"What Is an Idea?"  
Wayne C. Booth

1 "I've got an idea; let's go get a hamburger." "All right, now, as sales representatives we must brainstorm for ideas to increase profits." "The way Ray flatters the boss gives you the idea he's bucking for a promotion, doesn't it?" "Hey, listen to this; I've just had an idea for attaching the boat to the top of the car without having to buy a carrier." "The idea of good defense is to keep pressure on the other team without committing errors ourselves." "What did you say that set of books was called? *The Great Ideas?*What does that mean?"

2 The word *idea,* as you can see, is used in a great many ways. In most of the examples above it means something like "intention," "opinion," or "mental image." The "idea" of going for a hamburger is really a mental picture of a possible action, just as the "idea" of a boat carrier is a mental image of a mechanical device. The "ideas" of good defense and Ray the flatterer are really opinions held by the speakers, while the appeal for "ideas" about how to increase profits is really an appeal for opinions (which may also involve mental images) from fellow workers. None of these examples, however, encompasses the meaning of "idea" as it has always been used by those who engage in serious discussions of politics, history, intellectual movements, and social affairs. Even the last example, an allusion to the famous set of books edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler at the University of Chicago, does not yet express an idea; it only directs us toward a source where ideas may be encountered.

3 These uses of "idea" are entirely appropriate in their contexts. Words play different roles at different times. One can "fish" for either trout or compliments, and a scalp, an executive, and a toilet (in the Navy) are all "heads." Usually, these different uses have overlapping, not opposed, meanings. For example, we wouldn't know what fishing for compliments meant unless we already knew what fishing for trout meant; and the "heads" we just referred to are all indications of position or place. In the same way, the different uses of the word *idea* overlap. Even the most enduring ideas may appear to some as "mere opinion." What, then, does *idea* mean in the context of serious talk, and what keeps some opinions and mental images from being ideas in our sense?

4 Three central features distinguish an idea From other kinds of mental products:

1. An idea is always connected to other ideas that lead to it, follow from it, or somehow support it. Like a family member, an idea always exists amid a network of ancestors, parents, brothers, sisters, and cousins. An idea could no more spring into existence by itself than a plant could grow without a seed, soil, and a suitable environment. For example, the idea that acts of racial discrimination are immoral grows out of and is surrounded by a complex of other, related ideas about the nature of human beings and the nature of moral conduct:

a. Racial differences are irrelevant to human nature.

b. The sort of respect that is due to any human being *as* a human being is due equally to *all* human beings.

c. It is immoral to deny to any human being the rights and privileges due to every human being.

And so on. You can see that a great many other ideas surround, support, and follow from the leading idea.

2. An idea always has the capacity to generate other ideas. Ideas not only have ancestors and parents, but they make their own offspring. The idea that *racial*discrimination is immoral, for example, is the offspring of the idea that *any* sort of bigotry is wrong.

3. An idea is always capable of yielding more than one argument or position. An idea never has a fixed, once-and-for-all meaning, and it always requires interpretation and discussion. Whenever interpretation is required and discussion permitted, disagreements will exist. Ideas are always to some degree controversial, but the kind of controversy produced by the clash of ideas-unlike the kind of controversy produced by the clash of prejudices-is one in which *reasons* are offered and tested by both sides in the debate. As reasons are considered, positions that seemed fixed turn into ideas that move with argument.

5 In recent years, for example, the idea that racial discrimination is immoral, combined with the idea that past discriminations should be compensated for, has led to the follow-up idea that minority groups should, in some cases, receive preferred treatment, such as' being granted admission to medical school with lower scores than those of competing applicants from majority groups. Some people have charged that this is "reverse discrimination," while others advance arguments for and against such positions with great intellectual and moral vigor. Regardless of where you stand on this issue, you can see that interpretations of ideas yield a multiplicity of positions.

