

# "...we are not able to read or write."

A student in a large second-year class in English once remarked to the instructor: "Of course the trouble with most of us is that we are not able to read or write". This student was at least average in ability and training and unusual only in that he was trying to overcome his difficulties by learning to read and write for himself.

One reason for these difficulties was shown a few years ago by a newspaper cartoon depicting a schoolboy entering the lowest grade between two pillars, far out-topping himself, that were built from the text-books on which he would be examined before he was "passed" out of the High School. If he were to read all of these books he would acquire some habits of study and some systematic information, even though little might be added to his pleasure in reading or to his skill in writing. Normally he would have so little time or inclination for reading that even his oversimplified text-books must be reduced to summaries, notes, or disconnected underlined phrases with which to parry questions in an examination without having an opportu-



by

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ity, or at best any encouragement, to understand the answers or express them in his own words.

A school inspector asked members of a High School class what they would expect to find if they sank a shaft far below the surface of the earth. They made no response. He proceeded with further questions that did everything but put answers into their mouths. Still no response. Then the teacher put the question in the words of the book: "What is the state of the interior of the earth?" And with one voice

the entire class repeated "The interior of the earth is in a state of igneous fusion". Neither reading nor writing, in any proper sense of either word, is required for such an answer; but there are places where any other might lose marks.

This technique — which is not always easy to detect — may be continued in the University. Lack of understanding is sometimes made evident by the misuse of words and by incomplete or self-contradictory sentences. How far can it be assumed that a statement is understood if it is reproduced in the more or less exact words of the text-book or the note-book? There is a place for accurate memory-work; and more of it, if it is thorough, would be useful and welcome. A more serious problem is that of the student who could read with profit and write with intelligence if he were not handicapped for want of the working vocabulary that is supplied by active and intelligent reading, and re-

quired for independent and intelligent writing. Some of the more enlightening ideas that have been gathered from run-of-the-mill examinations were suggested—they could not be adequately expressed—in the language of the comic-strips, the bleachers, and the B-grade Westerns. They would be worth hearing if they did not, like the schoolboy's voice, have a rough passage out. When a student writes that Milton's "Nativity Ode" is "a bit too frilly", has he more or less understanding than most of those who repeat the text-book and say that it is "baroque"?

By a most pertinent coincidence a colleague called at this point to ask why some of this week's papers showed better thinking and worse writing than usual, and why so many others were missing. These questions are related to each other and to this discussion. Students had been asked to do more reading and writing for themselves. They knew what they had to do, but it was not done for them. Some practised writers had an unaccustomed struggle, but came through it well; those who prompted the question were students in science and engineering who come to grips with the current assignment and were lacking only in fluency and vocabulary to master it. They recalled a student from the same field of studies who was asked to compare two of Shakespeare's character as "dupes". The paper was slightly blurred; he read the word as "dopes" and wrote his best answer. Other concessions to his limited vocabulary might have brought him a pass.

This is not to suggest that academic language should be

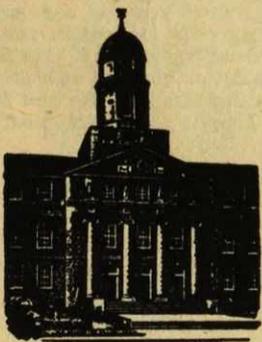
changed from abstract jargon to slack or smart colloquialism. Wise-cracks are not better than gobbledygook. Any such tendency should be reversed by regular practice in intelligent and independent reading and writing. To this end it is necessary to follow a few principles that are easy to state but not, under present conditions, quite so easy to apply.

First, there should be more reading of great writers not as an assigned task but for self-improvement and for pleasure. An accurate report on the chosen reading of our school and college students would be informative and possibly disturbing. Second, the reader should be encouraged to rise to the level of his author and not insulted with a diluted version reduced to the level of the laziest reader. Third, since writing is developed by practice, and the kind of writing by the kind of practice, students should be encouraged to say what they have to say, as well as to repeat what someone else has said for them. If a student's progress and success are judged almost exclusively in "written" subjects by his ability to reproduce the maximum of information in the minimum of time he cannot be blamed if he develops that kind of writing at the expense of any other. Finally, we must show respect for our own language, both by making our own best use of it, and by recognizing the genius and the sacrifice of the great writers who have used it best. Here reading and writing come most closely together: if we have learned how to read, we have learned also by example that if we have anything to say we owe it both to ourselves and to others to say it as well as we can.

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## Soviet versus American

(Christian Science Monitor)

Shortly before Hitler occupied The Sudetenland a cultured, travelled, freedom-loving American college teacher returned from a summer in Germany, wearing one of those semi-military caps of Nazi youth organizations. He explained the cap reminded him of the sturdy, serious boys marching together with disciplined precision. He was soon disillusioned.

Americans, suddenly awakened by the sputniks to the fact that they are lagging in technical training behind the Soviet Union, are in some danger of being beguiled also by the little schoolboy cap, Kremlin style. The recent report by the United States Office of Education, "Education in the U.S.S.R." should disillusion them.

The essence of this report could be summed up this way: The Soviet educational system has its roots in a political and social system the very antithesis of the American. Therefore it is futile to compare the two school systems or needless to ask whether one should be abandoned for the other. In the Soviet system

"the goal of education is to meet the needs of the state"; in the American "the goal of education is the development of each person as an individual with freedom and with opportunity to choose his life's work in his best interests." But from methods operating within the Soviet system there is much that perhaps, Americans can learn.

"Perhaps" because in Soviet methods there are disciplines which the state can demand of its people. Such disciplines in the United States the people must demand of themselves or they cannot expect them of their schools. It is not simply that Soviet youngsters go to school six days a week and receive systematic instruction in the "exact" sciences from an early age. It is not simply that fewer American youngsters are being trained in the "tougher" subjects. It is the index these figures give to the fact that in the American atmosphere there has been a growing tendency to decline the challenge and seek the easier way.

Turning to the other half of the educational picture: Soviet teachers

are thoroughly trained. There are more of them — one to 17 pupils, compared to one to 27 in the United States. True, many may have been assigned to pedagogical training who did not choose it, but they are well rewarded by both pay and social status.

Perhaps the critical defect in Soviet method is that pupils are expected to listen attentively, accept, and repeat—not to explore points of view other than the doctrinal orthodox.

But the Soviet scholars whose researchers have led to space satellites and rockets have certainly been permitted such thinking within the limits of their fields. And any experienced American teacher knows that a great deal of youthful speculating and wondering lacks a base of elementary knowledge acquired by listening and repeating.

Clearly there is much in the firmer demands and the thoroughness in Soviet method that American education can make use of with profit and without doing violence to traditions of freedom.