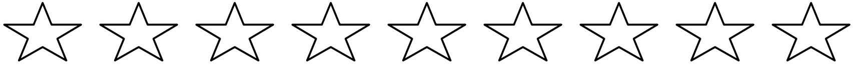
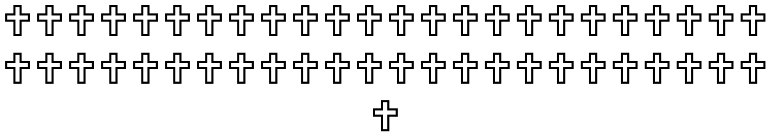


CONCEPTS AND CHOICES

A Writer's Companion and Personal Advisor

Richard E. Mezo, Ph. D.



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PREFACE

Sense and Nonsense: A Humanistic Approach to Writing

A humanistic approach to composition is not some vague attempt to enumerate supposed student "rights" or to "empower" those who claim to be victims of society or to make students feel good about themselves or about their writing instruction or anything of that nature. Such efforts may be useful and worthwhile or they may be paternalistic, wrong-headed, and a dreadful waste of time--the point is that they have nothing to do with writing itself. A humanistic perspective is, rather, an attempt to put an emphasis upon human reason in writing and to understand the structures of human communication free of political cant and pretense. The classical humanistic approach to writing, at one time the most commonly accepted "philosophy" in our society, seems to have died in American schools and colleges about a half-century ago; this book is an attempt to put writing back into a perspective that has existed to some degree (and energized our imaginations) since the time of the ancient Greeks.

Among the assumptions of a humanistic approach to writing are these:

1. Audiences consist of human beings; they are not "buying units" or "consumers" to whom products can be marketed. Neither are they radio receivers that detect "broadcast signals" from a writer.
2. In the communicative act of writing, there is a "coming together" or "communion" of writer and audience.
3. Our society has, in the past, developed forms and conventions for writing that are different from those used for oral communication; these two methods of communication have profoundly different purposes and therefore they use

very different structures. Ignorant or misinformed arguments about the "primacy" of oral language must not be accepted.

4. In schools, especially in the beginning grades, drill and practice in the grammar and mechanics of the language may be useful and necessary. These drills and constant practice may help students develop basic writing skills. However, after spending more than a decade of continuing instruction to develop these skills, repeating the same practices again in one college class (or even two classes), seems an educational activity of questionable value. At the upper levels of secondary school and in colleges or universities, the teaching of concepts in writing should replace, almost completely, the teaching of "skills." The "skills courses" are profoundly inappropriate to instruction in higher education and when offered should be honestly and openly considered attempts at remediation.

5. Learning to write well is the responsibility of individual students, who must be interested in writing and be willing to "apprentice" themselves to the discipline for the requisite number of years. The practice of filling out (with a minimum number of errors) forms and formats peculiar to business and industry or to government agencies may be useful and necessary activities, but teaching these types of writing must be separated from teaching serious deliberative discourse.

6. The goal of all writing, descriptive, narrative, or expository, is to find and communicate the truth about an experience or subject. The purpose is never to make points or win contests; the writer should not attempt to "sell" himself or herself, and certainly should not be interested in selling ideas to anyone. No writer of deliberative discourse should try to force readers to accept opinions not based on evidence; the writer should not make an elaborate show of presenting "both sides" of some presumed argument to readers while ignoring the truth.

7. The teaching and learning of writing requires frequent, extensive, and disciplined reading of materials outside of textbooks. Reading and writing are indivisible aspects of the language and should not be taught in isolation.

8. Models from actual published writing (not writings from textbooks or from previous student assignments) by the best writers should be carefully selected and provided to students in any program of writing instruction. At least some of these models should be quite recent ones.

9. Forms and structures taught in writing classes should correspond strictly to those used in published writing: these should not be forms and structures invented solely for "student use" (three or five paragraph "themes," "I-search" papers, or other useless nonsense).

