

LIGHT REFRACTIONS

How Not to Phrase an Assignment

by Thomas H. Middleton

A FEW WEEKS AGO, I mentioned Richard Mitchell and his *The Underground Grammarian*, the superb little paper he writes, edits, and prints and for which he is, officially, assistant circulation manager.

Mitchell comes to the defense of the English language by publishing the output of academics whose writing is garbage and by frequently revealing their salaries as well.

I pledged to follow suit. While I believe that the vast majority of English teachers are conscientious and hardworking and that a somewhat smaller majority are not only conscientious and hardworking but also effective, there are still too many who are taking their paycheck under false pretenses as they inflict severe damage upon the minds of the young people entrusted to their tutelage.

A parent of a high school student recently wrote to me, quoting one of the assignments given to his child:

Re: *The Catcher in the Rye*. HOMEWORK—One-page composition: It is quite obvious that Holden Caulfield is a distinctive protagonist. Explain the intrinsic ramification of Holden's mass appeal and identification to adolescent and young adult readers.

"In his effort to encourage students to learn new words," the parent wrote, "[the teacher] confuses, disorients, and irritates his students by a profuse and constant use of words they don't understand. He fires so many ambiguous notes and questions that the students are left with an understandable tension and frustration about their work. This guy appears to be a threat to the learning of English."

I've left this teacher anonymous, since I know no more about him than what my correspondent reveals in his letter. Let's call him Mr. Groby, after Thurber's notorious Miss Groby.

It is probably a safe bet that Groby is conscientious and hardworking but that he is a victim of the sort of schooling that Mitchell and, I hope, you deplore.

How would you handle the assignment Groby posed?

Intrinsic means "innate," "native," "inherent"; among the definitions *Webster's New International, Third Edition* (WNI III) gives for *ramification* are

"outgrowth" and "consequence."

Now, how about Holden Caulfield? What might the intrinsic ramification of his "mass appeal and identification to adolescent and young adult readers" be?

First, we must understand the assignment. "It is quite obvious that Holden Caulfield is a distinctive protagonist." If, as high school students, we're not sure what a protagonist is, we look it up and find that it is "the chief character of a novel or story in or around whom the action centers" (WNI III). How about *distinctive*? WNI III says, "characteristic," "peculiar," and "special." That's what Holden Caulfield is, all right. Quite obviously.

We accept the fact—easily enough—that Holden appeals to adolescents and to young adults and that many of them identify with him. Now we must decide what the intrinsic ramification of that fact is.

All right; what is the consequence inherent in Holden's mass appeal? I don't know, unless it's that the young people would begin to talk and act like Holden. But since the *reason* for the "mass appeal and identification" is that Holden is already so prototypical of the young people, we are reeling around in a dizzying circularity.

I don't know. Perhaps Groby's

brighter pupils did know, but knowing wasn't enough. They were asked to "explain the intrinsic ramification."

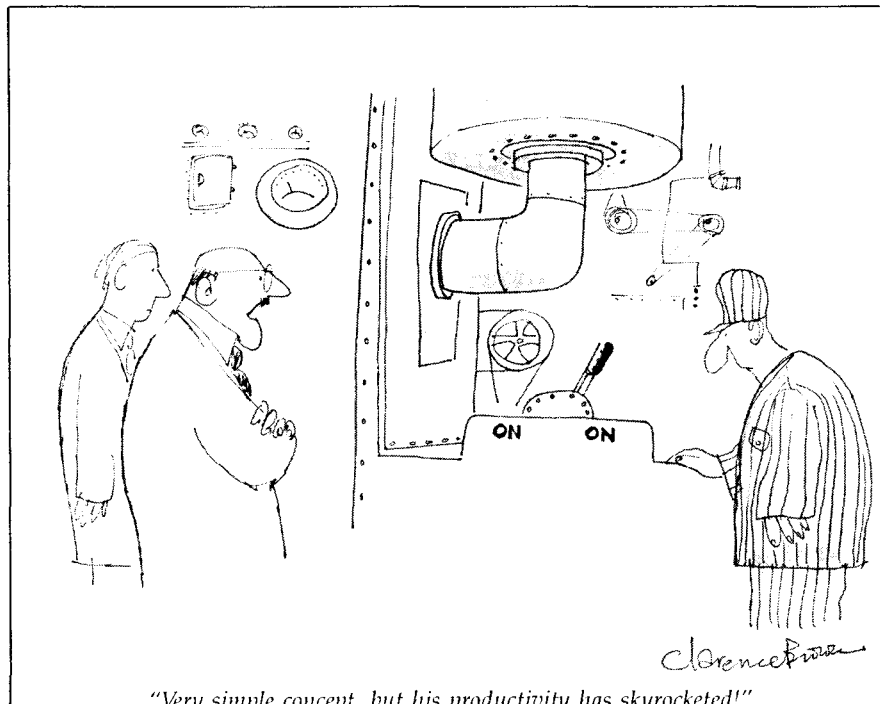
Frankly, I can't blame any high school student who, having deciphered that assignment and discovered what it meant, simply set down the translation and let it go at that.

I've asked a few friends what they thought Groby meant. The consensus is that he probably meant "Explain Holden Caulfield's mass appeal to young readers" but that he garbled it.

I have a strong feeling that Groby is a young man—probably under thirty-five—that he really cares, and that he has a master's degree from one of those schools of education where great value is placed on the number of words in a sentence and on the number of syllables in the words and where the meaning conveyed by those long words and long sentences is about as important as the collar size and sleeve length of the writer.

I devoutly hope that Groby will buy Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* and take some of its precepts to heart.

