



© Corbis

NEIL POSTMAN

The Word Weavers/ The World Makers

NEIL POSTMAN (1931–2003) was a student of the word. In 1958, while a graduate student at Columbia University, he taught at San Francisco State University, which was then at the center of original work in semantics, the science of the study of meaning in words. S. I. Hayakawa (1906–1992) was a leader in the field and a colleague of Postman's at San Francisco State. Both were influenced by the work of Alfred Korzybski (1879–1950), who had founded the Institute for Semantics and had been a highly influential lecturer and writer on meaning in language. Korzybski had taught a course called Language and Human Behavior in the Continuing Education School at New York University (NYU). It was, Postman said, the first course given in semantics at a major university. And in 1959, when Postman accepted a position at NYU, he was delighted to be able to continue the tradition and taught that same course there for more than forty years.

While Postman was teaching at NYU, the Canadian rhetorician and professor of English, Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) was becoming famous for his work in media and language; his slogan "the medium is the message" was influential on media scholars, especially during the explosion of television broadcasting and the beginning of the computer revolution. McLuhan promoted the idea that the media shape culture. Postman was influenced by McLuhan and other semanticists and developed his own views of the media and the influence of electronic forms of communication.

In 1961, Postman published his first book, *Television and the Teaching of English*, in which he applied the theories of linguistics and semantics to teaching English in primary and secondary schools. He followed this book with a series of related texts called *The New English* for grades 7 to 12, which also focused on English education. Postman was quick to see the power of television and its usefulness in teaching. In these books, he reviews the effects of various media on language and words and describes the power of television to

From *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*.

deliver meaning and shape language (though he would later come to reverse this stance). *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969), which he wrote with Charles Weingartner, was another highly influential book that questioned many of the assumptions about education across the board, not just those regarding English education. Postman and Weingartner pressed the issue of how language not only carries meaning but also shapes it. Postman's point was that language competence was of enormous importance to K-12 students because it actually shaped the way they perceived and understood their culture.

In the late 1970s, Postman began work on a trilogy of books designed to alert educators to the problems involved with the use of media not only in education but in the public sphere. The first, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (1979), announced that his earlier work, which had praised the power of television and electronic media, needed a total revision. He had become aware that children did not need much special training to adapt to television. Instead, they needed much more training to deal with basic texts, such as books and printed material. His second book in the series was *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982), which discussed the entire idea of childhood, a concept that he felt was essentially recent. In the ancient world, children were not treated in a special way. But, Postman argued, by the middle of the nineteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth century a special place had been created in society specifically to accommodate children. In this book, he points to the power of television to influence children by inundating them with adult content that emphasizes consumerism, materialism, and adult hedonism. The worlds of children and adults were conflated on television, and he thought that as a result TV viewers were stunting their intellectual development. Much of Postman's later work was aimed at revealing the ways in which electronic media hindered the growth of those passively immersed in it.

His third book was *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985). In this volume, Postman deals with the question of the effects on children of constant entertainment as a primary source of knowledge of the world. In addition, he points out that the public in general depends on entertainment to satisfy their intellectual needs. Postman became well known for his positions on the damage he said is done to the intellectual capacity of those who depend on television and other electronic media to describe and represent the world around them. His complaint is in some ways quite simple: television, he said, treats serious subjects with indifference and shallow presentation because it is entirely devoted to light entertainment rather than thoughtful instruction.

POSTMAN'S RHETORIC

One of Postman's constant suggestions to writers is that they stress clarity while writing. He made this suggestion at a time when some academic disciplines were becoming more theoretical and the writing produced was often unclear. Postman follows his own advice in this selection and maintains perfect clarity throughout. His subject is the ways in which the control of language affects our perception of the world. He makes it clear that the world is complex and that we need a means to bring what we observe under control and

make the complexities of experience manageable. When he talks about a cup, for instance, he reminds us that no one can really perceive a cup in its entirety and that, even more importantly, no one can perceive the reality of a cup because it is a collection of molecules and atoms in constant motion. And even if we could perceive that, we may not be perceiving reality. We use, he tells us, a process of abstraction to create a concept of a cup, just as we do for other physical objects. Such concepts make it possible for us to maintain some control over our environment.