6 There are obviously many kinds of mental products that do not qualify as ideas according to these criteria. "Two plus two equals four," for example, is not an idea. Without reference to the ideas that lie behind it, it can neither be interpreted nor used. In and of itself, "two plus two equals four" is simply a brute fact, not an idea. However, as a statement it is clearly the product of ideas: the idea of quantity, the idea that the world can be understood and manipulated in terms of systems of numbers, and so on.

7 Many of our everyday notions, opinions, and pictures of things also fail to qualify as ideas. "I hate John" may be an intelligible utterance-it indicates the feelings of the speaker-but it is not an idea. The "parents" of this utterance lie in the psychology or biography of the speaker, not in other ideas, and it can neither yield its own offspring nor support an argument. "Catholics are sheep," "All communists in government are traitors," "Christianity is the only true religion," "Republicans stink," "Most people on welfare are cheaters," and "Premarital sex is OK if you know what you're doing" are all such non-ideas. With appropriate development or modification, some of these opinions could be turned into ideas, but what keeps them from qualifying as ideas in their present form is that they are only minimally related (and in some instances totally unrelated) to other ideas. One sign that you are being offered mindless, bigoted, or fanatical opinions, not ideas, is the presence of emotion-charged generalizations, unsupported by evidence or argument. Catch words, cliches, and code phrases ("welfare cheaters," "dumb jocks," "a typical woman," "crazy, atheistical scientists") are a sure sign that emotions have shoved ideas out of the picture.

8 A liberal education is an education in ideas-not merely memorizing them, but learning to move among them, balancing one against the other, negotiating relationships, accommodating new arguments, and returning for a closer look. Writing is one of the primary ways of learning how to perform this intricate dance *on one's own.* In American education, where the learning of facts and data is often confused with an education in ideas, thoughtful writing remains one of our best methods for learning how to turn opinions into ideas.

9 The attempt to write well forces us to clarify our thoughts. Because every word in an essay (unlike those in a conversation) can be retrieved in the same form every time, and then discussed, interpreted, challenged, and argued about, the act of putting words down on paper is more deliberate than speaking. It places more responsibility on us, and it threatens us with greater consequences for error. Our written words and ideas can be thrown back in our faces, either by our readers or simply by the page itself as we re-read. We are thus more aware when writing than when speaking that every word is a *choice,* and that it commits us to a meaning in a way that another word would not.

10 One result is that writing forces us to develop ideas more systematically and fully than speaking does. In conversation we can often get away with canyon-sized gaps in our arguments, and we can rely on facial expression, tone, gesture, and other "body language" to fill out our meanings when our words fail. But most of these devices are denied to us when we write. In order to make a piece of writing effective, every essential step must be filled in carefully, clearly, and emphatically. We cannot grab our listeners by the lapel or charm them with our ingratiating smile. The "grabbing" and the "charm" must somehow be put into words, and that always requires greater care than is needed in ordinary conversation.

11 Inexperienced writers often make the mistake of thinking that they have a firmer grasp on their ideas than on their words. They frequently utter the complaint, "I know what I want to say; I just can't find the words for it." This claim is almost always untrue, not because beginning writers are deliberate liars, but because they confuse their intuitive sense that they have *something* to say with the false sense that they already know precisely what that something is. When a writer is stuck for words, the problem is rarely a problem only of words. Inexperienced writers may think they need larger vocabularies when what they *really* need are clearer ideas and intentions. Being stuck for words indicates that the thought one wants to convey is still vague, unformed, cloudy, and confused. Once you finally discover your concrete meaning, you will discover the proper words for expressing it at the same time. You may revise words later as meanings become *more* clear to you, but no writer ever stands in full possession of an idea without having enough words to express it.

12 Ideas are to writing as strength and agility are to athletic prowess: They do not in themselves guarantee quality, but they are the muscle in all good writing prowess. Not all strong and agile athletes are champions, but all champion athletes are strong and agile. Not everyone who has powerful ideas is a great writer, but it is impossible for any writer even to achieve effectiveness, much less greatness, without them.