

## Sample Summaries and Commentary

The following summaries and commentary connect to p. 199 of *Acting on Words*.

### **A Summary of “An Anorexic’s Recovery”**

Leanna Rutherford’s personal essay “An Anorexic’s Recovery” describes her struggle with anorexia and leads to her thesis that recovery was possible only once she had taken control of her life. She denies that she was under any of the pressures usually claimed to cause anorexia when hers began. Before starting university she undertook a modest diet with the goal of losing a few pounds to look good for her first classes. Her success gave her satisfaction, and focusing on the diet allowed her to avoid thinking about the big changes coming up. Once at university, however, she continued to lose weight. She was aware she had a problem within months of its onset, but was afraid that if she tried to force herself to eat or asked for help, she would become fat. She excelled at university and made many friends, but lost her physical strength and emotional stability. When she became suicidal, friends, family and the health care system took steps to treat her condition. She acknowledges that enforced treatment was necessary to save her life, but because it took control away from her, that was all it could do; it could not heal her. It was only after her weight had dropped to 90 pounds from 155 and she had lost a year of university that through loneliness and boredom she reached the conclusion that “anorexia and life are incompatible.” With the discovery of her own reasons to be healthy, she took control of her life, and the long process of recovery began: a process still underway at the time of writing.

[11 sentences]

## Commentary

The first sentence tells us the title, author, type of essay, topic, and thesis, with an observation that the thesis comes toward the end (inductive structure). Finding the thesis in personal writing can be especially demanding, because, in many cases, personal essayists use inductive or implicit central assertions (see Chapters 6 and 8). Notice that you can determine the thesis in this case by using the tip in your textbook to turn the essay title into a question and to read for an answer. Ask yourself what is the significant point about an anorexic's recovery. The significant thing, according to Rutherford's memoir, is that real healing requires the subject's will to heal herself or himself. The summary writer places this assertion at the opening of the summary, but otherwise follows the author's order of points, selecting just those that relate to the thesis. At the end of the summary, the writer quotes five telling words that reinforce the thesis. Because other words have not been quoted, these five gain extra weight. Note the use of third person, present tense, and impartial language. No evaluation of the essay occurs.

## No Two Summaries Are Exactly Alike

We now give two somewhat different summaries of "The Rhetorical Stance." These were written by two different readers who did not compare notes or confer with each other in any way regarding interpretation. The two versions may help to illustrate the range of difference that is bound to occur between any two summaries of the same essay, as well as the essential congruence that should occur for successful summarization. Read our following commentary for a critique of these summaries as well as more information on how they were constructed.

**A Summary of “The Rhetorical Stance”  
(Version 1)**

In his definition essay “The Rhetorical Stance,” Wayne Booth argues that writing instruction is ineffective because students are not directed to adopt a clear and purposeful rhetorical stance. He asserts that if students are taught to adopt a rhetorical stance for each piece they write, one that encompasses the audience it is written for, the subject it covers, and an appropriate voice, their writing will be more effective and more exciting both to write and to read. He models his approach in this essay by specifically directing it to teachers of writing skills, by demonstrating his experience in the field, and by using first person to express his personal commitment. He uses anecdotal examples to demonstrate that most writers he knows learned how to write well haphazardly, often because of one instructor or situation that made the principles clear to them. He believes that the common element, missing from much writing instruction, is attention to the rhetorical stance. He clarifies the term “Rhetorical Stance” by describing three corruptions. The first is the “Pedant’s Stance,” where the writer focuses solely on the subject, ignoring the audience. The second is the “Advertiser’s Stance,” where the writer writes solely to please the audience to the detriment of the topic. The third is the “Entertainer’s Stance,” where the writer concentrates on creating an engaging persona, neglecting both the subject and the audience. Booth claims that no subject is dull if the writer appeals directly to a target audience, demonstrates a command of the subject, and exhibits a passion for it. Likewise, instructors can make even the ‘dull’ aspects of rhetoric interesting and important if they emphasize that rhetorical rules are there to help writers communicate persuasively to an audience. He challenges instructors to improve the level of writing in society by teaching students to adopt a rhetorical stance.