Because Postman was a lifelong educator, his focus throughout the selection is on the ways in which we learn and develop ideas and concepts of the world. His views on semantics are central to the entire essay. He realizes as he writes that the fashion in English and language studies does not currently favor studies in semantics (which was wildly popular from the 1960s through the 1980s). Semantics, he says, should not be limited to study in graduate school but should in fact be introduced in the lower grades, as he did repeatedly while teaching. As he says, we learn by asking questions and we need to know where the questions come from and how they are phrased—and we hope that the best questions will produce even better questions to help clarify areas of study. In fact, Postman would like schools to pay special attention just to the idea of questions.

The essay has a simple three-part structure, which helps Postman achieve the kind of clarity he respects. The first part of the discussion focuses on three verbal issues: definition, questions, and metaphor. The fact that a word has a definition is interesting, he says, but it is important to know who gave it that definition and what other definitions of the word may be relevant. This is part of the process of understanding the meaning of words. He contends that questions shape the way we understand everything, and he states, “Everything we know has its origins in questions” (para. 3). Finally, he discusses metaphor: a comparison between two different things, the result of which is that one of those things is understood in a new way. He illustrates this concept with “Is the human mind, for example, like a dark cavern (needing illumination)? A muscle (needing exercise)? A vessel (needing filling)?” and continues with more examples. The point is that if we liken the human mind to anything else metaphorically, then we reshape the way we understand the concept of the mind.

The second part of the essay focuses on the work of Alfred Korzybski, the “father” of semantics and an inspiration to Postman. Postman provides a brief biography, then talks about Korzybski’s major publications and makes an appeal for better understanding of semantics by clarifying Korzybski’s original motivations in studying language. Korzybski’s war experience made him wonder why so much progress had been made in science and such little progress in social sciences up to his time. Science was successful, but social sciences failed to prevent World War I—in which Korzybski fought and was wounded. Korzybski and Postman are both convinced that a better education in language would help people have better control over their world and help them avoid the rush to war that characterized much of the twentieth century.

The final part of the essay returns to the three issues that are central to the opening pages: concepts of definition, questions, and metaphor, now developed in light of the

ideas suggested by Korzybski's work. This three-part structure makes the most difficult ideas in the selection more intelligible. It is similar to the classic structure of the sonata in music: theme, variation and development, restatement of theme. Postman understands how this three-part structure in an essay can help produce and maintain clarity.

❖ PREREADING QUESTIONS: WHAT TO READ FOR

The following prereading questions may help you anticipate key issues in the discussion of Neil Postman's "The Word Weavers/ The World Makers." Keeping them in mind during your first reading should help focus your attention.

1. What is a metaphor and how does it shape meaning?
2. How does language shape our understanding of the world?
3. What is the definition of *semantics*?

The Word Weavers/The World Makers

In an effort to clear up confusion (or ignorance) about the meaning of a word, 1
 I does anyone ask, What is *a* definition of this word? Just about always, the
 way of putting the question is, What is *the* definition of this word? The differ-
 ence between *a* and *the* in this context is vast, and I have no choice but to
 blame the schools for the mischief created by an inadequate understanding of
 what a definition is. From the earliest grades through graduate school, students
 are given definitions and, with few exceptions, are not told whose definitions
 they are, for what purposes they were invented, and what alternative defini-
 tions might serve equally as well. The result is that students come to believe
 that definitions are *not* invented; that they are not even human creations; that,
 in fact, they are—how shall I say it?—part of the natural world, like clouds,
 trees, and stars.

In a thousand examinations on scores of subjects, students are asked to 2
 give definitions of hundreds of things, words, concepts, procedures. It is to be
 doubted that there are more than a few classrooms in which there has been any
 discussion of what a definition is. How is that possible?

Let us take the equally strange case of questions. There will be no dis- 3
 agreement, I think, to my saying that all the answers given to students are the
 end products of questions. Everything we know has its origin in questions.
 Questions, we might say, are the principal intellectual instruments available

to human beings. Then how is it possible that no more than one in one hundred students has ever been exposed to an extended and systematic study of the art and science of question-asking? How come Alan Bloom didn't mention this, or E. D. Hirsch Jr.,¹ or so many others who have written books on how to improve our schools? Did they simply fail to notice that *the principal intellectual instrument available to human beings is not examined in school*?

