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Our Most Precious Heritage

Time that is intolerant
Of the brave and innocent
And indifferent in a week
To a beautiful physique
Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives
Pardons cowardice, conceit
Lays its honours at their feet.

— Auden

Allan Bevan and I came to Dalhousie at the same time, in September 1949. As one of Canada's oldest universities, Dalhousie had long enjoyed a high reputation. But it was then very small. Nearly all the offices of the Arts side of the Faculty of Arts and Science were in what is now the Great Hall of the Faculty Club. Those who have joined the faculties of Dalhousie in the last fifteen years will find it hard to imagine how small Dalhousie was. John Graham, Bob Vingoe, Bill Bernham and Bill Lederman also came to Dalhousie in 1949. I remember how pleased Dr. A.B. Kerr, the then president, was at so large a recruitment of new staff in a single year.

As newcomers the Bevans and the Aitchisons naturally saw much of one another and we became especially close when the Bevans moved into their home on Bellevue Avenue, a home in which both his wife and Allan died and which was not more than a hundred yards from our own. Lura sat next to me at a dinner in our home about two weeks before she died and only four days before her death my wife took her for a short walk. After Lura's death my wife made a point of having Allan to dinner nearly every Saturday night he was not otherwise engaged. Many a Saturday evening after our other guests had gone Allan and I sat alone talking for half an hour or more before the dying embers of the fire while my wife was busy in the kitchen or driving a guest home.

In one of Pritchett's short stories an old man is asked what he is thinking of. The old man tells a lie because he does not want to say that he is thinking about death—as, Pritchett writes, old men often do. Now that I have become old I find myself thinking of death more than I used to, not so much of my own as that of those I have been close to. I had become so close to Allan that his death affected me deeply. I became angry with death. I realized fully for the first time, and brooded on the realization, that the worst thing about a death is the destruction of a mind, a mind full of knowledge acquired over a lifetime, of memories, ideas and affections. I knew Allan's mind as well as I have known anybody's and the destruction of that mind left a great gap in my own and made me think of how wasteful death is.

In our small talk we were completely free with one another. Neither of us had to worry the slightest about shocking or hurting or giving offence to the other. Those who knew Allan know how good he was at telling stories and how much he liked hearing good stories. We exchanged them, talked about colleagues, friends and former students. He had little interest in my specialty, politics, and as I was not competent to talk about his, we rarely touched on either. But I knew he was interested in Canadian literature and I would pass on to him clippings I had made of reviews of the writings of Canadian authors. Now that he is gone I miss having these simple acts of friendship to perform.

But we had one academic interest in common. Both of us cared for, and realized the importance of, writing good, clear, precise, accurate English prose. We often talked about the finer and some of the disputable points of English usage. He did not always agree with me on disputable points but he usually did. He was interested and sometimes amused at the efforts I made in my writing classes and always encouraged me to keep them up. So I have chosen as the subject of this essay what Bernard Levin once called our most precious heritage and particularly my experience with the writing classes I offered over a period of eight years.

I took the obligation of conducting a writing class very seriously. I gave a great deal of thought to it. Every year I was dissatisfied with what I had accomplished and throughout the year made written or mental notes of ways in which I thought I could improve my performance the following year. I regularly attended the meetings of those who offered writing classes (when notified of them) in the hope of learning something from the experience of others. In 1978 and every year thereafter, in order to do what I had come to realize needed to be done and at the same time cover adequately the political science topics I wanted to take up, I divided my class into four writing workshops,

making sure that no student was precluded by other timetable obligations from attending at least one of them every week.

The most important conclusion I had come to was strongly confirmed by the four symposia that were held in the spring of 1982 on methods of improving the writing of university students. Those offering writing classes were invited to attend and a few experts were brought in to give us the benefit of their expertise. Probably none of us had enough time to say all we would have liked to say and I know that I did not. Most of the devices mentioned were no doubt serviceable enough but they all seemed to me to miss the heart of the matter. Some of them assumed that students were at a more advanced stage than most first-year students are, for most of them, I have found, had not been schooled even in the most elementary points of English usage. More importantly, they all seemed to assume that all students realize the importance of writing good English and are eager to improve their own. Although there are always some students in a first-year class who do not need to be persuaded of the importance of learning to write correct and good English, many others, if not most, do. At least that was so in my first-year classes. Far too many of my students did not see the importance of learning to write well and were unwilling to do the hard work and thinking such learning requires. Some of them clearly could not have cared less.