One thing is certain: Groby will be a better teacher if he makes it easier for his pupils to know what he's talking about. ●



"Very simple concept, but his productivity has skyrocketed!"

TOP OF MY HEAD

The New Person

by Goodman Ace

A MAN WRITES: "I have read SR for many years because it has kept me fully informed. I wish I could say the same for your strange columns, in which I can never find the point you are trying to make, if indeed you had a point to start with."

Well, sir, I can take friendly criticism like that as well as the next nervously insecure columnist—with a grain of aspirin. The irony is that as a writer I have always been in the forefront of the crusade to keep the reader fully informed. In fact, if I were a newspaper, my masthead would proudly proclaim: A FULLY INFORMED READER IS A FULLY INFORMED READER.

So, under that high-flying banner, from this moment on and continuing consecutively at least to my next column, I will attempt to fully inform you, sir. No sweat. Easy as splitting that infinitive. If it's full information you want, sir, today you've come to the right window.

However, before I get into that, I hope you will agree with me that all columnists can't be Russell Baker. The more garrulous of us eventually settle for being Russell Long. Quite often, halfway through writing a column, I find I have used up the full font of my full information and must filibuster my way through the rest of my space.

Not anymore. Today you will find me a changed man—even more

changed than Jimmy Carter (President of the United States... of America). Full enough? No? All right, let's pick a subject. For instance, "Books." Have you wondered how come so many books have been written in prison lately? I'm glad you asked me. Answer: For openers, writing books in prison serves one good purpose. It shuts up a lot of nonwriters who go around saying, "The story of my life would make a great book, if only I had the time to write it." The solution: "Commit a crime and some judge will give you the time" (joke).

But seriously, folks, you too, sir, writing books in prison is not a recent gambit. The author I recall most clearly and fondly was jailed at the turn of the century. He was one of my all-time favorites. His name was Bill Porter. Who he? Okay. To inform you more fully, his full name was William Sydney Porter. Ring a bell? You don't hear anything? I press on. He was born in 1862, in Greensboro, N.C. (North Carolina). As a young man he wandered around, working at several odd jobs until, in 1884, he got a job as a bank teller in Austin, Tex. (Texas).

I hope, sir, you're paying close attention, because I'm reading all of this from a very heavy book in my lap. It says here that a shortage in the bank's funds was discovered and that Bill Porter was convicted and sentenced to

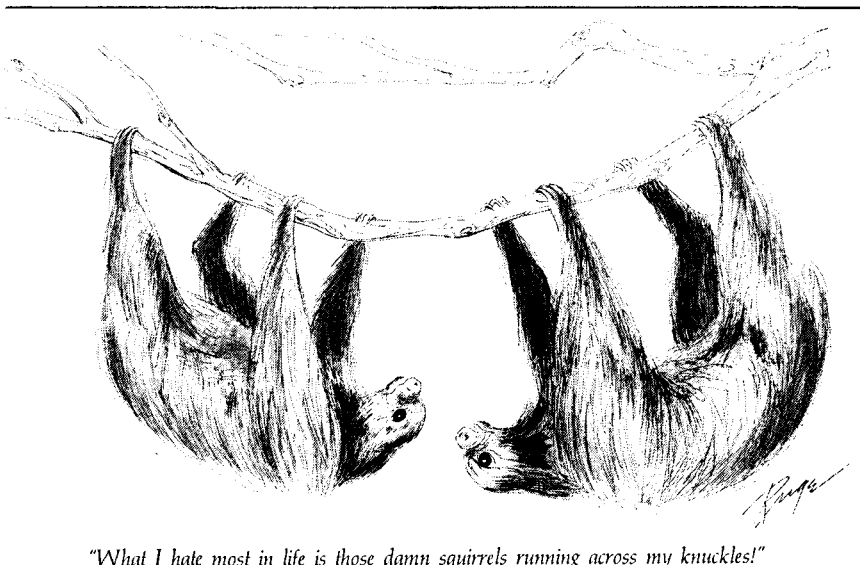
three years in prison—from 1898 to 1901—where he began writing short stories, each of which had a surprise ending. He didn't write under his own name. He used a nom de plume (French. Translation: "name of the pen"). He started writing in the penitentiary, hence the derivative, "pen name."

Still not full enough? Okay, here's one last clue I hoped I wouldn't have to use. Porter came to New York in 1902 and became so popular they named a candy bar after him. Now, if there are still some readers who haven't guessed his pen name, you will never hear it from me or see it in this column. I'm sorry. No, I'm not. This big book in my lap is getting so heavy it may injure me permanently.

On a footnote of comfort for Mr. Porter's fans, I should add that he was later exonerated—no cash shortage. This miscarriage of justice was committed by what was then known as a "hanging judge," who allowed a defendant to plead guilty or innocent. Period. That was justice at the turn of the century. Today, justice is more sophisticated. To the menu of pleas have been added items like "nolo contendere," "mea culpa," and, for all I know, "amo, amas, amat"—all little trapdoors through which a defendant can escape with a minimal sentence and live forever after with his family and his conscience. Also, the "hanging judge" has been replaced by the "judge who will throw the book at you."

This kind of justice was seen in the trials of our most recent group of prison authors—Haldeman, Ehrlichman, etc. (et cetera). The process works something like this: The judge who will throw the book at you tells the defendant to approach the bench and softly asks him how long it will take him to write his book. He sentences him accordingly. Then he says, "I've always thought my life's story would make a great book.... If only I had the time to write it."

And that, sir, is a reasonable facsimile, in the classic style of a William Sydney Porter surprise finish. ●



"What I hate most in life is those damn squirrels running across my knuckles!"