[12 sentences]

**A Summary of “The Rhetorical Stance”**  
**(Version 2)**

In this essay, distinguished author and senior English professor Wayne Booth defines “the rhetorical stance” as an appropriate balancing of subject, reader, and writer. He demonstrates this balance through contrast to three “corrupt” stances, each giving undue attention to one of the three main components.

In the “pedant’s stance,” the writer pays so much attention to intricacies of the topic that the reader becomes forgotten. Such writing typifies a pedant, one who bores us with dry demonstrations of his or her expertise. The “advertiser’s stance” describes writing that considers the reader excessively. Writers in this case compromise accuracy and truth (mistreat the subject) by serving an impression of what the reader wants to be told. In the third corrupt stance—the “entertainer’s stance”—writers lose sight of both the subject and the reader in favour of showing off. The writing becomes self-centred, serving personality rather than deeper meaning or concern for the reader.

By avoiding these three corruptions, writers can produce work that effectively unites knowledge of the subject, consideration for the reader, and individual voice of the writer.

[9 sentences]

## Commentary: Aiming to be Concise and Complete

Both summarizers tell us the author, title, and topic in their first sentence, and something about the author's argument. The first version places more emphasis on the persuasive aspect of this predominantly expository essay: its appeal to an audience of writing instructors, its reason for recommending the rhetorical stance. The first version tells us *why* the rhetorical stance is important as well as *what* it comprises. The second version tells us *what* but skimps on *why*.

Consider that Chapter 6 describes every thesis statement—in its most explicit expression—as containing the word “because.” This suggests that Booth may be saying “The rhetorical stance, comprising x, y and z, is important because . . .” Review the body of Booth's essay, and this does appear to be the case. He is concerned *equally* with demonstrating (defining) *what* is required by the rhetorical stance as well as showing *why* anything less will result in failed writing. The efficacy (functionality) of the right stance is, ultimately, the most important part of its definition. The idea of “ineffective” introduced in the first sentence of summary 1 therefore seems essential to Booth's main purpose and assertion (the *why*). However, as recognized in version 2, the need to balance three elements, stated in the second sentence of the first summary, is crucial as well (the *what*).

The most complete opening statement of Booth's thesis occurs in paragraph 4 of his essay: “The common ingredient that I find in all of the writing I admire—excluding for now novels, plays, and poems—is something that I shall reluctantly call the rhetorical stance, a stance which depends on discovering and maintaining a proper balance among three elements: the available arguments about the subject itself; the interests and peculiarities of the audience; and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker.” The opening three paragraphs of the essay gave us examples of the sort of writing Booth admires and why he admires it. He admires writing that is the opposite of “pretentious, dull, and disorganized” – that is “unpretentious, stimulating, organized, convincing” (para. 1). With this definition established in the opening, we understand that Booth is

really saying, in paragraph 4, that the rhetorical stance is important to understand because it produces admirable writing (too scarce on the whole and not widely or consistently taught). In paragraph 4, where he makes his thesis explicit, Booth identifies three “ingredients” that must be properly related in effective writing: the subject, the audience, and the speaker. Without using the word triangle, he suggests the image of one. If any of the three points of the triangle becomes dominant or overlooked, the structure will collapse into ineffectiveness. This assertion allows Booth to structure the body of his discussion: each of the three ingredients will be explained in terms of what happens when it receives too much attention in the three-way relationship. He will define what the proper stance is by demonstrating what it is not (A Hindu approach to describing God).

