is apt to regard the cultural primacy of commercial television as a source of despair and horror. He thinks of TV as a disease which insures mental atrophy in the young or as Pied Piperism at its worst. Michael Lieberman notes with alarm the fact that the vocabulary of most television programs is probably less than 5,000 words: "Clearly viewers actually encounter significantly less language in these programs than in live conversation and markedly less than in reading" (604). College teachers have every right to feel that the "tube" is the natural enemy of the book, and it is difficult to condemn too strongly the mediocrity of what network television serves up each night. Nor is it hard to make a case against the nightly news. Even as I watched the immense enthusiasm Johnson evoked, it occurred to me how easy it would be to disparage him or any other figure of broadcast journalism. Aren't they merely well-manicured elocutionists, reciting the news off teleprompters? Even in the TV news world, aren't they derisively referred to as "player pianos," men and women who recite what others have written? Any intellectual will be tempted to disdain TV news as flashy, show business oriented, and superficial and exhort the class to turn off the seven o'clock news and pick up *The New York Times*, *Newsweek* or *Time*. The result, however, would be a missed opportunity—certainly for the students a program like SEEK attracts, students who enter college with certain unmistakable educational handicaps. Why not find a way to exploit TV's powerful spell for academic advantage? If students are so clearly enamored of Johnson and his ilk, though perhaps for superficial reasons of glamor and income, doesn't it make sense to try to convert that infatuation to productive ends? Of all the TV celebrities whom academics might use as the focus of their lessons, surely newspeople are the best choice since they *are* journalists; however meretricious some of their techniques may be, their basic job remains the transmission of current events. Although the language they employ must be simple enough to reach a broad audience, it adheres to the same standard English usage

teachers are attempting to impart to their students. Moreover, its syntax and vocabulary are closer to college-level discourse than anything remedial English students are likely to be exposed to. Hence, it provides the proper models.

With all this in mind, I devised a unit of study for my developmental English class in which I used broadcast journalism as the pedagogical framework, my objectives being to strengthen the students' capacity for critical thinking and to improve their writing facility. As a first stage, the students were required to familiarize themselves with all three network news teams, then select one and watch it regularly for a couple of weeks. My initial thrust was usually content-oriented rather than focusing on grammar or the nature of the TV news medium itself. I simply wanted the class to approach TV news in a more analytical fashion. Subsequently, however, I turned to the more elementary dimensions of accurate grammar and proper usage which are inseparable from basic writing courses, requiring that my class revise their themes in accordance with my criticisms and corrections.

The most immediate benefit of this experience was that I was compelling the class to become much more conversant with national and international affairs, two areas where their knowledge is generally distressingly and frustratingly spotty. Among young people who previously could not name even one of New York State's two U.S. Senators, give the approximate location of either Jordan or Nicaragua, or define the President's "Star Wars" weapons systems, a hazy grasp of world events began to emerge. Classroom discussions and subsequent written assignments focused on different aspects of TV journalism. The first topic I introduced reached back to John Johnson's address. What are the qualities, talents, and traits that go into making a successful TV newscaster? Some of the responses were incomplete and shallow, but others were gratifyingly thoughtful and comprehensive.

In the end, we were able to arrive at a consensus on the most essential attributes of a network newscaster: looks, grooming, clear speech, a pleasing personality. Excess of any kind must be shunned. "The women wear makeup, of course," wrote one student. "But never to the extent that it looks gaudy." Summarizing the forensic necessities of the job, someone else remarked on the need for the "right rhythm of speech, good eye contact, and a self-confident look." The more perceptive students were able to effectively probe a question about the suitability of aggressive, combative personalities like Mike Wallace and Sam Donaldson for jobs on the evening news. In most cases, they noted (and subscribed to) the pervasive preference for placid, unassertive temperaments on the regular news team. They could easily comprehend the failure of a "controversial" figure such as Tom Snyder on *Eyewitness News*, despite his national reputation. As host of the now-defunct *Tomorrow*, a late-night talk show of the 1970s, Snyder gained renown—and notoriety—for his brash, opinionated commentaries, Jack Paar-like emotionalism, and frequently contentious attitude toward his guests. Elevated to an anchor-man's job on the nightly news, he was too outspoken and abrasive for

