

# ***Writing as Civility? Who'd Believe It?***

By Arthur Plotnik

**A**s students wrestle with the sweaty, two-ton mystery of putting words together, shouts for cogency and critical thinking are sure to drop them to their knees. Pile on the notion of writing-as-citizenship, and down goes a shoulder. Now holler for civility, and wham—flat on the mat.

Yet, when it comes to writing, civility is the move that gets the crowd into the game. Writing is, after all, the effort to share one's observations, anxieties, and imaginings with an audience, a community, a society. It's a way to channel self-absorption into social interaction. "I write because I want to end my loneliness," says novelist Jonathan Safran Foer. Without communication, however, nothing is shared or ended; and when writing flouts certain conventions of language, form, and integrity—conventions a society has worked out for its benefit—communication goes splat against the wall.

Think of today's marketplace of expression: papered to the rafters; blog-jammed, MySpaced, and YouTubed; mobbed by a pandemonium of pundits and pontificators elbowing in from every print and digital corner of the world. Here is democracy's cacophony, and those preparing to rise above its rant, hype, propaganda, and demagoguery—to be heard, understood, and valued—need a civil way with sentences as well as the facility of presenting ideas that hold up to scrutiny. Enter critical thinking.

## **A Hard Sell**

**“C**ritical thinking” is one of those terms that draw a few students to debate club and send the rest running for a sugar hit. It's a hard sell unless young writers can view it as a perk of freedom, as the clear-headedness that

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allows for self-determination and a share of clout in the crowd—even if its demands are so daunting one feels woozy just listing a few: *premises laid out neatly; arguments clear, rational, and pointed; biases purged or bared; discourse relating to the audience without pandering to it.*

In writing, critical thinking is a form of civility. It honors the reader's investment; it enriches the corpus of expression; and it sounds as if it's about as much fun as a hair shirt under a hoodie.

Never mind that the product can be stimulating and enlightening. Critical thinking goes against conversational patterns, the daily drool of catch phrases and clichés. Instead, applied to public expression in a free society, critical thinking bids one to say clearly and precisely what one means, arbitrating between feelings, beliefs, facts, and judgments—because no dictator is providing the service.

## Where the Fun Is

**N**ot all student essays will call for gear-grinding critical thought. (Heaven help us!) Nor, as educators well know, must assignments in critical writing be joylessly spartan. Every teacher these days can target themes that excite young ganglia. Even the most inane areas of pop culture invite thoughtful critical approaches. At this writing, and on the basis of my own lame understanding of teen passions, I am thinking of something like the following:

*Theme:* Honesty on the show *American Idol*

*Premise:* Honesty rewards true merit.

*Argument:* The show is dishonest. So-and-so deserved to win because . . . .

Suddenly the abstractions that define critical thinking grow faces: maybe the iconic mugs of Simon, Paula, and Randy, but faces now seen in a fresh, analytic light. (Ideally, such analyses will be informed by research into the show's origins, personalities, mandates, methods, critical reception, and the like.)

## Now Comes Rhetoric

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**O**.K.—the student has applied critical thinking to the theme paper, has worked up a sober draft with the *t* crossed in every *thus* and *therefore*. Now comes an opportunity to imbue argument with personality—to experience, stumblingly, the fun of styling prose.

One path to style bears an unlikely sign: *rhetoric*. Writing guides tend to duck this term, owing to its association with political claptrap or with your grandfather’s fire-breathing English instructors. Some educators may feel that the emotional nuances of “style” compromise critical thinking. In its best contemporary sense, however, rhetorical style is the art of persuasive *language* (apart from argument), of tellin’ it real, with felicitous words and style and grace. Its highest purpose? To lend appeal to argument, exposition, or story by delighting the aesthetic sense. Its value to society (including teachers)? Communication that not only is less painful than gallstones but that also sometimes rocks.

I hear Aristotle’s teeth gnashing, but as I see it, he might have titled his *Rhetoric* something a little more fun, something like, oh, *Spunk & Bite* (*spunk* for integrity of argument, *bite* for power of language). Where’s the fun for students in all this? It’s in discovering how time-honored rhetorical methods and devices—especially figures of speech, or *tropes*—are up-to-date friends from everyday expression, and how they give bite to critical writing.

