

1838

HOW TO WRITE A BLACKWOOD ARTICLE

Edgar Allan Poe

Poe, Edgar Allan (1809-49) - American poet, short-story writer, and critic who is best known for his tales of ratiocination, his fantastical horror stories, and his genre-founding detective stories. Poe, whose cloudy personal life is a virtual legend, considered himself primarily a poet. How to Write a Blackwood Article (1838) - Poe's spoof of the technique of writing terror tales. The story tells of Signora Psyche Zenobra and how she would introduce a better style to the most celebrated magazine, "Blackwood."

HOW TO WRITE A BLACKWOOD ARTICLE

“In the name of the prophets- figs!!” Cry of Turkish fig-peddler.

I PRESUME everybody has heard of me. My name is the Signora Psyche Zenobia. This I know to be a fact. Nobody but my enemies ever calls me Suky Snobbs. I have been assured that Suky is but a vulgar corruption of Psyche, which is good Greek, and means “the soul” (that’s me, I’m all soul) and sometimes “a butterfly,” which latter meaning undoubtedly alludes to my appearance in my new crimson satin dress, with the sky-blue Arabian mantelet, and the trimmings of green agraffas, and the seven flounces of orange-colored auriculas. As for Snobbsany person who should look at me would be instantly aware that my name wasn’t Snobbs. Miss Tabitha Turnip propagated that report through sheer envy. Tabitha Turnip indeed! Oh the little wretch! But what can we expect from a turnip? Wonder if she remembers the old adage about “blood out of a turnip,” &c.? [Mem. put her in mind of it the first opportunity.] [Mem. again- pull her nose.] Where was I? Ah! I have been assured that Snobbs is a mere corruption of Zenobia, and that Zenobia was a queen- (So am I. Dr. Moneypenny always calls me the Queen of the Hearts)- and that Zenobia, as well as Psyche, is good Greek, and that my father was “a Greek,” and that consequently I have a right to our patronymic, which is Zenobia and not by any means Snobbs. Nobody but Tabitha Turnip calls me Suky Snobbs. I am the Signora Psyche Zenobia.

As I said before, everybody has heard of me. I am that very Signora Psyche Zenobia, so justly celebrated as corresponding secretary to the “Philadelphia, Regular, Exchange, Tea, Total, Young, Belles, Lettres, Universal, Experimental, Bibliographical, Association, To, Civilize, Humanity.” Dr. Moneypenny made the title for us, and says he chose it because it sounded big like an empty rum-puncheon. (A vulgar man that sometimes- but he’s deep.) We all sign the initials of the society after our names, in the fashion of the R. S. A., Royal Society of Artsthe S. D. U. K., Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, &c, &c. Dr. Moneypenny says that S. stands for stale, and that D. U. K. spells duck, (but it don’t,) that S. D. U. K. stands for Stale Duck and not for Lord Brougham’s society- but then Dr. Moneypenny is such a queer man that I am never sure when he is telling me the truth. At any rate we always add to our names the initials P. R. E. T. T. Y.

B. L. U. E. B. A. T. C. H.- that is to say, Philadelphia, Regular, Exchange, Tea, Total, Young, Belles, Lettres, Universal, Experimental, Bibliographical, Association, To, Civilize, Humanity- one letter for each word, which is a decided improvement upon Lord Brougham. Dr. Moneypenny will have it that our initials give our true character- but for my life I can’t see what he means.

Notwithstanding the good offices of the Doctor, and the strenuous exertions of the association to get itself into notice, it met with no very great success until I joined it. The truth is, the members indulged in too flippant a tone of discussion.