The evidence for this was overwhelming. Some carefully corrected essays were never picked up. Not the slightest attention was paid to the corrections on many others that were. I put several copies of George Orwell's famous essay 'Politics and the English Language' on reserve in the Killam Library and told my students to read it. A check showed that few bothered. After the first few of my writing workshops, attendance at these rapidly and dramatically fell off, however lively and entertaining I tried to make them.

Eventually it dawned on me that the heart of the matter is the need, by hook or by crook, to get most students to realize the importance of learning to write good English and to inspire them to make the hard effort required: to turn reluctant learners into enthusiastic learners. This is the hardest trick of all. But once it is accomplished, and I have accomplished it with a few, all too few, there is little need of further 'devices'. All that needs to be done is to tell students what's what and why. One student of mine caught fire only in the second term of one year; thereafter his progress was rapid. At the end of another year, after the final examinations were over, a student came into my office. He had been indifferent about learning to write well but he had, he said, at last seen the light. He regretted not having attended my writing workshops and no doubt he would have learned more, and more

rapidly, if he had. But, he said, and he was right, he was now highly motivated and that was the most important thing. Undergraduates should be taught, above all, how to learn. Students with sufficient intelligence to be admitted to a university should graduate with an ability to teach themselves. I think that most faculty members will find on reflection that, though built on what they had learned during the years of their formal education, most of the knowledge they have acquired has been the result of self-teaching. But motivation is a prerequisite and the sad fact is that many students admitted to Dalhousie in recent years have been insufficiently motivated. My success with a few has done something to compensate for my failure with so many others.

It is possible to master all the nuts and bolts of writing correct English without being able to write a good essay. Evelyn Waugh once wrote: "I believe that what makes a writer, as distinct from a clever and cultured man who can write, is an added energy and breadth of vision which enables him to conceive and complete a structure." There are, of course, many other requirements of good English prose. Miss Bowen no doubt paused for a moment correcting the syntax or reconsidering the punctuation of a sentence; she probably spent more time finding the precise word or expression she wanted. But the fact that she called shape the most important thing—the shape of a sentence (correct syntax, grammar and punctuation are not sufficient for the production of a shapely sentence), the shape of a paragraph, of a chapter, of a whole novel—suggests that she found giving shape to her writings the most worrisome of her problems. And so it is, particularly that of arranging material in a coherent and orderly fashion for the whole of a piece or writing, even for one so short as an essay. With much experience of writing the task doubtlessly becomes easier but the most experienced, articulate and literate of writers always have to give some thought and often much thought to it.

Unfortunately, many students who have completed Grade XII have had little experience in writing and hence in organizing essays. It is not very difficult to teach students how to improve their spelling, punctuation, grammar and syntax, but it is very difficult to teach them how to organize the material of an essay. I usually handed out a list of assignments at the first meeting of a new class and on that list was a term essay due in about eleven weeks. One year a young woman shortly after getting my list came into my office and said 'Please, Professor Aitchison, how do you write an essay? Did you not write compositions in high school? I asked. Not since Grade IX, she replied. Surely, I said, you had classes in English after Grade IX. She had, but all that her classes in English did in her last three years of high school

was to sit around and talk. I was almost at a loss for something to say. The most effective way I know of teaching how to organize an essay is to re-organize a student's effort with the student at one's elbow. I said something about the importance and difficulty of organizing the material of an essay and told her to do the best she could and I would go over her completed effort with her.

I also told her to be sure to attend my first writing workshop. For, after all, I had come to discover some general things about the organization of an essay that I thought would be helpful. As all my students were confronted by the term-essay requirement and as many were as much at a loss as my young woman, I started making my first theme the large one of the preparation for an essay and of its construction as a whole. I told my students that a good essay could not be clobbered together in the few days before it was due, that it required reading and thinking over a longer period, that there was an extensive literature on all of the topics I had offered, that they would not have time to read more than a portion of it but they had to read some of it and to think about what they read, that they could not put in an essay of about three thousand words all the points raised in what they did read, that they had to keep thinking while they read of what to include and what to exclude, that an essay is judged partly by the selection that has been made; and also that they should keep in mind as they read the problem of organization, that if they did they would probably find a tentative shape forming in their minds, that this shape would probably alter as would their decisions on what to include and exclude, as they contrived to read and think, that if it helped they could make a formal plan but that they should start at least with some shape in mind and that the final shape might emerge during the course of writing. I told them that they had to get cracking right away and closed by warning them that the best is often the enemy of the good and the good of the passable. Their task was to do the best they could in the time available, but if they were to do that they had no time to waste.

