

Expository Writing

One of the challenges to me in teaching a freshman class in Composition and Rhetoric was in finding theme topics that interested the students. It's pretty dull writing about something that you don't care about, especially in a class you didn't especially want to take. Once I tried "Tying a Shoe," without diagrams; the students found it difficult but not impossible. Most students could accomplish the assignment rather well in two or three sentences. Looking for an assignment that would involve a bit more writing, I tried "Changing an Automobile Tire." I used this assignment a couple of times at the University of North Carolina in the days when the undergraduate student body was all male. It worked amazingly well until I became thoroughly bored with reading the essays. An almost universal first reaction was that the task was so simple that no explanation was really necessary. I used myself as an example of one who did not know how to do such a simple task - I was right about this the first time I made the assignment - and suggested that they use me as their audience.

The resulting papers were generally rather well done and were seldom more than a page in length. Moreover, the vocabulary was such that the instructions were mostly well spelled, and the simple declarative sentences needed for this exercise were not excessively demanding in syntax. They did get to be tedious to grade after I'd read the first twenty or so. There were not too many variations possible in the steps of getting the tire off the vehicle and the new tire installed. By the time I had marked the papers for four classes of twenty-five papers each, I felt that I had become an expert in the chore of changing a tire.

One Saturday afternoon soon after I had returned the papers to the classes and we had discussed the whole process, I was driving alone on a country road outside Chapel Hill when I had a flat tire. What to do: no service stations for miles around and no houses nearby to use a phone to call for help. Obviously, I had to change the tire and hope that my memory of the papers was accurate. I didn't really have to spend much time reviewing in my mind the steps involved, starting with opening the trunk and being sure I had a spare tire available.

I removed the spare, bouncing it to be sure it had enough air in it. Then I found the jack and the tire tool. I removed the hub cap, loosened the lug nuts, and placed them in the upturned hubcap. Our 1940 Oldsmobile had a simple jack with an obvious place on the axle to place the jack. The jack worked easily, just the way my students said it would. I removed the wheel with a triumphant flourish. Since everything had been easy to that point, I was sure that the spare would be difficult to thread onto the hub. I was wrong, however, and soon had the lug nuts in place. I was not too sure of the strength of my tightening the lug nuts and gave them each another tentative tightening before I replaced the hubcap. I threw the flat tire into the trunk, feeling triumphant and decidedly grimy. Aha! That was one point none of the essays had mentioned, the consequent dust and dirt. Shouldn't they have included a short sentence about the desirability of having a damp cloth and towel available? I drove cautiously back to Chapel Hill and our usual service

station, leaving the flat with them for repair and making sure that they checked the security of my applying the lug nuts.

My classes were unflatteringly surprised that I was able to accomplish the job even with their expert exposition but happy to learn of the usefulness of a bit of expository writing. I excuse their astonishment now by remembering that this took place in the forties before we had become sensitized to gender-oriented tasks. I would expect young men today to accept readily the ability of a woman to change a tire, but I would not expect a class in composition to be able to write successful essays on how to change a generic tire today. There's too much difference among brands and makes to hope for reasonable standardization. I experimented with other first assignments in writing expositions, though *never* "What I Did This Summer," but never found another one that worked quite so well as "Changing an Automobile Tire."