the prime time audiences, and my students agreed with the general condemnation. Snyder struck them as too brazenly self-centered. "He hogs the camera," wrote one. "Even when he's not there, you get the feeling he thinks it's the *Tom Snyder Show* or something." My suggestion that Snyder added flavor and dynamism to a bland ambiance met with no agreement. To the sophisticated observer, these are commonplace observations, of course, but for students from academically limited backgrounds, the process of exploring otherwise undefined emotional responses to TV journalism can provide valuable mental training.

Another productive area of investigation is the common format behind the major news shows. This topic creates an opportunity to introduce the class to the comparison/contrast mode. The relative interchangeability of the major news teams has often drawn fire from media critics, and it is useful to elicit a commentary from the students on this facet of broadcast journalism. No one has much difficulty discerning the basic composition of the team—two anchor people (usually a white male in his forties or fifties and a female, who may be either white or Asian, or two white males), a few correspondents, a sports commentator and a weatherman—but many students will not have given much thought to the comparative importance of the different jobs and will not be aware of the fact that salaries are apparently inversely proportional to the amount of work the job requires: the "general assignment" reporters often write their own segments where the regulars generally do not. Since there are few correspondents who would not trade their current assignments for positions as anchors, it is worth asking why these newspeople are unable to make the transition. What elements of a reporter's personality or appearance make him or her acceptable only in small doses? One New York City local correspondent, Myra Wolinski, struck a few students as perhaps too lively for her own good. "She's perky and has lots of energy, which is nice," went a typical comment. "But I would find it tiring to watch her for a whole half-hour."

Whatever the topics, comparison is going to emerge more readily than contrast; the similarity of TV news teams makes this unavoidable. Contrasts are best encouraged through the structure and focus of questions. Potential queries: What are the chief similarities and dissimilarities you see in the ethnic and sexual makeup of the news teams? Are there any differences in the overall presentation of the news, either in style or content, among the three shows? Does the tone vary? The visual techniques? The relationships among the newspeople? Instructors who want to shake the dust of academe from their topics can easily convert them to a glossier, more entertaining form. For example: Imagine you have just been made head of a new network—at a million dollars a year, with a limousine and a plush executive suite, of course—but in order to keep the job you have to insure high ratings for the news department, a feat which you can only accomplish by pirating the best newscasters from the other three networks. In assembling a full complement of the best journalistic talent, whom would you hire and why?

One unimaginative but very reliable assignment is to require a discus-

sion of the differences among three anchor people, or three sports reporters, or three correspondents. Often the assessments will be limited to the superficialities of appearance and dress, but occasionally a more interesting analysis will emerge. "Brokaw is boyish," read one appraisal by a female student. "Like your older brother or your favorite uncle. Rather is tough and very formal, not like your relative but more like your boss at work. Geraldo Rivera is the sexiest one. He's the guy you'd like to go out with." In my classes, few names come up as often as Barbara Walters, and most students find her more emotional than rivals, such as John Chancellor or Roger Mudd, and less commanding. (In this connection, it was revealing that contrasts were always intragender—men with men and women with women.) They agreed with the following comment by David Halberstam: "She specializes in the celebrity interview, the journalist as bigger star than interviewee. Her roots are in entertainment" (20). Categories of news can also be a context in which to set up contrasts. Naturally students from inner city environments are particularly sensitive to the coverage of minority affairs, though other areas can be equally fruitful.