10. Since the purpose of writing is communication, merely practicing the "forms" of writing without having something of value to communicate (something the audience does not know) is detrimental to writing instruction.

UNIT 1

Communication: Humans, not Radios

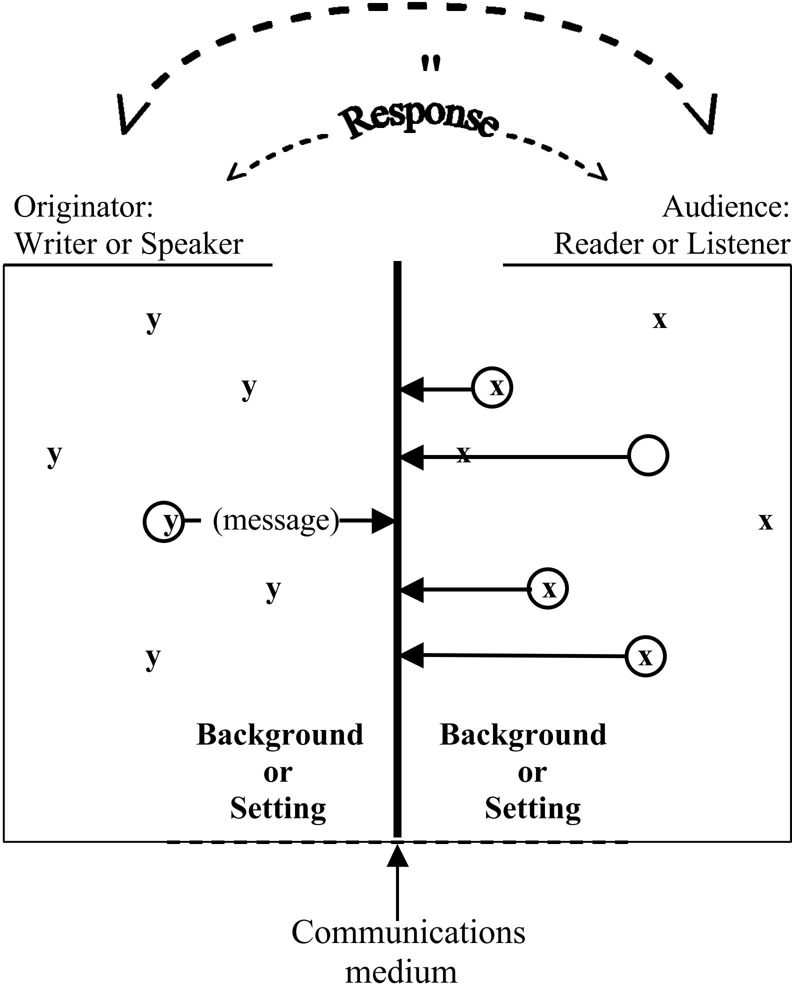
Except in very particular instances, writing is a very public activity, and the purpose of most writing is to engage an audience in a dialogue or debate, openly or less obviously. Reader response is and should be the purpose of all writing. The persuasion of readers is naturally an underlying aspect of written communication in every mode of writing--descriptive, narrative, or expository--whether the composition itself attempts to communicate human experience or to communicate ideas. The persuasive aspect of a narrative, of course, is not likely to be presented directly; persuasion remains, nevertheless, the most vital part of any narrative. In the type of expository writing called argument, persuasion is used fairly directly; assertions (opinions) are presented and these assertions are supported with evidence. It should be understood that “evidence” or “factual” material is of little or no value by itself without opinion, which is the heart of the argument. Indeed, to insist upon creating some general category called “informative writing” that does not attempt to persuade, that expresses no opinion, and that is in some way different from argument is to profoundly misunderstand the nature of writing. There are, of course, “reference works” that simply collect and store information in a convenient and easily accessible manner.

In an argument, because debate and dialogue imply a response, it is essential to understand that both writer and reader have distinct roles and particular responsibilities in the act of communication. It is the duty of the writer to set forth a subject and to use the forms and the diction that are

applicable to (and expected by) the writer's audience; it is the duty of readers to make themselves into a part of the addressed audience--in effect, to become the audience.