We are beginning to border on absurdity here. And we cross the line when we consider what happens in most schools on the subject of metaphor. Metaphor does, in fact, come up in school, usually introduced by an English teacher wanting to show how it is employed by poets. The result is that most students come to believe metaphor has a decorative function and only a decorative function. It gives color and texture to poetry, as jewelry does to clothing. The poet wants us to see, smell, hear, or feel something concretely, and so resorts to metaphor. I remember a discussion, when I was in college, of Robert Burns's lines: "O, my love is like a red, red rose/That's newly sprung in June./O my love is like the melodie/That's sweetly play'd in tune."

The first questions on the test were: "Is Burns using metaphors or similes? Define each term. Why did Burns choose to use metaphors instead of similes, or similes instead of metaphors?"

I didn't object to these questions at the time except for the last one, to which I gave a defiant but honest answer: How the hell should I know? I have the same answer today. But today, I have some other things to say on the matter. Yes, poets use metaphors to help us see and feel. But so do biologists, physicists, historians, linguists, and everyone else who is trying to say something about the world. A metaphor is not an ornament. It is an organ of perception. Through metaphors, we see the world as one thing or another. Is light a wave or a particle? Are molecules like billiard balls or force fields? Is history unfolding according to some instructions of nature or a divine plan? Are our genes like information codes? Is a literary work like an architect's blueprint or a mystery to be solved?

Questions like these preoccupy scholars in every field. Do I exaggerate in saying that a student cannot understand what a subject is about without some understanding of the metaphors that are its foundation? I don't think so. In fact, it has always astonished me that those who write about the subject of education do not pay sufficient attention to the role of metaphor in giving form to the subject. In failing to do so, they deprive those studying the subject of the opportunity to confront its basic assumptions. Is the human mind, for example, like a dark cavern (needing illumination)? A muscle (needing exercise)? A vessel (needing filling)? A lump of clay (needing shaping)? A garden (needing cultivation)? Or, as so many say today, is it like a computer that processes data? And

¹ **Bloom . . . Hirsch** Alan Bloom (1930–1992) and E. D. Hirsch Jr. (b. 1928) both wrote books critical of American culture.

what of students? Are they patients to be cared for? Troops to be disciplined? Sons and daughters to be nurtured? Personnel to be trained? Resources to be developed?

There was a time when those who wrote on the subject of education, such as Plato, Comenius, Locke, and Rousseau,² made their metaphors explicit and in doing so revealed how their metaphors controlled their thinking. "Plants are improved by cultivation," Rousseau wrote in *Emile*, "and man by education." And his entire philosophy rests upon this comparison of plants and children. Even in such ancient texts as the Mishnah,³ we find that there are four kinds of students: the sponge, the funnel, the strainer, and the sieve. It will surprise you to know which one is preferred. The sponge, we are told, absorbs all; the funnel receives at one end and spills out at the other; the strainer lets the wine drain through it and retains the dregs; but the sieve—that is the best, for it lets out the flour dust and retains the fine flour. The difference in educational philosophy between Rousseau and the compilers of the Mishnah is precisely reflected in the difference between a wild plant and a sieve.

Definitions, questions, metaphors—these are three of the most potent elements with which human language constructs a worldview. And in urging, as I do, that the study of these elements be given the highest priority in school, I am suggesting that world making through language is a narrative of power, durability, and inspiration. It is the story of how we make the world known to ourselves, and how we make ourselves known to the world. It is different from other narratives because it is about nouns and verbs, about grammar and inferences, about metaphors and definitions, but it is a story of creation, nonetheless. Even further, it is a story that plays a role in all other narratives. For whatever we believe in, or don't believe in, is to a considerable extent a function of how our language addresses the world. Here is a small example:

Let us suppose you have just finished being examined by a doctor. In pronouncing his verdict, he says somewhat accusingly, "Well, you've done a very nice case of arthritis here." You would undoubtedly think this is a strange diagnosis, or more likely, a strange doctor. People do not "do" arthritis. They "have" it, or "get" it, and it is a little insulting for the doctor to imply that you have produced or manufactured an illness of this kind, especially since arthritis will release you from certain obligations and, at the same time, elicit sympathy from other people. It is also painful. So the idea that you have done arthritis to yourself suggests a kind of self-serving masochism.

