

Writing with Style by John R. Trimble

Chapter 9: Critical Analysis

Prologue: In this chapter Trimble takes a venerable 20th century stylist as his central example. H. L. Mencken was a writer with attitude, a passionate thinker whose famous essays provoked and informed, entertained and persuaded. Trimble wants us to see how much fun reading and writing with an analytical and persuasive edge can be. This chapter pairs nicely with the one following, which focuses more on the creative aspects of writing.

1. Although Mencken's essay, "Literature and the Schoolma'm," is dated in many ways, it nevertheless illustrates a lively writer's voice in action. Trimble calls it "an object lesson in word power." Almost every sentence pushes his cynical argument forward. Read the essay carefully, noting his awareness of the reader, his careful diction, the way he signposts his argument at every turn. Do you find yourself being persuaded, if only temporarily, by his mastery?
2. Examine the critical scrutiny that both Trimble and his students use to crack open Mencken's writing. Notice how questioning his assumptions helps them create counterarguments to Mencken's thesis. Critical analysis is an important part of any college education. The ability to see how an argument works empowers you to discover and create your own.
3. Trimble's 10-point analysis of Mencken ends with a defense of the art of critical thought, the paragraph all in italics on page 98. Consider that paragraph's central argument—that to be educated means to develop two simultaneous (and somewhat contradictory) kinds of listening, resulting in a kind of open-minded skepticism. How are you doing at developing this sense in yourself?
4. Take a close look at the student paper by Jolene Shirley, "Can Writing Be Taught?" In her piece, she demonstrates that she has listened carefully to Mencken. Her response involves a clear representation of his thesis, then shifts to her own counter-thesis, which she goes on to develop using a hypothetical lesson, probably based on her experience in Trimble's class. How many traits of good writing do you see in her paper? Anything you might criticize?

Epilogue: Stop for a moment and consider what you've learned so far from Trimble's book. His main title is *Writing with Style*. How has your own writing style changed since you've begun to consider his advice? His subtitle is *Conversations on the Art of Writing*. One of his central lessons is that writing ought to be "conversational." The subtitle also states that writing is an "art." In response to the central debate in Chapter 9, what is your opinion on the subject—can writing be taught?