The writer-reader relationship is suggested in the following outline:

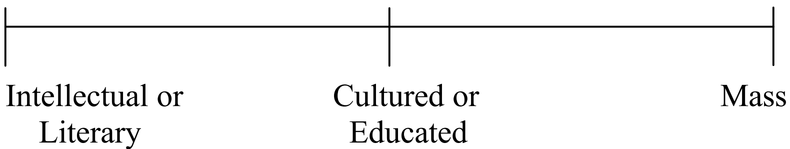
Humanistic
Theory of Communication



It should be noted that a writer may become a reader and that likewise readers become writers.

In the diagram above, the figure (y) is the author; the (x)'s make up the audience. The text is the communicative device that brings about a connection (communion) of author and audience. The "setting" is the background of individual writers and the audience. It provides the "barriers" to communication that must be overcome for the connection to take place. The arrows connecting writer and readers to the text represent the particular communicative effort that each must willingly make to overcome the barriers. The text itself is both a physical document and a carrier of the experience or ideas to be communicated. The duties of the writer and the readers to the act of communication may be specified quite clearly and completely, and need not be specified here; it is a primary duty of the writer, for example, to determine the audience and to write for that particular audience. The audience may be a "general" group of readers or a "special" group, as indicated below:

General Audience



Special Audience

Each audience, general and special, may be seen as occupying a domain or place on each continuum (general or specific) and as requiring a particular and appropriate format and style of writing.

The mutual obligations of writer and the audience shown may be further outlined as follows. The writer must be willing to meet reasonable expectations and demands of a particular audience, and at the same time individual members of the audience must be willing to meet the reasonable expectations and demands of the writer. When both writer and reader fulfill these obligations, communication takes place. The information conveyed by the writer must be new to the audience; it must also be verifiable, although "truth" in narrative may be quite different than "truth" in exposition. The reader must also be "open" or receptive to the communication at the beginning and must overcome "barriers" or obstacles of culture, time, and place, as well as barriers of individual idiosyncrasies.

The terms used in the diagram above should not be seen as limiting the types of audience, but rather as suggestions for classification. Each audience on either the general or the special continuum may be seen as occupying a point or domain that is sometimes rather wide and at other times quite narrow. In deliberative written discourse, each audience requires a particular and appropriate format and style. (Note that the terms used here to denote audiences are not exhaustive and that these terms are used solely for purposes of illustration.)

A writer is responsible to a particular audience for the subject, form, and style of the communication; the writer is not, however, responsible to any audience for substantiated assertions (opinions) in the argument, for the purpose of argument must always be a search for truth, even if it offends the audience. Some English handbooks and textbooks advise potential writers to pay attention to such demographic aspects of the audience as age, sex, occupation, socio-economic status, ethnic background, political or religious

associations, and so forth. Such a view of a writer's audience is completely wrong; these categories may be important to marketing (sales) in business but writing--contrary to popular notions and commercial platitudes--is not the "selling" of one's self or of one's ideas. Writing is of course used in marketing and in "public relations" and in the internal and external relations of a company or corporation (writing for a special audience), but it is a fallacy to equate writing itself with business or with some social science. A writer's purpose must be the search for the truth about a subject, even when the writer's audience disagrees with or does not want to know the truth.

It should be emphasized that speaking of the search for truth is not an attempt to convey "truth" as an overly abstract or a romanticized or impractical concept, as it sometimes is thought to be in the popular imagination. Ancient rhetoricians included the "ethical appeal" (in addition to the rational and emotional appeals) as a vital element in deliberative discourse; Aristotle, for example, suggests that the speaker (read "writer") should be a person of good sense, good moral character, and goodwill if that person is to be persuasive. These qualities are only demonstrated by a search for truth--not in attempts to rationalize or make excuses or deceive. Good writing is ethical writing, not necessarily writing that is free of grammatical and mechanical errors, writing that is polished and glib. It is this search for truth that characterizes (and is perhaps the foundation of) a political democracy. Such is the main point of a fine and widely-anthologized essay by George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" (1945).