Keeping in mind this central idea of a three-way relationship, or triangle, Booth divides the body of his essay into three basic parts, each of which deals with a corrupt stance. Thus, he employs the method of classification (three kinds of corrupt stances). But he also uses contrast (making a point by showing its opposite); example (providing illustrations of the corrupt stances); and cause-effect serving descriptive analysis (how the corrupt stances cause various undesirable effects). See Chapter 9 for a discussion of these patterns or methods of exposition. In Booth’s essay, a combination of patterns serves the overall purpose of definition: to explain the rhetorical stance by describing its components and dynamics (*what* it is) as well as by implying its effects as the inverse of those of the corruptions (*why* it matters). To explore this combination of methods, all the reader must do initially is to recognize the broad division into three—three corrupt stances. These dominate the essay body, so clearly the relationship among the three ingredients that centre each corrupt stance must figure in the thesis of the essay. As said above, the emphasis on effects suggests that some statement of purpose also needs to be included in the thesis—*why* this definition matters. It does not take many sentences to boil this essay down into its essence; but as you can see, it does take acute and knowledgeable reading.

After all this mulling of elements in the essay, one could express Booth’s thesis as follows: “Writing instructors should encourage the rhetorical stance [*states what*],

*because* this balancing of subject, reader, and writer [adds the three ingredients of the *what* and provides the reason in a direct list, thus outlining the essay structure to follow] produces writing that is lively, persuasive, and heart-felt [completes the *because* by stating the *why*, with three effects respectively connected to the three ingredients].” This way of expressing the thesis unites the important ideas of both the first and second sentences of version 1, and includes the reasons for the definition, which are missing or, at best, under-stated, in version 2. So version 1 needs to state the thesis more succinctly in one opening sentence. Version 2 needs to include more emphasis on who needs to recognize and use the rhetorical stance and why. As you can see, the challenge in writing a summary is to be both complete and concise—two qualities that push in opposite directions. Both summaries are very good but not fully achieved—mainly because the most important part—the thesis restatement—could be improved.

## Finding the Thesis by Observing Sectional Divisions

You have seen that recognizing patterns in the body of an essay allows you to zero in on the thesis—because an effective essay matches its sections to its thesis. This matching of thesis statement to essay body occurs in George Orwell’s seminal essay on language abuse, “Politics and the English Language.” Read the essay in *Acting on Words* (p. 471), and see if you can find a sentence in the introductory part of the essay that lays out body sections to follow in the essay proper. You may enjoy and appreciate this essay on a deeper level by also reading about the political times against which it was written. See “For Further Reading” at this website, Reader, for suggested sources of background information.

### ***How Structure Reveals Thesis in Longer Essays***

Here are two different summaries of “Politics and the English Language.” These were written by two different readers who did not compare notes or confer with each other in any way regarding interpretation. The two versions may help to illustrate the range of difference that is bound to occur between any two summaries of the same essay, as well as the essential congruence that should occur for successful summarization. Read our

following commentary for a discussion of how these summaries have used connections among Orwell's introduction, thesis statement, and body structure to interpret his main purpose and points.

### **A Summary of "Politics and the English Language"**

#### **(Version 1)**

In his persuasive essay, "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell uses a problem-solution design to support his thesis that, while poor language use leads to unoriginal thinking, good language use can lead to original thought, which makes writers (and by extension society) less susceptible to those who deliberately misuse language to obscure meaning for political ends. He notes that most people agree English as a written language is declining in quality but believe that this is a natural and unchangeable process. He counter-argues that as habitual use of poor English devalues the language further, so rigorous use of good English will reinvigorate the language, and with it the quality and originality of the thought it expresses. He presents two flaws common to modern English prose: staleness of imagery and lack of precision. These result when writers let commonly-used words and phrases dictate meaning. Often these are used out of thoughtlessness, but they can be used to obscure meaning even from the writer; this is the connection between bad writing and politics. Political writing uses vagueness and euphemisms to defend acts that range from irresponsible to horrendous. Thoughtless, formulaic writing reduces the critical consciousness of writers and readers; the result is a more suggestible, more conformist, and more easily controllable populace. It is possible, however, for a minority of people to reinvigorate the language and with it original thought and political awareness. Orwell supplies guidelines throughout the essay to enable writers to choose words that best express their own thoughts. He challenges readers to begin political change by learning to recognize poor English (and especially what it hides) and by striving to write good, clear English that truly conveys meaning.