Attention to minority issues in the news may be the best framework in which to concentrate on the ethnic and sexual makeup of the various news shows. That each show seeks a balance is self-evident, but if the students are Black and Hispanic they will be quick to point out that members of their own subculture are mostly relegated to second echelon jobs. "The Black newsmen only do special reports, which means you only see them once in a while," said a Black student bitinglly. "Maybe that's how often the public wants to see them." For Blacks, the shade of pigmentation has so long been a factor in how they are treated by society and how they regard themselves that they are not surprised by the unstated favoritism based on color. Until recently, the only Black, male or female, in the New York area who had captured and held onto an anchor position was Sue Simmons, who is so light-complected that some students were not aware that she was Black.

In other cities, the absence of Black (or Hispanic) faces at the helm is just as conspicuous; the regular anchors are white males or females, though Asian women can be said to have broken the color line in several cities. Consider the following randomly assembled list of anchors; Chuck Moore and John Pruitt, both white males (NBC, Atlanta); Jerry Dunphy and Christine Lund, both white (ABC, Los Angeles); John Schubeck and Tritia Toyota, a white male and a Japanese-American female (CBS, Los Angeles); Randy Little, a white male (ABC, Cincinnati); Lois Matheson and Kathi Goertzen, both white females (ABC, Seattle); Ernie Anastos and Kaity Tong, a white male and a Chinese-American woman (ABC, New York). Harry Porterfield (ABC, Chicago) and Phyllis Criswell (ABC, Dallas), both Black, are among the few exceptions. Throughout the country, the TV news jobs that typically go to Blacks or Hispanics are weather, sports, or special reports; e.g., Joe Washington, a Black sportscaster (CBS, Atlanta); Jeannette Harrison, a Black correspondent specializing in educational subjects (NBC, Minneapolis); Jim

Avila, a Hispanic reporter (CBS, Chicago); and Steve Pool, a Black weatherman (ABC, Seattle).

Like them or not, these are the racial/political realities of the day, and they might as well be faced in this context as any other. My Black students remarked approvingly on the elevation of John Johnson to a semiregular anchor spot on ABC's New York City news team, but no one knew the circumstances behind the promotion. Here I had a chance to supply illuminating background information. In a surprisingly under-publicized episode in 1980, Johnson sued to be released from his ABC contract, claiming discrimination. He said that Ted Turner had offered to make him head of the CNN news team, a precedent-setting opportunity, since it would have made him the first Black anchor on a national news show. He also complained that his salary, \$125,000, was appallingly low for his years of experience. (Students are endlessly fascinated by the gargantuan incomes of celebrities and gasp at the thought that \$125,000 could be considered meager—until they hear about the \$1 million-plus range which Rather, Walters, and even the “retired” Walter Cronkite command.) Johnson dropped his suit when ABC agreed to give him a raise and a promotion.

Students of Hispanic descent are heavily represented in the SEEK program, and they usually remark on the relative paucity of Spanish-surnamed newsmen. The problem is perhaps best approached as part of the generally meager coverage of Latino life in New York City by the media. Often one can pick up five or six issues of local newspapers at random without finding a single article about, for example, the struggles of Puerto Rican politicians for an enlarged power base in the Bronx, or the penetration of the Puerto Rican community by the Pentecostal movement, or the conflicts among the increasingly diverse subdivisions within the city's Spanish-speaking populace. The first discovery for the instructor is how passive the students are about their “invisible” status. They seem to accept it as a natural condition of life. Still, with a little consciousness-raising from the front of the classroom (and the leadership of the more assertive Hispanics), they will write energetically about the probable explanations for these phenomena. Not everyone can emerge as an incisive social observer, of course, but many will offer credible reasons for the fact that, judging by the coverage in the New York media, their subculture does not often make news, nor are its representatives deemed qualified to report the news. Prejudice is the most often cited cause, but the language barrier is mentioned too, along with ignorance about gaining access to the media. The more sophisticated Hispanics are aware of the role that political activism plays in such matters, and compare themselves—with a mixture of envy and resentment—to the Blacks, whose collective vociferousness, political savvy, and lobbying skills have won them a far bigger share of popular attention than the Hispanic community with whom they are often lumped together. “We have no Spanish NAACP.”