The expectations of the audience selected by a writer are fairly clear-cut and need not be explained in detail; the writer knows these expectations by extensive and careful readings in the domain of the audience. Students, however, or beginning writers who do little reading (or none at all) may find it necessary to immerse themselves in written materials of a particular domain prior to writing for that

audience. Teachers of writing may need to explain the conventions of writing for a "general educated audience" to high school, college, or university students. (Such is probably the desired audience in general writing courses; exceptions would be courses in journalism and fiction writing, in business or technical writing, or in some particular course in which the writing would be addressed to a special audience.) A general educated audience would be one aware of current events and history, one that regularly and critically reads newspapers and specialty magazines as well as good general magazines, and one that sometimes watches TV or has watched it. A general educated audience would be more skeptical and demanding than a mass audience and would be interested in a wider range of subjects; the audience would appreciate new, well-written material and be suspicious of writing that included clichés, platitudes, and vague generalities. Readers would expect support for assertions made by the writer and ask that the tone and style of the writing be appropriate to the subject. They would, of course, be somewhat less demanding (and perhaps less formal) than readers in an intellectual or literary audience.

A useful technique for teaching writing is the presentation and analysis of reading material appropriate to the desired audience. Then the student writer may "imitate" the presented model (not slavishly, but using some of the forms) and then analyze that effort. Finally the student is encouraged to write with a concentration upon audience, not the form. Using this PAPAO method (Presentation of a reading model; Analysis of forms used; Practice in imitating a form or forms; Analysis of the imitation; and Open practice, in which the emphasis is placed directly upon the writer's audience) will focus the student's attention upon both appropriate form and desired audience. For beginning writers, the model provided might consist of only one sentence--and certainly not more than a paragraph. It must be noted that such a procedure would ideally be

accompanied by extensive reading (usually outside of class) in the domain of the desired or "target" audience.

Following are some characteristics of major types of audiences:

GENERAL AUDIENCES

Mass audience: All "popular" writing is directed to a mass audience, including supermarket novels, self-help books and articles, and even scripts for movies and television. Newspapers (even tabloids) and news magazines constitute an important part of the "mass media," as do a number of popular periodicals.

Cultured/educated audience: In addition to reading some of the materials directed toward a mass audience (such as newspapers and news magazines), general, educated readers have an interest in more serious essays and in more literary narratives. Essays are indeed an important type of writing for such an audience, as are narratives. Beginning writers in college composition classes should practice writing primarily for a general, educated audience.

Intellectual/literary audience: Readers in this group enjoy serious essays, literary narratives, more difficult forms of poetry, serious drama, and general non-fiction prose that expresses complex ideas.

SPECIAL AUDIENCES

Personal/Transcriptive audience: Personal writing is mainly in the form of diaries, letters to family and friends, and short notes when transcribed speech is needed or desired.

Business audience: Most business writing is accomplished by following fairly strict formulas, using a particular jargon, and employing limited diction and structures.

Technical audience: Writing for a technical audience demands that the writer follow particular formats and conventions; in most respects, technical writing is more varied and more demanding than much business writing, although one might consider these types together.

Academic/scientific audience: The audience is quite demanding and formal writing is necessary. A major type of this kind of writing is the formal paper (research paper, library paper, term paper, periodical article). Note that the paper is essentially a four-part form, unlike the essay, which has a three-part structure.

UNIT 1
SUGGESTED EXERCISES

Group Discussion: Each group will outline the main points of this unit and each group (of no more than 3-5 students) will discuss one or more of the main points and make an oral presentation on it to the class. Time will be allowed for questions and responses from the other groups.

In-Class Assignment: The instructor will provide written examples from several audiences for reading, identification of audience, and analysis.

Writing Assignment: Using a PAPAO technique, students will imitate examples selected from professional writing that are provided by the instructor.