I then turned in my workshops to what I have called the heart of the matter. Most students who are indifferent to writing well are not to blame for their indifference. There is no doubt that the quality of English in recent decades has been deteriorating. In 1978 Leon Botstein wrote that he thought the English language was dying. More illiterates and semi-literates are writing and being published than there used to be, among them some university professors and other presumably highly educated persons. "More words," observed a letter-writer to *The Times*, "are now being printed and broadcast by the illiterate than the literate." The reason for the decline is clear. There developed in English-speaking countries two widely held notions. One of them was

that good writing is unimportant. The other was that insistence on it is undemocratic: because not every one has the capacity to learn to write well, to stress it is elitist. Consequently good writing ceased to be taught. The decline, Leon Botstein has said, is due to this simple fact. He found the elitist charge odd because no exception has ever been made to excellence in sports. It is not surprising that the conclusion many students came to was this: "Why bother? Our teachers haven't bothered to teach us and nobody any longer cares for good writing; besides it is undemocratic." One cheer for democracy!

There have always been some, of course, who still cared, but many, discouraged by the extent of the rot that had set in, threw up their hands and thought that those who can write really well would progressively become fewer. I am not so pessimistic. I believe with Orwell that more can be saved. The lifeboat is roomy enough for all who can and want to be saved. I have cordially invited all my students to climb aboard.

I found it useful to quote the following sentences on the morality of language from Kathleen Nott's *The Good Want Power*.

The morality of language—and obviously and increasingly a great part of our language-usage is immoral—depends on real description or reference, and a real intention of communication as precise as we can make it... Knowing what one means, saying what one means, meaning what one says—and abjuring rhetoric—these constitute the morality of language (p. 284).

We must find out how to teach and encourage children to think realistically and to express their thoughts accurately, fully and without superfluity. Primary—and fundamental—scholastic education would consist in learning to use one's own language with the intention of honesty and accuracy to the best of one's ability, under the guidance of older people who have learned how to do it themselves, and in ever fuller communication with them (p. 290).

Before they come to university most students are aware, if dimly, that many English words have several meanings. But their consciousness of this fact needs to be raised. I took the opportunity of Nott's title, derived from Shelley, to offer a brief comment on this fact before going on to the main point I wanted to make. What Nott meant was not that the good desire but that they lacked it.

The lesson that it is really immoral not to learn to write well if one is capable of learning is a useful one. Nott neatly destroys at one stroke both the elitist charge and the notion that good writing does not matter. That not all can learn makes it all the more important that those who can, do. All should be given an ample opportunity to learn to the best of their abilities.

Nott, however, puts forward one of the higher reasons for learning to write well. Because I wanted at the outset to catch the attention of those students who might not be moved by the higher reasons, I started in my last few years of teaching to begin with the more material and immediate advantages. Happily, a healthy reaction has set in though it still has a long way to go. More of those who have authority over students and will have authority over them when they seek and obtain employment are demanding better writing. Some students will want to apply for scholarships or admittance to graduate or professional schools, and nearly all of them will eventually have to apply for jobs. Many positions, even quite minor ones, in both government and business now require much writing to be done. Memoranda, reports, letters, information pamphlets of all kinds have to be written and increasingly those who write them are judged by the quality of their writing. Once, in the good old days when the Department of Political Science was solely responsible for the teaching of public administration I asked D. H. Fullerton, then Chairman of the National Capital Commission to speak to those of our students who hoped to enter the public service. I asked him to tell them what was the most important thing for public administrators to learn. I knew what his answer would be: "To write!" he exclaimed. He said that hundreds of letters addressed to him came into his office, that he had no time to write himself all the replies that required his signature, that whenever he found a subordinate whose draft replies left him with nothing more to do than to read them and to scribble his signature, that subordinate got promoted. I have since pointed out to all my students who came to listen that with the increasing recognition of the importance of good writing, more and more superiors are becoming like Fullerton.