Since they have grown up in a city which is a vast mosaic of different ethnic groups, the students have come to expect a significant measure

of minority representation on local news shows. They are surprised to learn how carefully and minutely controlled the ethnic and sexual distribution on these shows has become. As Chee Chee Williams described the situation, the quotas that have been created are so rigidly applied that if there is no opening for a new Black or Hispanic male, none will be considered for a job. She herself was hired, she said, because Melba Tolliver—one of the first Blacks in TV news—resigned, and her spot had to be filled by a replacement of the same sex and race. Such informative revelations make the subject matter all the more engrossing.

In surveying the cultural makeup of the news team, it can be stimulating to see that the class confronts the thornier aspects of the issue of fair representation. A provocative topic might require the students to agree or disagree on the following: “Since TV networks are publicly held, profit-minded companies, not public agencies, they should not have to worry about anything but making money and securing the highest possible ratings. If the public demonstrates a preference for white Anglo-Saxon males, then it is entirely defensible that they should be given most of the news jobs.” Forcing the students to confront the conflict between a network’s public responsibilities and its obligations to its shareholders can heighten student awareness of an important area of debate.

One of the perennial controversies about TV news is its degree of political bias, if any. As a topic in basic writing, however, it proved disappointing. The students simply had not studied enough news stories in sufficient depth to buttress their arguments. In this respect, they did not fall short of the country at large, which never fares too well on ABC’s irregularly scheduled *Viewpoint*, a face-off between a random assemblage of citizens and four or five members of the press. Presided over by the indefatigably courteous Ted Koppel, these forums seldom produce anything but torrents of criticism, each onslaught initiated by a political constituency which wants to see its opponents suppressed or derided in the media and its own views loudly promulgated. Advocacy, not objectivity, is everyone’s true but unstated goal.

Broadcast journalism, of course, is not a pureblooded species of reportage. It is a hybrid, part information service and part entertainment medium. The degree to which show business values and techniques influence TV journalism is crucial to any understanding of the subject. “Most viewers don’t realize the closeness in format of television news and television entertainment programs,” observes Foster. In the words of Paul Attanasio, “the rallying cry of the critics of broadcast journalism was that the news business had become show business” (21). In this area, my students didn’t need much elaboration from me. With a push in the right direction, the majority have no difficulty isolating elements of the nightly news which reflect a “show biz” orientation. From the attractive dress and appearance of the newsmen and their personable manners to the frequent choice of unnewsworthy but amusing, sordid, or poignant stories, to the technical slickness of the shows, the students detected showmanlike glitz everywhere. A few mentioned the Von Bulow murder trial as a prime example and were in accord with Foster’s description

of the case as “lurid and worthless” (29).

Another facet of the news which prompted many comments was the bantering exchanges among the newscasters—by now a trademark of these shows. Although some students accepted the pretense of “impromptu” badinage, a lot found this element corny and synthetic. One essay was critical of the uneasy coexistence of grim subject matter and lighthearted commentary: “They are always going from somebody’s tragedy—maybe a baby got killed or something—to joking around. A lot of times the kidding seems forced.”

As every basic writing instructor discovers, students have a limited ability to explore any subject in depth, to delve deeply and mine out varied dimensions and ramifications of a topic. Among the words I hear myself use most often are “elaborate” and “enlarge upon,” and few comments flow out of my pen more often than “needs more explanation.” Hence, I felt it was essential that the class select an individual story and follow it for a week or two. In this way, they could present a fully detailed account, an anatomy of a major public event as filtered through the network news. In addition to comprehension, they could supply a shrewder, more discerning perspective on TV journalism and how it handles major stories. I urged everyone to pick a controversial story because it was likely to test the resources of a news staff more strenuously, and, fortunately, life cooperated by supplying an incident which was all I could have hoped for in terms of explosiveness and universal emotional appeal—the case of Bernhard Goetz, the New York straphanger who, in December, 1984, vaulted to international fame by shooting four Black teenagers he thought were trying to rob him. An overwhelming percentage of my students chose this story, and the result were enormously gratifying. I doubt that any homework assignment I have ever given has generated such impassioned commitment. It pumped new life into the old cliché “passions ran high.” As a result, it became the one story about which the class was able to make informed judgments on the quality of TV reporting and offer allegations about bias which they could back up.

