

Writing to the Right Brain

Ray Malus

Let's define some terms:

The Four I's

It seems to me that there are four basic kinds of content in writing. (I managed to find 7 words for them.

Cute!):

1. Information (i.e. Journalism, Almanacs)
2. Insight (i.e. Op-ed, Background pieces, Commentary, Essays)
3. Instruction (i.e. Technical writing, Cookbooks, Manuals)
4. Inspiration (Provokes an *emotional* reaction. i.e. Poetry, Stories, Advertising, Propaganda)

I will term this fourth kind "creative-writing"—using the hyphen to differentiate it from writing of the other kinds that may yet be "creative."

The Two Brains

For many years, psychologists have agreed that the human brain operates in two very different modes, which are apparently located in the left and right hemispheres of the brain.

| Left Brain | Right Brain |
|----------------|-----------------|
| Verbal | Conceptual |
| Logical | Random |
| Sequential | Intuitive |
| Rational | Holistic |
| Analytical | Synthesizing |
| Objective | Subjective |
| Looks at parts | Looks at wholes |

Can you see the vast difference between the I-1 through I-3 and I-4?

While the first three target the Left Brain, I-4 needs to target the Right Brain. This is where emotion lives. This is where it's accessible."

I-4 has always been my primary interest. (A strange admission for one who is writing an example of I-2.)

Not only am I passionately focused on evocative writing, but through it one has the opportunity to produce work that provides direct insight into the universal human condition and experience.

When one accomplishes this, one has Literature—ART. Art is a slippery concept. One person's "art" is another's banality or worse "kitsch."

Moreover, pieces of "art" go in and out of fashion. How can this be?

The usual answer is, "Well, it's 'subjective.'" This is no answer at all; it is simply a restatement of the situation. I believe the answer is that the piece of art has simply failed to stimulate the audience's Right Brain—the "banal" one because doesn't "resonate," and the "kitsch" one because it has been too overt in its attempt—it has betrayed its techniques, revealed itself as "manipulative."

I also think the primary reason a piece of art can go

"out of fashion" is that its imagery is no longer evocative—either because of unfamiliarity or overuse.

The challenge then is this: Writing is composed of words—fundamentally *Left Brain* tools. How then does one use a *Left Brain* tool to accomplish a *Right Brain* goal?

My belief is that one cannot.

In writing that targets the Right Brain, words become simply the raw material of the work—much as oil and pigment is to painting and marble is to sculpture.

The true "tools" are analogous to—and adapted from—other forms of art: Image, Tempo, Form, Focus, Nuance, Symmetry... Creative-writers constantly get into disagreements with editors over "errors" in punctuation, grammar and usage. Viewed through the lens of "Left vs. Right Brain," this is inevitable. Neither one is "right" or "wrong." They are simply evaluating the work differently.

Editors function primarily as Left Brain people. They analyze, and follow sequential rules. They deal with words.

Look back at the table of Left Brain characteristics! These are what serve the editor.

It is the Right Brain characteristics that serve the creative-writer.

To state it succinctly: A creative-writer strives to punch you in the gut; an editor wants to grade his paper.

In the kind of writing I espouse, scholastics are 'way down on the list of priorities, and if a work has lipstick on its collar or dirt under its fingernails, so be it!

This is not to say that these rules are unimportant. A writer who strays too far outside of the norm risks being dismissed by the reader's Left Brain as inept, incomprehensible, and uncredible before the Right Brain ever gets a chance to react. You will need to balance the risks for yourself and to a large extent your success will depend on your audience.

In the following pages, I will attempt to discuss the tools and techniques of targeting the Right Brain. However, right here I will give a guideline for evaluating this writing:

Have you given the reader value?

Writing is not a dialogue; it is a monologue—a lecture rather than a conversation. You have asked the reader to devote time and attention—precious commodities—with no way to respond. What have you given in return?

This is a criterion of any writing.

Specifically, in creative-writing if you have not provided the reader with an emotional experience, you have not returned your reader's investment.

For example, poetry that doesn't "stir" the reader is not successful, no matter how many rhymes it has, how strict the meter, or how the lines are broken. Inversely, poetry that "moves" the reader is successful, no matter how many "rules" it breaks.

So, in creative-writing the first question is: "Did this 'move' me?"

The second is: "Why and how?"

Let's see if we can find some answers.