The papers read every Saturday evening were characterized less by depth than buffoonery. They were all whipped syllabub. There was no investigation of first causes, first principles. There was no investigation of any thing at all. There was no attention paid to that great point, the "fitness of things." In short there was no fine writing like this. It was all low- very! No profundity, no reading, no metaphysics- nothing which the learned call spirituality, and which the unlearned choose to stigmatize as cant. [Dr. M. says I ought to spell "cant" with a capital Kbut I know better.] When I joined the society it was my endeavor to introduce a better style of thinking and writing, and all the world knows how well I have succeeded. We get up as good papers now in the P. R. E. T. T. Y. B. L. U. E. B. A. T. C. H. as any to be found even in Blackwood. I say, Blackwood, because I have been assured that the finest writing, upon every subject, is to be discovered in the pages of that justly celebrated Magazine. We now take it for our model upon all themes, and are getting into rapid notice accordingly. And, after all, it's not so very difficult a matter to compose an article of the genuine Blackwood stamp, if one only goes properly about it. Of course I don't speak of the political articles. Everybody knows how they are managed, since Dr. Money penny explained it. Mr. Blackwood has a pair of tailor's-shears, and three apprentices who stand by him for orders. One hands him the "Times," another the "Examiner" and a third a "Culley's New Compendium of Slang-Whang." Mr. B. merely cuts out and intersperses. It is soon done- nothing but "Examiner," "Slang-Whang," and "Times"- then "Times," "Slang-Whang," and "Examiner"- and then "Times," "Examiner," and "Slang-Whang." But the chief merit of the Magazine lies in its miscellaneous articles; and the best of these come under the head of what Dr. Money penny calls the bizarreries (whatever that may mean) and what everybody else calls the intensities. This is a species of writing which I have long known how to appreciate, although it is only since my late visit to Mr. Blackwood (deputed by the society) that I have been made aware of the exact method of composition. This method is very simple, but not so much so as the politics. Upon my calling at Mr. B.'s, and making known to him the wishes of the society, he received me with great civility, took me into his study, and gave me a clear explanation of the whole process.

"My dear madam," said he, evidently struck with my majestic appearance, for I had on the crimson satin, with the green agraffas, and orange-colored auriclas.

"My dear madam," said he, "sit down. The matter stands thus: In the first place your writer of intensities must have very black ink, and a very big pen, with a very blunt nib. And, mark me, Miss Psyche Zenobia!" he continued, after a pause, with the most expressive energy and solemnity of manner, "mark me!- that pen- must- never be mended! Herein, madam, lies the secret, the soul, of intensity. I assume upon myself to say, that no individual, of however great

genius ever wrote with a good pen- understand me,- a good article. You may take, it for granted, that when manuscript can be read it is never worth reading. This is a leading principle in our faith, to which if you cannot readily assent, our conference is at an end.” He paused. But, of course, as I had no wish to put an end to the conference, I assented to a proposition so very obvious, and one, too, of whose truth I had all along been sufficiently aware. He seemed pleased, and went on with his instructions.

“It may appear invidious in me, Miss Psyche Zenobia, to refer you to any article, or set of articles, in the way of model or study, yet perhaps I may as well call your attention to a few cases. Let me see. There was ‘The Dead Alive,’ a capital thing!- the record of a gentleman’s sensations when entombed before the breath was out of his body- full of tastes, terror, sentiment, metaphysics, and erudition.

You would have sworn that the writer had been born and brought up in a coffin.

Then we had the ‘Confessions of an Opium-eater’- fine, very fine!- glorious imagination- deep philosophy acute speculation- plenty of fire and fury, and a good spicing of the decidedly unintelligible. That was a nice bit of flummery, and went down the throats of the people delightfully. They would have it that Coleridge wrote the paper- but not so. It was composed by my pet baboon, Juniper, over a rummer of Hollands and water, ‘hot, without sugar.’” [This I could scarcely have believed had it been anybody but Mr. Blackwood, who assured me of it.] “Then there was ‘The Involuntary Experimentalist,’ all about a gentleman who got baked in an oven, and came out alive and well, although certainly done to a turn. And then there was ‘The Diary of a Late Physician,’ where the merit lay in good rant, and indifferent Greek- both of them taking things with the public.