In passing on to the higher reasons I told them that I did not want them to try to improve their writing merely to meet any university requirement or for the material advantages that probably would accrue, that external sanctions were not enough to turn them into enthusiastic students, that if they became enthusiastic their progress would be more rapid, and that therefore they had to know the higher reasons. The English language, I said, is one of the greatest of modern languages, but the question which is the greatest is an idle one and I did not claim that English was greater than, among others, German, French, Spanish, Italian or Russian. Bernard Levin, who once called the English language our most precious heritage, would no doubt agree that to the Germans their language is their most precious heritage. The Russian language, a famous Russian writer had said, was Russia. The point about the English language is that it is ours. A precious heritage ought to be given the greatest care and not allowed to

become defaced through neglect. Those who cared not for the preservation of our great and beautiful language were not worthy of their inheritance.

I presented some of the statements on language that I had culled from a large variety of sources and commented on them. One of them was Kathleen Nott's. Here are some others:

Oliver Wendell Holmes (through the mouth of one of his characters in "The Professor at the Breakfast Table"):

Language!—the blood of the soul, Sir, into which our thoughts run and out of which they grow.

Northrop Frye:

There is only one way to degrade mankind and that is to destroy language.

Colin Seymour-Ure:

Without communication there is no society.

A.N. Whitehead:

Language is our most habitual method of conveying to others our state of mind.

Dorothy Formaloe (a teacher at St. Clair College, Windsor, in a letter to the *Globe and Mail*):

One of the attributes of a civilized and educated person is the ability to read, write and speak his own language.

George Orwell:

A man may take to drink because he feels himself a failure and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but slovenliness in our language makes it easier to have foolish thoughts.

Malcom Cowley:

No complete son-of-a-bitch ever wrote a good sentence.

I concluded my workshops on the importance of good writing by referring to the enormous satisfaction that one gets when one knows that one has written something well and even when one realizes that one's writing is improving:—and to the pleasure one gets from giving pleasure to others. I said that it was hard to learn to write well, particularly if one has not been taught the rudiments of good English

in elementary and high school, but it is worth the effort. I quoted one Edna Goldstein:

Writing is a painful business, but the pleasure of building up a single lucid paragraph far exceeds the pain involved; while the conquest of a difficult sentence, which obstinately defies the author's control, and struggles snakelike in his grasp, is sometimes even more rewarding.

Writing at its best, I said, was a high art and good prose gives as much pleasure to those who appreciate it as does the other high arts. I quoted Paul Fussell on Peter Quennell: 'his sentences were calculated to delight'. I likened the pleasure to that of those who have learned to appreciate well-performed classical music.

I found that the most regular attendants of my workshops were generally those who needed least to be inspired to become enthusiastic and who already wrote quite well. Did they waste their time coming and listening to my passionate utterances on the importance of good writing? Somewhere along the way I said I did not think so: those who realized its importance might not know all the reasons why it is important or could not articulate them. If they really cared for good writing they would, like me, want to make as many converts as possible. They would be more likely to make them if they knew and could articulate all the reasons. I sent them forth into the world to spread the good news.

I kept harping briefly in many of my regular classes on the subject, often presenting another apt quotation I had come across. My purpose was to lure more students back to my workshops. I employed other 'devices' with the same purpose. I netted a few.

I had warned my students at the outset that I would correct every illiteracy however seemingly trivial in their written work. I asked them to write out five times and hand in the correct spellings of words they had got wrong and sometimes short sentences such as

The possessive of *it* is *its*, not *it's*.
The possessive of a noun requires an apostrophe.
A dependent clause doth not a sentence make.

I got after those who did not hand in their corrections. But I had no coercive force at my disposal. Only in my last year of teaching did I think of and apply an effective sanction: I told the delinquents that I would not hand in final grades for them until they got their corrections in.

I early discovered that with the best will in the world I could not by means of corrections and written comments on essays do all that needed to be done to teach the nuts and bolts of good English. I could

not suggest a reconstruction of every badly constructed sentence; there was little point in referring to the possessive case or the apostrophe or jotting down "split infinitive," "dangling participle," or "comma splice" when many students did not know the meanings of such terms. Moreover, though English spelling is notorious for not being consistently phonetic it is not necessary to learn the spelling of all English words one by one: the phonetic approach can carry one a long way. There are phonetic guidelines or rules though many exceptions to them. It is more economical to learn the phonetically based rules, the exceptions to them and the exceptions to the exceptions, than to dispense entirely with the rules. I realised that many of my students required formal instruction in the rudiments of English usage. I could not provide this by means of written comment on essays however much time I was willing to devote to them. Nor could I spare the time in my regular classes and still do justice to the political science content of the course. To provide this instruction was the principal reason I instituted my workshops though, as any reader of this essay has seen, I came to discover two others than I put first.