UNIT 2

The Basics: Discourse and the Appeals

All written argument is expository in nature and an attempt to persuade an audience; certainly other modes of writing attempt to be persuasive as well, but in a somewhat different way. Argument, in which assertions are supported by evidence, is an attempt to find the truth about the topic selected by a writer; sometimes a particular argument will place an emphasis upon calling for action, mental or physical, on the part of the reader, and the result is what people often call "persuasion." Nevertheless, such persuasion should also be seen as a matter of degree; it is not something different in kind from the persuasion found in other kinds of writing. Further, since human beings are perhaps by definition imperfect, it is necessary for writers and readers to become aware of false arguments that are sometimes used by unscrupulous persons to acquire wealth and power; their arguments may be quite persuasive. The discussion that follows applies to the legitimate arguments made by a writer, not to false ones, however persuasive, that seek to deceive readers.

Aristotle classified three types of discourse that are as appropriate to speaking and writing today as they were to the oral rhetoric of the ancient Greeks. When one thinks of discourse, or argument, or expository writing, one is perhaps likely to think of deliberative discourse and to forget the other two kinds of discourse: forensic and epideictic. All are persuasive; deliberative discourse deals with matters of concern to the public and presumably matters that the public will have a voice in determining. But forensic discourse

(which deals with more personal matters) is important to our culture and is the kind of discourse underlying our entire legal system. In fact, forensic discourse might well be called legal or judicial discourse; although it is comprised of the language and forms of the court, it sometimes moves into the more general area reserved for deliberative discourse. Such is especially the case when the trials of notorious persons are broadcast by television and radio and reported in newsprint. In contrast, epideictic discourse deals with "ceremonial" matters and today can be found in a number of special circumstances for speech or writing--religious sermons, "inspirational" speeches, and panegyrics to football or baseball teams or to celebrities of the popular culture (called "puffery"), to name a few.

Even though most writers who are not addressing a special audience will probably engage in deliberative discourse, it is necessary to recognize and appreciate the other types. It is also useful to note that the forensic and epideictic types of discourse are sometimes combined with deliberative discourse. (This kind of combination is often unwise for attempts by beginning writers.) In addition, some generalizations might be made concerning the tendency of deliberative discourse to have a balance of rational and emotional appeals, along with a strong ethical appeal to the reader, while forensic discourse usually emphasizes the rational appeal and epideictic discourse emphasizes the emotional appeal.

Writers make legitimate and illegitimate appeals to reason, to emotion, and to "ethics." An illegitimate rational appeal is called a "fallacy"; the same regarding emotional appeal is "manipulation"; and poor ethical appeal is the result of "ethical failure." Brief definitions of the types of appeal follow:

Rational Appeal: Opinions (assertions) are derived or inferred from the available evidence in a reasonable manner. The persona's argument is logical, not fallacious.

Emotional Appeal: No argument is a mechanical or perfunctory matter, but always includes emotion and may include calls to action. However, an illegitimate appeal is made when a writer attempts to manipulate the argument by ignoring reason and attempting to play upon an audience's emotions.

Ethical Appeal: The persona is honestly and objectively presenting evidence (not excluding, hiding, ignoring, or misrepresenting any relevant material) and looking for the truth.

THE RATIONAL APPEAL

The rational appeal in discourse has certainly been discussed more that either of the other two appeals. It perhaps lends itself to discussion more readily, since assertions (positive statements of opinion) must be supported by some kind of verifiable evidence. The questions then become (1) Is the evidence good? and (2) Was the proper procedure followed? Of course, in practice there are other complicating factors--for example, are we (writer and reader) really speaking about the same thing? Have we agreed upon our definitions and have we accepted the shared assumptions that are necessary to almost every argument?