And then there was ‘The Man in the Bell,’ a paper by-the-by, Miss Zenobia, which I cannot sufficiently recommend to your attention. It is the history of a young person who goes to sleep under the clapper of a church bell, and is awakened by its tolling for a funeral. The sound drives him mad, and, accordingly, pulling out his tablets, he gives a record of his sensations. Sensations are the great things after all. Should you ever be drowned or hung, be sure and make a note of your sensations- they will be worth to you ten guineas a sheet. If you wish to write forcibly, Miss Zenobia, pay minute attention to the sensations.” “That I certainly will, Mr. Blackwood,” said I.

“Good!” he replied. “I see you are a pupil after my own heart. But I must put you au fait to the details necessary in composing what may be denominated a genuine Blackwood article of the sensation stamp- the kind which you will understand me to say I consider the best for all purposes.

“The first thing requisite is to get yourself into such a scrape as no one ever got into before. The oven, for instance,- that was a good hit. But if you have no oven or big bell, at hand, and if you cannot conveniently tumble out of a balloon, or

be swallowed up in an earthquake, or get stuck fast in a chimney, you will have to be contented with simply imagining some similar misadventure. I should prefer, however, that you have the actual fact to bear you out. Nothing so well assists the fancy, as an experimental knowledge of the matter in hand. "Truth is strange," you know, 'stranger than fiction' - besides being more to the purpose."

Here I assured him I had an excellent pair of garters, and would go and hang myself forthwith.

"Good!" he replied, "do so;- although hanging is somewhat hacknied. Perhaps you might do better. Take a dose of Brandreth's pills, and then give us your sensations. However, my instructions will apply equally well to any variety of misadventure, and in your way home you may easily get knocked in the head, or run over by an omnibus, or bitten by a mad dog, or drowned in a gutter. But to proceed.

"Having determined upon your subject, you must next consider the tone, or manner, of your narration. There is the tone didactic, the tone enthusiastic, the tone natural- all common- place enough. But then there is the tone laconic, or curt, which has lately come much into use. It consists in short sentences. Somehow thus: Can't be too brief. Can't be too snappish. Always a full stop. And never a paragraph.

"Then there is the tone elevated, diffusive, and interjectional. Some of our best novelists patronize this tone. The words must be all in a whirl, like a humming-top, and make a noise very similar, which answers remarkably well instead of meaning. This is the best of all possible styles where the writer is in too great a hurry to think.

"The tone metaphysical is also a good one. If you know any big words this is your chance for them. Talk of the Ionic and Eleatic schools- of Archytas, Gorgias, and Alcmaeon. Say something about objectivity and subjectivity. Be sure and abuse a man named Locke. Turn up your nose at things in general, and when you let slip any thing a little too absurd, you need not be at the trouble of scratching it out, but just add a footnote and say that you are indebted for the above profound observation to the 'Kritik der reinem Vernunft,' or to the 'Metaphysithe Anfangsgrunde der Noturwissenchaft.' This would look erudite and- and- and frank.

"There are various other tones of equal celebrity, but I shall mention only two more- the tone transcendental and the tone heterogeneous. In the former the merit consists in seeing into the nature of affairs a very great deal farther than anybody else. This second sight is very efficient when properly managed. A little reading of the 'Dial' will carry you a great way. Eschew, in this case, big words; get them as small as possible, and write them upside down. Look over Channing's poems and quote what he says about a 'fat little man with a delusive show of Can.' Put in something about the Supernal Oneness. Don't say a syllable

about the Infernal Twoness. Above all, study innuendo. Hint everything- assert nothing. If you feel inclined to say 'bread and butter,' do not by any means say it outright. You may say any thing and every thing approaching to 'bread and butter.' You may hint at buck-wheat cake, or you may even go so far as to insinuate oat-meal porridge, but if bread and butter be your real meaning, be cautious, my dear Miss Psyche, not on any account to say 'bread and butter!' I assured him that I should never say it again as long as I lived. He kissed me and continued: "As for the tone heterogeneous, it is merely a judicious mixture, in equal proportions, of all the other tones in the world, and is consequently made up of every thing deep, great, odd, piquant, pertinent, and pretty.