² **Plato . . . Rousseau** Plato (429–347 B.C.E.), John Amos Comenius (1592–1670), John Locke (1632–1704), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) were philosophers of language who wrote widely.

³ **Mishnah** An important rabbinic collection of Jewish oral tradition collected in 220 C.E.

Now, let us suppose a judge is about to pass sentence on a man convicted of robbing three banks. The judge advises him to go to a hospital for treatment, saying with an air of resignation, "You certainly have a bad case of criminality." On the face of it, this is another strange remark. People do not "have" criminality. They "do" crimes, and we are usually outraged, not saddened, by their doings. At least that is the way we are accustomed to thinking about the matter.

The point I am trying to make is that such simple verbs as *is* or *does* are, in fact, powerful metaphors that express some of our most fundamental conceptions of the way things are. We believe there are certain things people "have," certain things people "do," even certain things people "are." These beliefs do not necessarily reflect the structure of reality. They simply reflect a habitual way of talking about reality. In his book *Erewhon*, Samuel Butler⁴ depicted a society that lives according to the metaphors of my strange doctor and strange judge. There, illness is something people "do" and therefore have moral responsibility for; criminality is something you "have" and therefore is quite beyond your control. Every legal system and every moral code is based on a set of assumptions about what people are, have, or do. And, I might add, any significant changes in law or morality are preceded by a reordering of how such metaphors are employed.

I am not, incidentally, recommending the culture of the people of Erewhon. I am trying to highlight the fact that our language habits are at the core of how we imagine the world. And to the degree that we are unaware of how our ways of talking put such ideas in our heads, we are not in full control of our situation. It needs hardly to be said that one of the purposes of an education is to give us greater control of our situation.

School does not always help. In schools, for instance, we find that tests are given to determine how smart someone *is* or, more precisely, how much smartness someone *has*. If, on an IQ test, one child scores a 138 and another a 106, the first is thought to *have* more smartness than the other. But this seems to me a strange conception—every bit as strange as "doing" arthritis or "having" criminality. I do not know anyone who *has* smartness. The people I know sometimes *do* smart things (as far as I can judge) and sometimes *do* dumb things—depending on what circumstances they are in, how much they know about a situation, and how interested they are. Smartness, so it seems to me, is a specific performance, done in a particular set of circumstances. It is not something you *are* or *have* in measurable quantities. In fact, the assumption that smartness is something you *have* has led to such nonsensical terms as *over-* and *underachievers*. As I understand it, an overachiever is someone who

⁴ Samuel Butler (1835–1902) His utopian novel *Erewhon* (an anagram of *Nowhere*) is still considered an important cultural statement.

doesn't *have* much smartness but does a lot of smart things. An underachiever is someone who *has* a lot of smartness but does a lot of dumb things.

The ways in which language creates a worldview are not usually part of the schooling of our young. There are several reasons for this. Chief among them is that in the education of teachers, the subject is not usually brought up, and if it is, it is introduced in a cavalier and fragmentary fashion. Another reason is that it is generally believed that the subject is too complex for schoolchildren to understand, with the unfortunate result that language education is mostly confined to the study of rules governing grammar, punctuation, and usage. A third reason is that the study of language as "world-maker" is, inescapably, of an interdisciplinary nature, so that teachers are not clear about which subject ought to undertake it. 15

As to the first reason, I have no good idea why prospective teachers are denied knowledge of this matter. (Actually, I have *some* ideas, but a few of them are snotty and all are unkind.) But if it were up to me, the study of the subject would be at the center of teachers' professional education and would remain there until they were done—that is, until they retire. This would require that they become well acquainted with the writings of Aristotle and Plato (among the ancients), Locke and Kant (among recent "ancients"), and (among the moderns) I. A. Richards, Benjamin Lee Whorf,⁵ and, especially, Alfred Korzybski. 16