[11 sentences]



**A Summary of “Politics and the English Language”  
(Version 2)**

In this essay, written during the Second World War, George Orwell argues that contrary to popular opinion, the shabby English of his day can be improved, and that this will restore political health.

He proposes that a vicious circle can occur between poor language and poor thinking: the one contributes to the other. Next he provides examples from academic and political writing to demonstrate that the language of his times is stale, vague, and pretentious. He goes on to suggest that these weaknesses and the careless thinking they reinforce abet political decay: occupation of foreign lands, mass slaughter of innocents, and various brutal actions that belie the perpetrators’ official claims. Orwell gives numerous examples of euphemisms used to hide atrocities. The political state of the world is so horrible, he suggests, that political writing, in particular, is almost always “bad writing,” seeking to lie and mislead. Pretentious style reveals insincerity, the writer’s archenemy.

He reminds us of his major concern—that “if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought”: inflated style numbs our intellects. He returns to his thesis that the problem can be reversed, citing examples of how a minority of objectors can put an end to bad habits. Many false ideas surround the idea of “defending” the language; what is really needed, he says, is simply “to let the meaning choose the word.” Writers need to think individually before they speak. They need to find precise, original images rather than those repeated by thoughtless writers and speakers whose thoughtlessness plays into corrupt political interests. Orwell advocates concise, active style and discourages the use of foreign terms, jargon, and scientific words if plain English options are available.

[12 sentences]

## Commentary: Find a Statement that Embraces Structure

Did you find a sentence in the first part of Orwell's essay that signals how the rest of his essay unfolds? We suggest the following from paragraph 2: "Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble." Note that paragraphs 4 to 18 provide examples of "bad habits" and describe their faults. Paragraph 19 moves on to the idea of "imitation" by looking at how using someone else's expressions, a lazy feature of modern writing, plays into the hands of political manipulators. This concern with the political relationship between lazy language and political atrocity continues to the end of paragraph 24. In paragraph 25, Orwell repeats his opening claim that "the decadence of our language is probably curable." In the remainder of the essay, he advocates things that writers can do to redeem the language—if they are willing "to take the necessary trouble." In other words, the sentence we quoted above from paragraph 2 previews the three main sections of the essay.

In long complex essays of this nature, you need to pay particular attention to the structure of the essay, to its parts and to the movement of ideas from one part to the next. In long essays, such as "Politics and the English Language," writers may repeat their thesis two or three times in the body, as a transition into new movements of the discussion. In various ways, Orwell repeats the central idea that modern English does not do what writing should do but in fact does the opposite. Writing should invigorate thinking; instead, it dulls thinking. Notice how he states this idea in paragraph 2 when he says that "the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." After illustrating what he considers to be slovenly language (paragraphs 3–18), he re-states his central concern in the introduction to paragraph 19: "As I have tried to show, modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning...." The rest of this paragraph builds to the further idea that this debasement of language has a "special connexion" to politics. Orwell repeats his thesis in paragraph 19 as he changes focus from examples of bad writing and a critique of those examples to the special political nature of how the illustrated problems "spread by imitation." He repeats

his thesis yet again at the beginning of paragraph 24 when he says “[b]ut if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.” This paragraph climaxes his main argument—his concern with the debasement of thinking and political well-being – and prepares us for his recommendations for “political regeneration,” to echo paragraph 2.

By looking for major transition points in the body of a long essay (often signalled by re-statements of the thesis or at least references to the thesis), you should have an easier time of deciding what the thesis is. The writers of both summaries of this essay have done a good job of recognizing its three main sections, dealing with examples, political forces behind imitation, and the way to redemption. With such a long essay, it is naturally hard to decide how much content to leave out. You will see in comparing the two summaries above that the writers found the same essential assertions and differed mainly on which supporting ideas to include. Remember, the most important part of the summary is a complete re-statement of its thesis or central assertion.