"Let us suppose now you have determined upon your incidents and tone. The most important portion- in fact, the soul of the whole business, is yet to be attended to- I allude to the filling up. It is not to be supposed that a lady, or gentleman either, has been leading the life of a book worm. And yet above all things it is necessary that your article have an air of erudition, or at least afford evidence of extensive general reading. Now I'll put you in the way of accomplishing this point. See here!" (pulling down some three or four ordinary-looking volumes, and opening them at random). "By casting your eye down almost any page of any book in the world, you will be able to perceive at once a host of little scraps of either learning or bel-espritism, which are the very thing for the spicing of a Blackwood article. You might as well note down a few while I read them to you. I shall make two divisions: first, Piquant Facts for the Manufacture of Similes, and, second, Piquant Expressions to be introduced as occasion may require. Write now!" - and I wrote as he dictated.

"PIQUANT FACTS FOR SIMILES. 'There were originally but three MusesMelete, Mneme, Aoede- meditation, memory, and singing.' You may make a good deal of that little fact if properly worked. You see it is not generally known, and looks recherche. You must be careful and give the thing with a downright improviso air.

"Again. 'The river Alpheus passed beneath the sea, and emerged without injury to the purity of its waters.' Rather stale that, to be sure, but, if properly dressed and dished up, will look quite as fresh as ever.

"Here is something better. 'The Persian Iris appears to some persons to possess a sweet and very powerful perfume, while to others it is perfectly scentless.' Fine that, and very delicate! Turn it about a little, and it will do wonders. We'll have some thing else in the botanical line. There's nothing goes down so well, especially with the help of a little Latin. Write!

"The Epidendrum Flos Aeris, of Java, bears a very beautiful flower, and will live when pulled up by the roots. The natives suspend it by a cord from the ceiling, and enjoy its fragrance for years.' That's capital! That will do for the similes.

Now for the Piquant Expressions.

“PIQUANT EXPRESSIONS. ‘The Venerable Chinese novel Ju-Kiao-Li.’ Good! By introducing these few words with dexterity you will evince your intimate acquaintance with the language and literature of the Chinese. With the aid of this you may either get along without either Arabic, or Sanscrit, or Chickasaw.

There is no passing muster, however, without Spanish, Italian, German, Latin, and Greek. I must look you out a little specimen of each. Any scrap will answer, because you must depend upon your own ingenuity to make it fit into your article.

Now write!

“‘Aussi tendre que Zaire’- as tender as Zaire-French. Alludes to the frequent repetition of the phrase, la tendre Zaire, in the French tragedy of that name. Properly introduced, will show not only your knowledge of the language, but your general reading and wit. You can say, for instance, that the chicken you were eating (write an article about being choked to death by a chicken-bone) was not altogether aussi tendre que Zaire. Write!

‘Van muerte tan escondida, Que no te sienta venir, Porque el plazer del morir, No mestorne a dar la vida.’

“That’s Spanish- from Miguel de Cervantes. ‘Come quickly, O death! but be sure and don’t let me see you coming, lest the pleasure I shall feel at your appearance should unfortunately bring me back again to life.’ This you may slip in quite a propos when you are struggling in the last agonies with the chicken-bone.

Write!

‘Il pover ‘huomo che non se’n era accorto, Andava combattendo, e era morto.’

That’s Italian, you perceive- from Ariosto. It means that a great hero, in the heat of combat, not perceiving that he had been fairly killed, continued to fight valiantly, dead as he was. The application of this to your own case is obvious- for I trust, Miss Psyche, that you will not neglect to kick for at least an hour and a half after you have been choked to death by that chicken-bone. Please to write!

‘Und sterb’ich doch, no sterb’ich denn Durch sie- durch sie!’

That’s German- from Schiller. ‘And if I die, at least I die- for thee- for thee!’ Here it is clear that you are apostrophizing the cause of your disaster, the chicken.