A few paragraphs about Korzybski are in order here, since his work offers the most systematic means of introducing the subject, deepening it, and staying with it. Another reason is that academics at the university level either do not know about Korzybski's work or, if they do, do not understand it (which does not mean, by the way, that fifth graders cannot). If they do understand it, they hate it. The result is that an exceedingly valuable means of exploring the relationship between language and reality goes unused. 17

Korzybski was born in Poland in 1879. He claimed to be of royal ancestry, referring to himself as Count Alfred Korzybski—another reason why academics have kept him at arm's length. He was trained in mathematics and engineering, and served as an artillery officer in World War I. The carnage and horror he witnessed left him haunted by a question of singular importance. He wondered why scientists could have such astonishing successes in discovering the mysteries of nature while, at the same time, the nonscientific community experienced appalling failure in its efforts to solve psychological, social, and political problems. Scientists signify their triumphs by almost daily announcements of new theories, new discoveries, new pathways to knowledge. The rest of us announce our failures by warring against ourselves and others. Korzybski 18

⁵ I. A. Richards (1893–1979) A British critic and teacher famous for introducing techniques of close reading of literary texts. One of his books is *How to Read a Page*. Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941) An American linguist who advocated the principle of "linguistic relativity."

began to publish his answer to this enigma in 1921 in his book *Manhood of Humanity: The Science and Art of Human Engineering*. This was followed in 1926 by *Time-Binding: The General Theory*, and finally by his magnum opus, *Science and Sanity*, in 1933.

In formulating his answer, Korzybski was at all times concerned that his ideas should have practical applications. He conceived of himself as an educator who would offer to humanity both a theory and a method by which it might find some release from the poignant yet catastrophic ignorance whose consequences were to be witnessed in all the historic forms of human degradation. This, too, was held against him by many academics, who accused him of grandiosity and hubris.⁶ Perhaps if Korzybski had thought *smaller*, his name would now appear more frequently in university catalogues.

Korzybski began his quest to discover the roots of human achievement and failure by identifying a critical functional difference between humans and other forms of life. We are, to use his phrase, “time-binders,” while plants are “chemistry-binders,” and animals are “space-binders.” Chemistry-binding is the capacity to transform sunlight into organic chemical energy; space binding, the capacity to move about and control a physical environment. Humans have these capacities, too, but are unique in their ability to transport their experience through time. As time-binders, we can accumulate knowledge from the past and communicate what we know to the future. Science-fiction writers need not strain invention in their search for interesting time-transporting machinery: *we* are the universe’s time machines.

Our principal means of accomplishing the binding of time is the symbol. But our capacity to symbolize is dependent upon and integral to another process, which Korzybski called “abstracting.” Abstracting is the continuous activity of selecting, omitting, and organizing the details of reality so that we experience the world as patterned and coherent. Korzybski shared with Heraclitus⁷ the assumption that the world is undergoing continuous change and that no two events are identical. We give stability to our world only through our capacity to re-create it by ignoring differences and attending to similarities. Although we know that we cannot step into the “same” river twice, abstracting allows us to act as if we can. We abstract at the neurological level, at the physiological level, at the perceptual level, at the verbal level; all of our systems of interaction with the world are engaged in selecting data from the world, organizing data, generalizing data. An abstraction, to put it simply, is a kind of summary of what the world is like, a generalization about its structure.

⁶ **hubris** Overweening pride.

⁷ **Heraclitus (c. 535–c. 475 B.C.E.)** Early Greek philosopher who claimed that everything was in change and said, famously, that “no one steps in the same river twice.”

