

# Worker Writers

by

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## The Manual

### 1. We Must Have Writers

Who will be the future singers and writers of America? Who in the past have written the songs and told the stories of the building of America? How many thousands of timber workers told the many stories of Paul Bunyan and the Blue Ox after a hard day's work over the campfire? How many thousands of negro and white workers in the South made up the work songs, the chain gang poems, the mourning chants that tell of the life of the Black and white worker below the Mason-Dixon line?

America is finding out that the most vital song, poetry and literature, has long been produced by the worker building railroads over vast empires, hewing trees, plowing the prairie, planting the wheat.

Walt Whitman, that good poet of work and the open road, traveling over the prairies of the middle west after the Civil War when the frills and daintiness of English literature was all our hearty pioneers had, said this:

When I mix with these intermingling, swarm of alert, turbulent, good natured, independent citizens, mechanics, young persons, at the idea of this mass of men, so fresh and free, so loving and so proud, a singular awe falls upon me. I feel, with dignity and amazement, that among our genius and talented writers or speakers, few or none have yet really spoken to this people, created a single image, making mark for them, or absorbed the central spirit and the idiosyncracies which are theirs and which so far remain uncelebrated, inexperienced. I say I have not seen a single writer, artist, or lecturer that has confronted the voracious but ever erect and active, pervading indulging will and typical aspiration of the land in a spirit kindred to itself. Do you call these genteel little creatures American poets? Do you term that perpetual pistareen paste pot work American art, American drama, taste, verse? I think I hear echoed, as from some mountain top afar in the west, the scornful laugh of the genius of these states.

Who knows the fires, emotions, love, the deep glow and courage of our people? The rich spiced talk of men at night riding over the dark prairie to look for a job; the talk of steelworkers and of women knitting socks for another war? More and more we need words to write the true history of the past so that we may create a true history in the future. History is a thing that everyone feels and some of us make it and many of us are living it right now. It is only YOU who are making this history and can write the true story of it. No matter what you do you are part of history. If you buy an orange or ride in a car or decide to have a baby, you are making history.

Don't tell yourself that it is not up to you to write the true history. Who is to write it if not you? You live it. You make it. You write it.

Don't tell yourself you can't do it because you have no education, because you stopped school early, because you can't throw language around in pretty paragraphs. You can talk, can't you? You can tell a story. You can write a letter. When something exciting happens you can tell it to others and make them see it, make them see what happened as if they had been right there beside you. At the end of the day don't you go over what has happened, live it again, hear everything Charlie said in that fight he had with the boss? Well, that's history. Write it down just as you would say it.

You think poetry has to be something pretty high, about the moon, and English heather. There's a book by Carl Sandburg, "The People Yes," that will show you just how the history of a people and high poetry can be made out of the things we say every day like "Howrya?" "I'll say." "You're telling me?" "What's new?"

You must not be afraid to write simply because you are not a University student or quit school when you were ten. The English language is to be used. Those fighting for their daily lives today are the ones that are going to need to have that strong, sturdy language for their use. They are going to be the great reporters, the great writers of the future. So don't be afraid. Like any instrument, it may be awkward at first but you will soon learn.

There are certain rules of construction, certain laws of storytelling which you can learn. These have nothing mysterious connected with them. Anyone can learn them. They are the tools of the writing craft. There are certain ways of telling a story better than other ways. There are certain rules of attracting attention, holding off the climax, arousing interest and holding it. This is no mysterious magic, only known by a few old men. This course will help you: and some things you will learn from your own reading, from listening to good story tellers. Such technique is used every day by a good story teller, or a good gossip.

But the important thing, never to be forgotten, is that YOU have the experiences of American life. You can speak and write about the things you know, and you will find then that they are the experiences of others too. Language is perhaps the most social, outside of the drama, of any of the forms of expression. We are bottled up. We think that we do not have the tools of expression. We must get over this. Words are made to speak to others, to communicate, and without them we cannot create a new society. They are the blueprints of a new society. They are YOURS.

## 2. The Word Is a Tool

The word, like the plow, the chisel, the needle, the spindle, is a tool. Of all the materials man works with the tool word is perhaps the most social. It is through the word that you speak to others, influence others, tell other what has happened to you.

Everyone must make this tool his or her own. You must not be afraid of this tool simply because you have not had a formal training in its use. With practice, like any other tool, it will turn to your hand.

The Universities have put a kind of halo around the written word as if it were sacred and not for common use. Literature in the past has been the expression of only a few people, a privileged class. For the most part it has been written and read by such a class. In the highly polished sentences of the literature of the nineteenth century, much skill was needed, an extensive education, long hours for the labor of its production. This naturally made most of the writers come from the upper classes; also the readers. The books were long and expensive and hard for us to come by.

The hero of the nineteenth century novel was the merchant hero, the middle class hero. This was so up to the time of the great middle class classics like *Ulysses* by James Joyce and *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust, a sick nobleman who shut himself up in a cork room to remember in long beautiful and ornate sentences the fetid decay of his life. Many of these writers, in the present decay of their class, have gotten so far away from their ordinary life, from the life of the people, that they disdain any audience at all. They say they do not write to communicate anything, but only for themselves, like Gertrude Stein with her "Pigeons on the grass, alas" and others who write only for a select few.