Indeed what gentleman (or lady either) of sense, wouldn’t die, I should like to know, for a well fattened capon of the right Molucca breed, stuffed with capers and mushrooms, and served up in a salad-bowl, with orange-jellies en mosaïques.

Write! (You can get them that way at Tortoni's)- Write, if you please!

“Here is a nice little Latin phrase, and rare too, (one can't be too recherche or brief in one's Latin, it's getting so common- ignoratio elenchi. He has committed an ignoratio elenchi- that is to say, he has understood the words of your proposition, but not the idea. The man was a fool, you see. Some poor fellow whom you address while choking with that chicken-bone, and who therefore didn't precisely understand what you were talking about. Throw the ignoratio elenchi in his teeth, and, at once, you have him annihilated. If he dares to reply, you can tell him from Lucan (here it is) that speeches are mere anemonae verborum, anemone words.

The anemone, with great brilliancy, has no smell. Or, if he begins to bluster, you may be down upon him with insomnia Jovis, reveries of Jupiter- a phrase which Silius Italicus (see here!) applies to thoughts pompous and inflated. This will be sure and cut him to the heart. He can do nothing but roll over and die. Will you be kind enough to write?

“In Greek we must have some thing pretty from Demosthenes, for example.

Anerh o pheugoen kai palin makesetai There is a tolerably good translation of it in Hudibras ‘For he that flies may fight again, Which he can never do that's slain.’

In a Blackwood article nothing makes so fine a show as your Greek. The very letters have an air of profundity about them. Only observe, madam, the astute look of that Epsilon! That Phi ought certainly to be a bishop! Was ever there a smarter fellow than that Omicron? Just twig that Tau! In short, there is nothing like Greek for a genuine sensation-paper. In the present case your application is the most obvious thing in the world. Rap out the sentence, with a huge oath, and by way of ultimatum at the good-for-nothing dunder-headed villain who couldn't understand your plain English in relation to the chicken-bone. He'll take the hint and be off, you may depend upon it.” These were all the instructions Mr. B. could afford me upon the topic in question, but I felt they would be entirely sufficient. I was, at length, able to write a genuine Blackwood article, and determined to do it forthwith. In taking leave of me, Mr. B. made a proposition for the purchase of the paper when written; but as he could offer me only fifty guineas a sheet, I thought it better to let our society have it, than sacrifice it for so paltry a sum. Notwithstanding this niggardly spirit, however, the gentleman showed his consideration for me in all other respects, and indeed treated me with the greatest civility. His parting words made a deep impression upon my heart, and I hope I shall always remember them with gratitude.

“My dear Miss Zenobia,” he said, while the tears stood in his eyes, “is there anything else I can do to promote the success of your laudable undertaking? Let me reflect! It is just possible that you may not be able, so soon as convenient, toto- get yourself drowned, or- choked with a chicken-bone, or- or hung,- or-

bitten by a- but stay! Now I think me of it, there are a couple of very excellent bull-dogs in the yard- fine fellows, I assure you- savage, and all that- indeed just the thing for your money- they'll have you eaten up, auricula and all, in less than five minutes (here's my watch!)- and then only think of the sensations! Here! I say- Tom!Peter!- Dick, you villain!- let out those"- but as I was really in a great hurry, and had not another moment to spare, I was reluctantly forced to expedite my departure, and accordingly took leave at once- somewhat more abruptly, I admit, than strict courtesy would have otherwise allowed.

It was my primary object upon quitting Mr. Blackwood, to get into some immediate difficulty, pursuant to his advice, and with this view I spent the greater part of the day in wandering about Edinburgh, seeking for desperate adventuresadequate to the intensity of my feelings, and adapted to the vast character of the article I intended to write. In this excursion I was attended by one negro- servant, Pompey, and my little lap-dog Diana, whom I had brought with me from Philadelphia. It was not, however, until late in the afternoon that I fully succeeded in my arduous undertaking. An important event then happened of which the following Blackwood article, in the tone heterogeneous, is the substance and result.

THE END