As the case unfolded, the class scrutinized each new wrinkle and revelation with the intensity of research scientists observing the behavior of a unique new organism. One of the major deficiencies in their written work, absence of supporting detail, vanished dramatically. In its place was a seemingly limitless storehouse in which every particular of the case could fit comfortably. An astonishing precision of reference appeared in their work, enough to bring joy to the heart of any instructor whose immemorial injunction to “Be specific and use examples” had generally been issued in vain. As a result, it was possible to learn that the four youths who approached Goetz were wearing jump suits, were allegedly carrying sharpened screwdrivers, asked for a match and then five dollars, etc. Later disclosures which modified the earliest accounts were eagerly absorbed and integrated into the assignments: two of the boys were shot in the back, one was shot a second and third time because he “didn’t look so bad,” and only two of the youths actually approached Goetz. (I tried the antique Chaplin gag on defeating a gang single-handedly—

“I surrounded ’em”—and it worked. Eventually everything old becomes new again.)

A number of students were severely critical of TV news coverage, arguing that television—and the media in general—had jumped to too many conclusions about Goetz and glorified him too quickly, or at least created a convenient scenario by which the public could accomplish this glorification. “They made him out to be a hero when they hardly had any facts yet,” a student claimed. “They should have waited before they made everyone think Goetz was like Charles Bronson or somebody like that. They called him the ‘Death Wish’ killer, which immediately made him sound like he was in the right. Look how wrong they all turned out to be when the facts came out more completely.” From the beginning, reporters had not investigated the evidence sufficiently or made an effort to sort out fact from half-truths and probable fictions. Several students drew the surprisingly shrewd conclusion that the media was a business, like any other, and was telling the public what it wanted to hear about this sensational and unprecedented case in order to attract viewers: “This was a big story, and they played it up so the public would watch their show,” someone wrote. Since I have always found ghetto- and barrio-bred students to be somewhat naive and gullible when it comes to the media (they are often devout believers in *The National Enquirer*, for example), it was rewarding to witness the growth of a salutary skepticism.

The only negative feature of this component of my news project was the racial polarity that developed. It reflected the widening fault line which split the larger society, as more information about the Goetz case became available. After the initial symmetry of response between the races, my Black students soon parted company with the Hispanics and the few nonHispanic whites in class. Rightly or wrongly, Black swiftly gravitated toward an anti-Goetz position, while the others remained fairly steadfast in their support. Still, there was no friction of any kind—only a spirited debate.

Perhaps the most inevitable of topics in studying broadcast journalism is a juxtaposition of TV coverage with that of newspapers and magazines. Needless to say, limiting the class to one major story will produce the best focused results. An English teacher is almost certain to harbor a preference for written journalism, and hence it is distressing (if predictable) that the majority of students in developmental writing classes rank television news above the print medium. There is no comparison between a verbal account of a news event and a visual rendering, they say. For them, children of the TV generation, the word bringeth not life—only the picture. The impact of live footage is hypnotic to them and cannot be duplicated on the page, even if that page is in *Time* or *Life* and is bedecked with action photos in color. Here are some of the comments: “The TV news helps you look at a story more, and it puts you into the news; it also shows you a little humor and doesn’t make it as boring as when you’re reading it.” “On the TV news they make it very interesting; they don’t leave out points. But in the newspapers they seem to be pro-