The point is not to pummel students with rhetorical terms, which few writers have at hand, but to let them know that argument can be enlivened by this cool thing called rhetoric, by an established set of devices available for emphasis as needed.

The punchy presence of such devices can be revealed using almost any patch of schoolyard gab:

“Omigod [*invocation*], that big mouth [*synecdoche*] be goin’ for class president like Spidey chasin’ Sandman [*allusion, simile, hyperbole*]. Me vote for him? Yeah, right [*antiphrasis*]. Like I’m totally [*intensifier*] charmed [*sarcasm*] because he rocks [*anthimeria*] that hoodie and got bling [*neologism*] in his grill [*metaphor*]. Student body gonna jump out its skin [*personification*] before he gets elected.”

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Critical writing also draws power from the figurative:

The time for setting the nation's voting age at 16 has landed like intelligent life from the stars [*simile, hyperbole*]. Can we blindly ignore it [*epilexis*]? At the heart [*personification*] of Generation Y are roughly 10 million American citizens who are 16- to 17-years old, their very number a silent cry [*oxymoron*] for representation. While most nations have been less than progressive [*litotes*] in fostering this suffrage, perceptive legislators [*comprobatio*] see the idea taking root [*metaphor*]: The 16-and-overs have the vote in Nicaragua; they have the vote in Cuba; they have the vote in Brazil [*gradatio*]; and they will have it [*asphalia*] in Austria, where studies show [*apomnemonysis*] 16- and 17-year-olds to be as interested in politics as other age groups and to possess "an open and critical attitude."

## Rhetoric and Clarity

Everyone roots for clarity in writing: clarity as a gift to the reader, as good manners, as a lever to advance one's meanings. But somehow, possibly from misuse of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, clarity has acquired a doctrine of dry-mouthed austerity. "Use figures of speech sparingly," warned E. B. White, who never met a figure of speech he didn't use robustly. The message some students get is, *avoid* devices like metaphor, hyperbole, and personification in prose—as if they taint clarity by departing from the literal.

Certainly, figurative language can serve to deceive (think of war euphemisms like *collateral damage*). When students use figurative language uncritically, *voilà*: a teaching opportunity. When honestly employed, however, figures of speech intensify both clarity and truth. How? By sparking those non-literal areas of the brain that help interpret the universe. Poetry relies on such ignition. Prose, too, can be illuminated by figurative language. Lively, risk-taking prose, ablaze with attitude, signals an enthusiasm for one's assertions that can be contagious to the modern reader and (if truth-driven) healthy as well.

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## Breaching the Peace

**T**he idea of teaching citizenship through critical writing may recall the old notion of “deportment,” that report-card code for classroom conformity. Critical writing is not about sitting still in received knowledge; it is more the honing of nonconforming ideas into convincing, if sometimes annoying, assertions. When students learn to present even the most rebellious, antagonistic messages with solid argument and stylistic force, are they pains in society’s rear. . . or incipient Paines (as in Thomas), rearing up in all the fury of conviction?

Young writers must have the right to express, without fear of being branded, a society’s ugliest behavior and to shape any imaginings into art. “If they start censoring themselves, then the muse just shuts up,” says Amherst College’s playwright in residence. To paraphrase a San Diego writing teacher, students need to vent the dark, embarrassing, disturbing places in their heads, because that’s where powerful writing lives.

## About the Writer

Arthur Plotnik’s *acclaimed* *Spunk & Bite: A Writer’s Guide to Bold, Contemporary Style (Random House Reference)* hit the shelves this May in a paperback edition that includes a teacher’s guide containing thirty prose-enlivening exercises for students. *The Elements of Editing*, one of his seven books and a *Book-of-the-Month Club* featured selection, presented an editor’s guide to critical analysis of manuscripts and has been widely adopted. A graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop, he edited the *American Libraries* magazine of the American Library Association and is a contributing editor to *The Writer* magazine.

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