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THE WRITING PROCESS: HOW [NOT] TO WRITE A LETTER OF COMPLAINT

James S. Mullican

The Number One term on the Composition Hit Parade is undoubtedly "the writing process." As Huck would say, "heuristics" and "relevance" ain't shucks alongside of "process." Teachers of writing are urged to observe their own processes to see how homo sapiens (see shortened form below) really does compose her/himself. Thus in a spirit of scientific inquiry and neighborliness I offer the following prescription for composing a how-to essay.

Have you ever felt so mad that you could just eat a banana? Maybe a business firm has cheated you out of some money, or maybe some politician has done something incredibly stupid or corrupt. In both instances, injustice has been let loose upon the world, and it falls to you to set the matter straight. How do you go about righting this terrible wrong? Assassination is definitely out, as is assault and battery. A personal tongue lashing is a possibility, but all too often, the truly guilty are far removed from you personally, and even if they were close by, you just might get a fat lip if you got too vociferous in giving the wicked some well deserved badmouthing. So what recourse is left? Write a letter of complaint.

Now, the first step in writing a letter of complaint is to find some grievance that must be remedied post haste. In this crooked world in which we live, that isn't so difficult. The task is made a bit more difficult when we must find some grievance that can actually be remedied. Let's face it: A letter of complaint will not balance the federal budget, redress the trade imbalance, or stop the nuclear arms race; it probably will not save the whales or persuade nincompoops to quit shooting bald eagles. So you need a more manageable problem, say, the fact that leaf burning makes you sick and that your fellow citizens, so admirable in other ways, are barbaric when it comes to disposing of

their leaves by depositing tars and gasses in the lungs of their neighbors. Now that's a grievance worth getting hot under the collar about and one that somebody just might pay some attention to.

Now that you have your topic, a worthy grievance, what are you going to do about it? If you follow my advice, you will empty all your venom onto the page. Really let those dumbos have it in some such vein as this:

Dear Creeps:

You call yourselves good citizens, yet you smoke up the neighborhood, letting the smoke hang like a sodden poisonous blanket over the lives and property of your neighbors. Some of you go to church on Sunday and profess to love your neighbor. Is that any way to love your neighbor, by dumping poisonous gas on him or her? You keep the insides of your houses neat and clean; you may even have electronic air filters to keep **your** air clean, but you don't mind befouling the air of your neighbors. You have no consideration for those who suffer from allergies and asthma. You'd rather deposit your filth in their lungs than to pay a couple of bucks for some plastic bags and take time to put your leaves in them for the street department to pick up. In conclusion, you are rotten bastards and lowdown sons of bitches.

With sincere venom,

Having completed your first draft and feeling much better, you are ready for the second step: let this draft cool for twenty-four hours.

The third step is to read what you have written and visualize the faces of your neighbors. Think of the barbecue you had with them last summer. Think of the time they found your cat dead in their

yard and came to your door to tell you about it in hushed tones, dabbing a tear as they talked. Think of the time that your son threw a rock and broke the windshield of their new car and they didn't even call the police. Visualizing your neighbors' faces is necessary for your next step, writing for an audience.

In revising your first draft, edit out anything offensive, salvaging anything that might be useful in achieving your goal. Finding nothing there to salvage, you begin afresh with something like this:

Hi, neighbors:

This morning as I was out working in my garden, a familiar, but not altogether pleasant odor assailed my nostrils (ha, ha!). I hate to tell you, but it seems that some of you were burning your leaves. I know they do make a mess on your lawns, but after all, guys and gals, I do get the sniffles a bit after inhaling smoke and there is some evidence that smoldering leaves can contribute to the BIG C (chortle!). You know what? The street department will **give** each household **ten** plastic bags, and wouldn't it be great if our fine neighborhood didn't have even a smidgeon of smoke anywhere? I know it's a little trouble to bag those nasty leaves, but the payoff would be something else in livability in the ol' neighborhood. Think about it.

Your old pal,

After letting this draft stand overnight, you should take a hard look at it. Very likely you will say, "Boy, what a bunch of baloney. This is a letter of complaint?! This draft bends over backwards to butter up those rascals. Better no letter at all than such sop as this." I have to admit that your judgment would be good in rejecting this drivel, so now you are ready for a third try, this time addressed to the local newspaper in which your complaint is stated in general terms.

The advantage of the general audience is that your neighbors will see your name and suspect that the letter may be meant for them, but they won't get mad because they won't know for sure. Here's a sample:

My Fellow Citizens:

In this modern jet-age world of today, one may encounter problems that partake of both the old and the new. From time immemorial, homo sapiens (Sap, for short) has disposed of surrounding arboreal excrescences through incineration. In the eons and eons of prerecorded time, these noxious fumes had little impact, since the human race was extended spatially over wide distances and one's family and oneself were the only ones who would have to partake nasally of aerial hydrocarbons. Further, the existence of carcinogens was unknown, so the Sap could ingest these not unpleasant--and soon to become, nostalgic--aromas to his heart's content in the aura of blissful ignorance (Cf. "Smoke gets in your eyes"; "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire"). No more!!! Now the population is concentrated in urban centers, and congestion in megalopolies (sic: look it up), not to speak of nasal passages, reigns supreme. If the human species is to survive, prosper, and breathe the clean air of freedom from emphysema and pulmonary carcinoma, we must all of us come to the aid of our countrymen and quit burning the dadburned leaves.

Very truly yours,

This draft need simmer only twelve hours before its assessment, which, to make a long story short, reveals that the third draft too is so much hokum. Then, dear reader, you are ready for your final step. Throw all these drafts in the wastebasket, close all your windows, turn on your electronic air filter, and relax until the fires go out and the sodden ashes quit smoldering.

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