Before taking up the different nuts and bolts one by one I talked about the importance of "trifles." I quoted John Fowles: "I do believe that almost all major human evils come from the betrayal of the word at a very humble level." I found in Chapter 6 of Richard Mitchell's *Less Than Words Can Say* a treatment of the importance of "trifles" that could not be bettered, and made good use of it. "Should we recognize that 'Writing' is just a careless error, a slip of the finger, a minor and momentary lapse?" he asks. "Are mistakes of this order worthy of serious concern?" His answer to the second question is a resounding Yes. He had caught out the executive secretary of the Michigan Board of Pharmacy writing "The costs of the administration of the act is considered...." After pointing out that we sometimes do not know whether a subject is singular or plural he writes:

There's no question, however, about "costs" and when the executive secretary of the Michigan Board of Pharmacy says costs is considered, he is wrong. He has not been overcome by the awesome complexities of the English language, he has not failed to find the appropriate expression of a complicated idea, he has not violated the metaphoric consistency of his letter, he has simply made a mistake. It's not much of a mistake; it's something like the mistake a pharmacist might make when he gives you the wrong pills.

Of course, we take the pharmacist's mistake more seriously, since it might result in death or at least convulsions. But the executive secretary's is still an example of careless imprecision which, in this case, has simply not resulted in sudden death or convulsions. For the concerns of our society, though, the executive secretary's mistake is *more* significant than the pharmacists'. It suggests that a man in an important position, a

functionary of government, *is careless and thoughtless in doing his work and that he seems not to have learned the habit of precision and correctness.* (The second emphasis is mine).

If you avoid illiteracies, I told my students, you will give your readers confidence that you have formed the habit of precision and correctness in other things.

I also made use of the Prologue to *The Complete Plain Words* where it is pointed out that the job of the writer is not merely so to write that his meaning is clear to himself; it is also to make it clear to his readers. Robert Louis Stevenson is quoted: "The difficulty is not to write but to write what you mean, not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish." But writers may fail to affect their readers precisely as they wish even if they succeed in making their meaning clear to them. Readers, I pointed out, may be adversely affected by illiteracies alone. I quoted Richard Adams, a British novelist: "A well-written book is like a pretty girl: one starts with a favourable bias that is not easily removed."

I have intimated that I tried hard to make my workshops lively and entertaining. The illiteracies that now abound in published English gave many an opportunity for fun. If published English became entirely free of illiteracies knowledgeable readers of English would be deprived of much hilarity. (There is little danger of that.) I am indebted to the *New Yorker* and the *New Statesman* for calling attention to the following examples of faulty syntax;

Strapped to her legs, the customs officers found 2 lb of heroin. (*New Statesman*)

A recipe for Sheftalia caught my eye, which serves six. (*Ibid.*)

Pete was being interrogated about previous instances of fire-raising by Mr. Donald Farquharson, QC. (*Ibid.*)

Mr. Cox said the baby was conceived while studying in England (*New Yorker*)

Beverly Whipple's ground-breaking discoveries about female sexuality delivered to the Society for the Study of Sex with John D. Perry, placed her immediately in the public eye and made her one of the foremost authorities on a new and controversial area of human sexuality. (*New Yorker's* comment: Where did it place John D. Perry?)

I happen to be among the hardest of hardliners on splitting the infinitive and I am prepared to hold my own against Fowler, Gowers, Strunk and White, the editors of the *New Yorker* or anyone else. One of my arguments against ever splitting is that those who think they

need to be on their guard are more likely to use redundant adverbs. Of the two examples I give below, the second, a motherhood motion to amend a recommendation, recorded in the minutes of a meeting of Dalhousie's Faculty of Arts and Science, is less amusing than the first but it serves to demonstrate that university professors can fall into the trap.

[They] lack the city-bred exhibitionism that allows eastern girls *to positively clamor* for the click of the shutter, bras cheerfully removed, nipples at full point.

That the Faculty do all it can to support the efforts of the secondary schools *to successfully prepare* for matriculation those students who are enrolled in courses leading to the university.

How can students be unsuccessfully prepared to anything? If attempts had been made to put these adverbs outside the infinitive, their superfluousness would have become immediately apparent.