The evidence itself may be regarded as true or false, depending upon the reader's verification of the "proof" offered or of premises made. Naturally, the evidence may be difficult to obtain; it may have been tampered with; it may be inappropriate evidence for another reason. But the evidence itself cannot be mere speculation or unsupported opinion. It cannot come from generalizations that are made from insufficient or unrepresentative particulars. It cannot be "anecdotal" if it is derived from a specific example; it must be "universal" or contained in the experiences of an appropriate number of people. If the evidence is based on perception, was the person perceiving the event a trained and objective observer?

Evidence must come from an authoritative, up-to-date source and be directly related to the point. It must be based on what the words denote, not upon connotations or upon figurative language. It must not contain evasive words (weasel words) or doublespeak or any other fallacies. Claims or assertions made must not be overcomplicated or simplistic. Overly abstract or general assertions should be treated with skepticism; the authority of the author and

publisher are important factors in evaluating the source properly.

Rational appeals should not be confused with mechanical assumptions that reduce human beings to matrices of desire, seeking only personal power or profit. Again, these are analogies that many people do not accept; indeed many find such assumptions about "human nature" repugnant. Nearly all human religions and cultures insist upon the worth of human beings and place great value upon acts of altruism. We have no reason to make mechanical or diabolical assumptions about human nature--such claims are fundamentally fallacious because evidence has not been provided.

One of the hallmarks of a reasoned approach to argument is toleration of opposing views. One answer to some particular problems may be the best, but many human problems seem to have no definite answer. Sometimes one must accept an ambiguous answer or no answer at all. At any rate, any good argument must consider strong opposing arguments and deal with them in an honest and direct manner. It is never just enough to list two arguments and leave the decision to a reader even if the writer cannot find an answer. The writer is obligated to make an attempt and then provide the reader with the results of that attempt.

Inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning are the types of reasoning that human beings apply to argument. The inductive method (sometimes wrongfully called the "scientific method") is a process that moves from the individual events to a generalization or hypothesis. It is governed by several "rules," the most important of which are the necessity of sufficient evidence and representative evidence. The generalization or hypothesis must be tested repeatedly; the more frequently it meets the same test, the more likely it is to be true. A model of inductive reasoning follows in Figure 1 (page 23).

Deduction, the other method of human reasoning, moves in the opposite direction--from a generalization or

hypothesis to a particular instance. A writer must know deductive reasoning as well as inductive. In the most common type of deductive reasoning, the categorical syllogism, the structure of the reasoning is also important. The movement is from the major premise (the hypothesis) to a minor premise (a particular) to the conclusion, which is also particular. (See Figure 1, page 23.) Perhaps the most important rules that govern the syllogism are these: (1) it can have only three terms and (2) the copulative verb ("to be") must be used. If the form of the syllogism is in error, the syllogism will be invalid. If one of the premises is the syllogism is untrue, the conclusion will also be untrue. In either case, the conclusion will be incorrect.

As should be evident, deduction is not an artificial exercise engaged in by overly-intellectual Christian apologists from the Medieval era in Western civilization. Deduction is as much a part of the "scientific method" as is induction. In fact, it is almost impossible to think about even a simple matter without using both types of reasoning. But there are also other kinds of syllogisms: the hypothetical "if. . . then. . ." and the disjunctive "either. . . or. . ." (see Figure 4, page 27.) Both are strictly rule-governed and deductive reasoning and call for very limited conditions in the structure.

Following are T.H. Huxley's brief example of inductive and deductive reasoning and a listing of common fallacies and definitions that are especially appropriate for beginning writers.

ON SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION

From *Autobiography and Selected Essays* (1910)

T.H. Huxley

The method of scientific investigation is nothing but the expression of the necessary mode of working of the human mind. It is simply the mode at which all phenomena are reasoned about, rendered precise and exact. There is no more difference, but there is just the same kind of difference, between the mental operations of a man of science and those of an ordinary person, as there is between the operation and methods of a baker or of a butcher weighing out his goods in common scales and the operation of a chemist in performing a difficult and complex analysis by means of his balance and finely graduated weights. It is not that the action of the scales in the one case and the balance in the other differ in the principles of their construction or manner of working; but the beam of one is set on an infinitely finer axis than the other, and of course turns by the addition of a much smaller weight.