viding too much information.” “Comparing network news to magazines and newspapers, I found TV news to be more lively, factual and complete. In contrast to television news, newspapers and magazines were more questionable as to facts and had a tendency to prolong their points making them dull, while causing me to lose interest.” “Every time Warner Wolfe on Channel 2 [the CBS New York City station] reports the sports events, he always has a very amusing comment to make about something. When you read the sports in the paper you always get the facts that occurred without any humor.” Fortunately, there were a few dissenting opinions, almost always from the brighter members of the class: “The newspapers tell more of the little details of a story than TV does. These details may seem trivial to some people but quite important to others. For example, in the case of the screenwriters strike, the papers told what provoked the strike and they told some of the strikers’ personal stories, whereas the TV news only told of the strike and what shows were shut down because of it.” “Television does not produce the news better than magazines and newspapers; it only has more vivid pictures to offer because of the impact of actually seeing something. The newspapers offer far more facts and cover a much wider range of subjects than TV. A story about a foreign country will get more attention in the papers than on TV because television news prefers to tell you about local affairs.”

The instructors’ frustrations are enhanced when they discover, as I did, that, in addition to evaluating the worth of the respective news outlets incorrectly, the students regard TV newscasters as more objective than their colleagues on newspaper staffs! Here the municipal setting in which I work is unquestionably a factor. Given a choice between two sensationalistic tabloids, the *New York Post* and the *Daily News* and one formidable serious newspaper, *The New York Times*, most students in a remedial English class will opt for the *Post* or the *News*, where the big stories are usually bedizened and gussied up. To correct the class’s superficial impressions in this regard, I distributed coverage of a major story from the *Post*, the *News* and the *Times* and either *Time* or *Newsweek*. Once they had the evidence in front of them, the students were able to make more discriminating judgments. The hyperbolic headlines of the two tabloids, alongside the more restrained, dignified version in the *Times*, were enough to put the matter into perspective, while most could make sensible contrasts between the emotionally charged writing of the *Post* and the *News* and the sobriety of the *Times*. “They want you to think it’s one way,” wrote one student, “and only that way. But in the *Times* it could be either way.” For students who have never given much thought to such issues, and for whom terms like “objective” and “subjective” are at best only dimly understood, this is a meaningful intellectual advance. Still more encouraging was their ability to see the differences between the writing in local newspapers and that of news magazines, which have perfected an interpretive style aimed at entertaining the reader while informing him at the same time. Care is taken to provide balanced coverage, and conflicting points of view are always represented, but the reader feels the presence of an authorial (or editorial)

voice. One could hardly quarrel with the assertion that most TV reporting is more objective than *Time* or *Newsweek*.

An enterprising instructor might want to carry my experiment to its logical and most dramatic conclusion: having the class set up its own broadcast team and put its version of the news "on the air." The content could be made up of either the major international, national, and local stories of the week or campus events. Since there is no limit to the number of potential "special reports," everyone in class could have an assignment. Student involvement of this sort is always the best antidote to apathy and passivity. Some students would no doubt be shy about making presentations, while others would take readily to the exciting role of newsperson they have seen so often on the TV screen, clutching the microphone and announcing confidently to imaginary millions: "This is Sonia at the site of the accident. I'm speaking to two of the victims..." What better way to cap the experiment than videotaping it and critiquing the performances? Michael J. Witsch, who teaches video production at a New York high school, has elaborated upon this idea, describing various technical features which can be employed (35).