General Lee's last words are said to have been "Strike the tent!" Russell Baker commented:

The Lee line is hard to improve upon, but as a writer—if I may give myself aesthetic airs in preparing for my last moment—I would have to adjust it slightly. I have three variations under debate: (1) Strike the dangling participle! (2) Avoid tautology, redundancy, and ambiguity! (3) Get rid of those adjectives!

I am better prepared than Baker. (I had better be - I am in the second lustrum of my eighth decade and my seventies are slipping by altogether too quickly for my liking.) I am quite sure that my (famous?) last words will be: Strike the ITO factor!

I invited my students to look at the following:

In terms of understanding Canadian society, in terms of the evolution of my writing style, and in terms of my own philosophical awakening, Christina has been a dominating influence.

Who had perpretated this awful sentence? I asked. Peter C. Newman, that's who, The Peter C. Newman who had graduated from two elite institutions—Upper Canada College and the University of Toronto—who was then the editor of *MacLean's*, who had published a million or more words. Peter and Christina had recently been divorced; why they got divorced was none of my business or theirs. But if that sentence was the result Christina's influence on the evolution of Peter's writing style and on "his own personal" philosophical awakening, Peter had needed no other grounds.

There was no shortage of amusing examples and no shortage of topics. I could not cover all the rudiments and finer points in a weekly

fifty-minute period. But I managed to cover many of them and to send some of my students away prepared to learn more on their own.

Why after all this effort did I succeed with so few? Had I not tried hard enough or was there something wrong with my methods? I decided the reason could not be either for those with whom I did succeed were enthusiastic about what I had done for them. I concluded that the sanctions applied by the Faculty were not severe enough and that two grades should be given for writing classes, one for content and one for style.

The only sense I have ever been able to make of Rousseau's comment about men having to be forced to be free is that he meant that they needed to be forced to act as if they were free. After being forced so to act many of them would become free. Many youngsters, though talented, are unwilling to put in the long hours of practice required to make good musicians. But if, by means of one sanction or another, they are induced to practise, some will come to do willingly what they had started to do only under threat of penalty or promise of reward.

I longed for the day to come when I could tell my students that they would not graduate until they obtained a separate passing grade for the writing requirement of a writing class and that if they did not get it in mine they would have to get it in a second or third writing class. Had I been able to tell them this many more would have attended my workshops and studied the marked illiteracies on their returned essays. The separate grade is essential. Students who write well can usually master enough of the subject matter of a class to satisfy the examiner. I have sometimes lowered the grades of students a notch or two because of the quality of their writing. But the writing of these students was still good enough to earn them a pass on the writing component as well as on their grasp of subject matter. But what about those students whose grasp of the subject matter was less firm, but still sufficient, and whose writing was so bad that lowering their grades would result in F's for the whole course?

The stock objection to a separate grade, which I have often heard in recent years within the faculty, is that style and content are inseparable. This is simply not true. If it were, the injunction to members of the faculty to take both into account would not make sense. How many of us, knowing what we wanted to express, have groped, not always successfully, for the precise word and the right sentence in which to express it? Aldous Huxley (I paraphrase from memory) once deplored his articulateness: as soon as he had a thought a way of articulating it that satisfied him immediately popped into his mind. How nice he imagined it would be to wallow in an uncertainty between thought and

expression. No doubt one of the pleasures of having written well is the feeling of accomplishment one gets from mastering the difficulties, from subduing the sentence that struggles snakelike in one's grasp. I, for one, wish I wallowed less.

I have read many essays and many answers to examination questions that have been full of misspellings, dangling participles, malapropisms and other technical errors, but in which, nevertheless, the students showed they had a sufficient grasp of the subject matter to get a passing grade, if a low one. Should such students be failed and sent forward to the second year short a credit, to be made up perhaps by repeating the class? Would it not be better to give them a passing grade for content, to fail them for not meeting the writing requirement and let them make up that requirement by taking another writing class in the same or another subject?

I know and can answer the other objections that have been made to the separate grade. I was an early advocate of it and fought hard for it in meetings of the liaison group. I thought I had triumphed when a recommendation that it be instituted was placed before the Faculty, but the Faculty tabled it in the spring of 1981 and has not yet picked it up. If the Faculty is really serious about improving the writing of its graduates, it will lift the recommendation off the table and approve it.