You will understand this better, perhaps, if I give you some familiar example. You have all heard it repeated, I dare say, that men of science work by means of induction and deduction, and that by the help of these operations, they, in a sort of sense, wring from Nature certain other things, which are called natural laws and causes, and that out of these, by some cunning skill of their own, they build up hypotheses and theories. And it is imagined by many that the operations of the common mind can be by no means compared with these processes, and that they have to be acquired by a sort of special apprenticeship to the craft. To hear all these large words, you would think that the mind of a man of science must be constituted differently from that of his fellow men; but if you will not be frightened by terms, you will discover that you are quite wrong, and that all these terrible apparatus are being used by yourselves every day and every hour of your lives.

There is a well-known incident in one of Molière's plays, where the author makes the hero express unbounded delight on being told that he has been talking prose during the whole of his life. In the same way, I trust that you will take comfort, and be delighted with yourselves, on the discovery that you have been acting on the principles of inductive and deductive philosophy during the same period. Probably there is not one here who has not in the course of the day had occasion to set in motion a complex train of reasoning, of the very same kind, though differing of course in degree, as that which a scientific man goes through in tracing the causes of natural phenomena.

A very trivial circumstance will serve to exemplify this. Suppose you go into a fruiterer's shop, wanting an apple--you take one up, and, on biting, you find it is sour; you look at it, and see that it is hard, and green. You take up another one and that too is hard, green, and sour. The shop man offers you a third; but, before biting it, you examine it, and find that it is hard and green, and you immediately say that you will not have it, as it must be sour, like those that you have already tried.

Nothing can be more simple than that, you think; but if you will take the trouble to analyze and trace out into its logical elements what has been done by the mind, you will be greatly surprised. In the first place, you have performed the operation of induction. You found, that, in two experiences, hardness and greenness in apples went together with sourness. It was so in the first case, and it was confirmed by the second. True, it is a very small basis, but still it is enough to make an induction from; you generalize the facts, and you expect to find sourness in apples where you get hardness and greenness. You found upon that a general law, that all hard and green apples are sour; and that, so far as it goes, is a perfect induction. Well, having got your natural law in this way, when you are offered another apple which you find is hard and green, you say, "All hard and green apples are sour; this apple is hard and green, therefore this apple is sour." That train of reasoning is what logicians call a

syllogism and has all its various parts and terms--its major premise, its minor premise, and its conclusion.

And, by the help of further reasoning, which, if drawn out, would have to be exhibited in two or three other syllogisms, you arrive at your final determination: “I will not have that apple.” So that, you see, you have, in the first place, established a law by induction, and upon that you have founded a deduction and reasoned out the special conclusion of the particular case. Well now, suppose, having got your law, that at some time afterwards, you are discussing the qualities of apples with a friend; you will say to him, “It is a very curious thing--but I find that all hard and green apples are sour!” Your friend says to you, “But how do you know that?” You at once reply, “Oh, because I have tried them over and over again, and have always found them to be so.” Well, if we were talking science instead of common sense, we should call that an experimental verification. And, if still opposed, you go further and say, “I have heard from the people in Somersetshire and Devonshire, where a large number of apples are grown, that they have observed the same thing. It is also found to be the case in Normandy, and in North America. In short, I find it to be the universal experience of mankind wherever attention has been directed to the subject.” Whereupon, your friend, unless he is a very unreasonable man, agrees with you and is convinced that you are quite right in the conclusion you have drawn. He believes, although perhaps he does not know he believes it, that the more extensive verifications are--that the more frequently experiments have been made, and results of the same kind arrived at--that the more varied the conditions under which the same results are attained, the more certain is the ultimate conclusion, and he disputes the question no further. He sees that the experiment has been tried under all sorts of conditions, as to time, place, and people, with the same result; and he says with you, therefore, that the law you have laid down must be a good one, and he must believe it.