In the foregoing discussion, I have emphasized that sharpened critical faculties and an enlarged awareness of the dynamics of the news media are key educational accomplishments. Equally important to me is the inculcation of a sounder, more sophisticated mastery of writing skills. I mentioned earlier, instructors can achieve this in a strictly conventional way by simply building a traditional grammar component into the lesson plan, one in which the students must rewrite their work according to each instructor's specifications. I have also tested more creative strategies, such as having the students write their own account of a designated news story from sketchy notes on the board. All the bare bones of an event can be supplied without robbing students of the opportunity to flesh them out. Next I like to show a tape of a well-known newsperson giving his or her rendering of the same story. I then hand out transcriptions of the segment and perhaps a good newspaper account. (Instructors who don't have a VCR and access to a video hookup for their classroom through the college audio-visual department would have to bypass the in-class viewing.) Asked to revise what they have done, using the professional versions as paradigms, the students can derive considerable benefit. They are forced to see their own work on a subject in close juxtaposition to that of practicing newsmen. In such a context, it is fairly easy to present students with alternatives to their own diction and sentence patterns, and, because they are examining hot-off-the-wire (or tube) journalistic renderings of a timely, newsworthy occurrence, these models are more accessible than typical textbook examples, which can seem both remote and terribly intimidating.

One of my more successful applications of this approach concerned a gripping story from London on a race riot in the Tottenham section in early October, 1985. After assigning a paragraph-long synopsis of the event based on a skeletal outline I supplied, I gave them Peter Jennings' ABC *World News* summary of the ugly episode, along with an account

from *The New York Times*. On the basis of these materials, I asked the class to overhaul their own treatments and fulfill three new requirements; (1) increase the specificity and vividness of their work by drawing on the new fund of details at their disposal; (2) incorporate a list of words which were not likely to be part of their working vocabulary but which the professional stories used—including *erupt*, *succumb*, *berserk*, and *rationalization*; and (3) reshape some of their sentences to correspond to more sophisticated syntactical patterns taken from ABC and the *Times* (in particular, complex and compound/complex sentences, and sentences which included elements held in suspension or used in apposition). I encouraged the class to use their own words as much as possible, except where they were interpolating the vocabulary list with which they had been provided.

As in any basic writing class, the results sprawled across the spectrum from feeble to excellent. More than a few students, however, turned in work with approximately as much improvement as the following sample (in which some of the more elaborate sentence structures are underlined):

Original

A riot happened in London last night between the police and black people there. The riot was because the police killed a black woman while they were investigating a crime of theft. The people got mad and threw things at the police and started fires and finally they even killed a policeman. For the first time in England, the people in the riot used guns. This was the fifth time in the last month that blacks in London have gone on a riot. One government leader looked at the situation and said no one had an excuse for this action. But a black leader said there was a lot of police brutality against them all the time. So what do you expect?

Revision

Last night a riot erupted in London, England in the Tottenham section between the police and a large number of black people. *In Tottenham, which is predominantly white, there is a black housing project, which is where all the trouble started.* The blacks threw bricks, bottles and homemade bombs, and also they put cars on fire. They *wielded* weapons, like knives and guns and actually killed a policeman, who was the first one ever killed in a riot. About 240 policeman were hurt.

The people were enraged because the police raided a black woman's home, and while they were searching for stolen goods, she succumbed to a heart attack. Then many black people, especially young males, went berserk. Afterwards, the English minister in charge of law and order said the riot was not justified at all because it was all done by criminals looking for a rationalization. But the black people there say the police are virtually

uncontrollable in their neighborhood. *Many black people, including a mother of six, have been seriously hurt by the police. Not all the violence is by blacks, however, and white people are being violent too, as in the case of a journalist who was stabbed by a white youth.*

Student commentaries like those in this article hardly bear the stamp of scholarly analysis, nor are they written in elegant prose. Nevertheless, they do serve educationally valid ends, increasing comprehension of the subjects at hand and enhancing writing facility. Behind any TV-oriented lesson, there should be a "hidden agenda" aimed at getting the students to read more than they do and to stay abreast of the news. The imagination of writing teachers is probably always going to be linear. Writing teachers will always have an attachment to the written word, to forms of communication in which knowledge is relayed through lines that reach from left to right. We must, however, make an effort to adapt to the orientation of today's students, for whom the linear is infinitely less alluring than a box with pictures. Through experiments such as I have described here, it is possible to help students grow more analytical about that box and use it as a bridge to improved writing skills.

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