

Sentences on Conceptual Writing

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I will refer to the kind of writing in which I am involved as uncreative writing. In uncreative writing the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an author uses a uncreative form of writing, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the text. This kind of writing is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the writer as a craftsman. It is the objective of the author who is concerned with uncreative writing to make her work mentally interesting to the reader, and therefore usually she would want it to become emotionally dry. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the uncreative writer is out to bore the reader. It is only the expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to Romantic literature is accustomed, that would deter the reader from perceiving this writing.

Uncreative writing is not necessarily logical. The logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at times, only to be ruined. Logic may be used to camouflage the real intent of the writer, to lull the reader into the belief that she understands the work, or to infer a paradoxical situation (such as logic vs. illogic). Some ideas are logical in conception and illogical perceptually. The ideas need not be complex. Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple. Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable. In terms of ideas the writer is free even to surprise herself. Ideas are discovered by intuition. No matter what form it may finally have it must begin with an idea. It is the process of conception and realization with which the writer is concerned. Once given physical reality by the writer the work is open to the perception of all, including the author. (I use the word perception to mean the apprehension of the sense data, the objective understanding of the idea, and simultaneously a subjective interpretation of both). The work of literature can be perceived only

after it is completed.

Literature that is meant for the sensation of the ear primarily would be called aural rather than uncreative. This would include most poetry and certain strains of fiction.

Since the function of conception and perception are contradictory (one pre-, the other post-fact) the author would mitigate her idea by applying subjective judgment to it. If the author wishes to explore her idea thoroughly, then arbitrary or chance decisions would be kept to a minimum, while caprice, taste and others whimsies would be eliminated from the making of the text. The work does not necessarily have to be rejected if it does not look well. Sometimes what is initially thought to be awkward will eventually be aesthetically pleasing.

To work with a plan that is preset is one way of avoiding subjectivity. It also obviates the necessity of designing each work in turn. The plan would design the work. Some plans would require millions of variations, and some a limited number, but both are finite. Other plans imply infinity. In each case, however, the writer would select the basic form and rules that would govern the solution of the problem. After that the fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work, the better. This eliminates the arbitrary, the capricious, and the subjective as much as possible. This is the reason for using this method.

When an author uses a multiple modular method she usually chooses a simple and readily available form. The form itself is of very limited importance; it becomes the grammar for the total work. In fact, it is best that the basic unit be deliberately uninteresting so that it may more easily become an intrinsic part of the entire work. Using complex basic forms only disrupts the unity of the whole. Using a simple form repeatedly narrows the field of the work and concentrates the intensity to the arrangement of the form. This arrangement becomes the end while the form becomes the means.

Uncreative writing doesn't really have much to do with mathematics, philosophy, or any other mental discipline. The mathematics used by most writers is simple arithmetic or simple number systems. The philosophy of the work is implicit in the work and it is not an illustration of any system of philosophy.

It doesn't really matter if the reader understands the concepts of the author by reading the text. Once it is out of her hand the writer has no control over the way a reader will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different ways.

If the writer carries through her idea and makes it into visible form, then all the steps in the process are of importance. The idea itself, even if not made apparent, is as much a work of art as any finished product. All intervening steps - sketches, drafts, failed attempts, versions, studies, thoughts, conversations- are of interest. Those that show the thought process of the writer are sometimes more interesting than the final product.

Determining what length a piece should be is difficult. If the book were made lengthy then the size alone would be impressive and the idea may be lost entirely. Again, if it is too small, it may become inconsequential. I think the text must be long enough to give the reader whatever information she needs to understand the work and framed in such a way that will facilitate this understanding.

The page can be thought of as the flat area bound by the three-dimensional volume. Any tome will occupy space; one must never disregard the physical characteristics of the printed volume. If the text is meant to reside permanently on the computer or network, its placement on the screen or printout is equally important. It is the interval between things that can be measured. The intervals and measurements can be important to a work of uncreative writing. If space is relatively unimportant -- as, for example, on a web page -- it should be regularized and made equal (things placed equal distances apart) to mitigate any interest in interval. Regular space might also become a metric time element, a kind of regular beat or pulse. When the interval is kept regular whatever is irregular gains more importance.

Marketplace fiction and forms of "purposeful" writing are of completely opposite natures. The former is concerned with making a text with a specific function. Fiction, for example, whether it is a work of art or not, must be utilitarian or else fail completely. Uncreative writing is not utilitarian. When poetry starts to take on some of the characteristics, such as staking out utilitarian zones, it weakens its function as art.

New materials are one of the great afflictions of contemporary writing. Some writers confuse new materials with new ideas. There is nothing worse than seeing art that wallows in gaudy baubles. The electronic writing landscape is littered with such failures. By and large most authors who are attracted to these materials are the ones who lack the stringency of mind that would enable them to use the materials well. It takes a good writer to use new materials and make them into a work of literature. The danger is, I think, in making the physicality of the materials so important that it becomes the idea of the work (another kind of Romanticism). It is challenging enough for the author to simply write with the rigidity of an idea in mind; add to that programming, design and sound and the challenge becomes insurmountable.

Writing of any kind is a physical fact. The physicality is its most obvious and expressive content. Uncreative writing is made to engage the mind of the reader rather than her ear or emotions. The physicality of the work can become a contradiction to its non-emotive intent. Rhyme, meter, texture, and enjambment only emphasize the physical aspects of the work. Anything that calls attention to and interests the reader in this physicality is a deterrent to our understanding of the idea and is used as an expressive device. The uncreative writer would want to ameliorate this emphasis on materiality as much as possible or to use it in a paradoxical way (to convert it into an idea). This kind of writing, then, should be stated with the greatest economy of means. Ideas may be stated with numbers or words or any way the author chooses, the form being unimportant.

These paragraphs are not intended as categorical imperatives, but the ideas stated are as close as possible to my thinking at this time. These ideas are the result of my work as a writer and are subject to change as my experience changes. I have tried to state them with as much clarity as possible. If the statements I make are unclear it may mean the thinking is unclear. Even while writing these ideas there seemed to be obvious inconsistencies (which I have tried to correct, but others will probably slip by). I do not advocate a uncreative form of writing for all authors. I have found that it has worked well for me while other ways have not. It is one way of writing; other ways suit other writers. Nor do I think all uncreative writing merits the reader's attention. Uncreative writing is good only when the idea is good.