Today something is happening. The word as a tool is going back to the people. The best of our writers are saying that writing is no use unless it is a tool, a tool of defense as well as creation, a tool against barbarism, against hunger and want.

The first books that were brought to the middle west were brought by that first hobo, Johnny Appleseed, who cooked his own meals in one of the first hobo "jungles," wore his stew pot as a hat, carried a pouch of apple seeds, and as many books as he could carry, each torn into three parts. Each torn part he would leave with a worker or farmer and rotate them on his next trip so that a woodsman might read the last part of a book in the spring and the first part the following winter.

We are beginning to have worker writers who write about special kinds of experience, like Jack Conroy with his books about the auto workers and the mine workers, and Nelson Algren with his moving book about the young boy hoboes created by the Depression, and James Farrell with his stories of the Irish Catholics on the Chicago streets and Grace Lumpkin writing about the south, and scores of others. These are for the most part workers, not highly educated, writing straight from the experience of their lives for other workers to understand.

Our literature which has been the possession of only a handful of people, a small group whose experience has become more and more limited and parasitic, is changing to become something created by those who participate first hand in productive life. We are learning that the word as a tool is likely to be used best by the worker, the producer. Who has kept language alive, freshened it out of his or her own experience? Who put the new words in the dictionary? It's the worker who has the new experiences first, who makes up a word, adds a word, creates new tools as needed in the work.

We are not concerned with what is called "style." We want to communicate, speak to others, make a union meeting vivid or describe and report the strike, or what happened at the funeral of a young mother who died in childbirth. This kind of writing is going to be simple and vivid because we are going to read it before a group, because we want to share a rich, communal experience. If we can write down these things we are going to write down something that will be exciting.

It is up to you to make this new literature, to use this tool that is in your hand.

### 3. How To Write

The way to write is to write. Almost all letters are interesting. You hardly ever read a dull letter. Why? Because the writer is not thinking about literature. He is thinking about the experience he had, how he went fishing, what kind of day it was, how many fish he caught, what was said, how it was done. He is thinking about how to tell this so that the reader will see it exactly like it happened, or almost like it happened. If he is a good story teller, he may not be able to resist fixing it up a little, make the big fish he caught a little longer. But he does this, too, because he wants to impress his reader.

Don't say that nothing happens to you, that your life is dull and who could be interested in it. One of the best pieces of writing I have seen came out of one of the Workers Education classes, and was written by a Swedish woman who could barely speak English, but who remembered the deep and living feeling of her experience raising seven children on a sand bar in Lake Superior in the shadow of the ore docks after her young husband had been killed by the icy Superior winds. The lack of language didn't bother her. She had to tell her suffering to all people, so it would be known. She would have told it on stone in the old hieroglyphs, if necessary. She wrote vividly and well enough to wring the heart out of you—as in any great literature.

It isn't a matter of great adventure happening to you, kidnapping, murder, violence; it's a matter of seeing what it around you. You might travel the world and see absolutely nothing. I once knew a woman who lived in a hotel in Minneapolis and when she went around the world she lived in a hotel in China, in Japan, in France and in England. She simply lived in a different hotel. A dull person is a dull person no matter where she is. Geography can't change her. If you see and know vividly what happens in one place you will know it in another. What happens in Virginia, St. Paul and Duluth is important.

There is no life so meager, so lonely, that it hasn't sufficient material in it to write a lifetime. Just sitting in one room with a class, for example—if you could write only one-third of the truth about the things that happen to the six or seven lives of the people sitting there, it would take you a lifetime and you would write something good.

Or suppose you go to a meeting. Can you tell your family what happened? If you try to write it down you'll find out what a poor observer you are, you'll find out that you remember only half of what is said, that you cannot describe the speaker, that your eye is very slow and your ear slower. You'll have to practice. The next time, you'll see more and perhaps you can take down some notes while you're there.

Or perhaps you can keep a diary and when something happens write in it day by day when your memory is fresh. You can see how dramatic and interesting an event of this kind is, just in a day-by-day chronicle.

The thing to do is to get a notebook. Get one at the store with loose leaves in it and begin. Don't pay any attention how you write, simply write down what happened during the day. Don't scare yourself by reading it over right away, just keep on writing. Write how you had lunch with someone, try to put down the conversation, how you felt commuting to work, the characters you saw, what happened at the shop. Just let yourself go. The secret is not to get self-conscious about it, not to feel, What does this amount to? This isn't interesting. Keep on writing it down and pretty soon you'll find out that it is interesting, that when you read it to others they are excited and interested and may add something that they saw or heard, or they may say, "That's good, that's how it happened alright, that's the spittin' image of him alright." And then you know you're getting on.

Another thing, write regularly. If you have only ten minutes before you go to bed, write then, try to put down what happened. If you can squeeze out half an hour regularly, all the better. Try to do it regularly. Anything develops better if it can grow regularly, be practiced regularly.

But writing is like athletics. You wouldn't take a gym class and never do a push-up, or swim. Neither can you learn writing except by doing it, and what you do is worth all the instruction in the world.

So write!