Korzybski might explain the process in the following way: let us suppose we are confronted by the phenomenon we call a "cup." We must understand, first of all, that a cup is not a thing, but an event; modern physics tells us that a cup is made of billions of electrons in constant movement, undergoing continuous change. Although none of this activity is perceptible to us, it is important to acknowledge it, because by so doing, we may grasp the idea that *the world is not the way we see it*. What we see is a summary—an abstraction, if you will—of electronic activity. But even what we *can* see is not what we *do* see. No one has ever seen a cup in its entirety, all at once in space-time. We see only parts of wholes. But usually we see enough to allow us to reconstruct the whole and to act as if we know what we are dealing with. Sometimes, such a reconstruction betrays us, as when we lift a cup to sip our coffee and find that the coffee has settled in our lap rather than on our palate. But most of the time, our assumptions about a cup will work, and we carry those assumptions forward in a useful way by the act of naming. Thus we are assisted immeasurably in our evaluations of the world by our language, which provides us with names for the events that confront us and, by our naming them, tells us what to expect and how to prepare ourselves for action. 22

The naming of things, of course, is an abstraction of a very high order and of crucial importance. By naming an event and categorizing it as a "thing," we create a vivid and more or less permanent map of what the world is like. But it is a curious map indeed. The word *cup*, for example, *does not in fact denote anything that actually exists in the world*. It is a concept, a summary of millions of particular things that have a similar look and function. The word *tableware* is at a still higher level of abstraction, since it includes not only all the things we normally call cups but also millions of things that look nothing like cups but have a vaguely similar function. 23

The critical point about our mapping of the world through language is that the symbols we use, whether *patriotism* and *love* or *cups* and *spoons*, are always at a considerable remove from the reality of the world itself. Although these symbols become part of ourselves—Korzybski believed they become imbedded in our neurological and perceptual systems—we must never take them completely for granted. As Korzybski once remarked, "Whatever we say something *is*, it is not." 24

Thus, we may conclude that humans live in two worlds—the world of events and things, and the world of *words* about events and things. In considering the relationship between these two worlds, we must keep in mind that language does much more than construct concepts about the events and things in the world; it tells us what sorts of concepts we ought to construct. For we do not have a name for everything that occurs in the world. Languages differ not only in their names for things but in what things they choose to name. 25

Each language, as Edward Sapir⁸ observed, constructs reality differently from all the others.

This, then, is what Korzybski meant by what he called general semantics: the study of the relationship between the world of words and the world of "not words," the study of the territory we call reality and how, through abstracting and symbolizing, we map the territory. In focusing on this process, Korzybski believed he had discovered why scientists are more effective than the rest of us in solving problems. Scientists tend to be more conscious of the abstracting process; more aware of the distortions in their verbal maps; more flexible in altering their symbolic maps to fit the world. His main educational objective was to foster the idea that by making our ordinary uses of language more like the scientific uses of language, we may avoid misunderstanding, superstition, prejudice, and just plain nonsense. Some of his followers, S. I. Hayakawa, Irving Lee, and Wendell Johnson,⁹ wrote readable texts for use in schools, but their material is not much in fashion these days. I wrote some texts along these lines myself, mostly to find out if these ideas are suitable for younger students, and discovered that they are. (I remember with delight the easy success we had with them in Arlington, Virginia, at the Fort Myer Elementary School.) But, of course, not all of the ideas are useful, and not all of them are good. General semantics, like any other system, has to be applied with a considerable degree of selectivity. Assuming teachers know something about the subject, they will discover what works and what doesn't. It is, in any case, a mistake to assume that profound ideas about language, from general semantics or any other place, cannot be introduced until graduate school.

Of course, there are plenty of "other places" from which profound ideas about language may come. The work of I. A. Richards (generally) and what he says, specifically, on definition and metaphor are good introductions to language as world-maker. On definition (from his *Interpretation in Teaching*):

I have said something at several places . . . about the peculiar paralysis which the mention of definitions and, still more, the discussion of them induces. It can be prevented, I believe, by stressing the purposive aspect of definitions. We want to do something and a definition is a means of doing it. If we want certain results, then we must use certain meanings (or definitions). But no definition has any authority apart from a purpose, or to bar us from other purposes. And yet they endlessly do so. Who can doubt that we are often deprived of very useful thoughts merely because

⁸ **Edward Sapir (1884–1939)** Prominent American linguist also trained as an anthropologist.

⁹ **Hayakawa . . . Johnson** S. I. Hayakawa (1906–1992), Irving Lee (1909–1955), and Wendell Johnson (1906–1965) were all important theoreticians of semantics.

the words which might express them are being temporarily preempted by other meanings? Or that a development is often frustrated merely because we are sticking to a former definition of no service to the new purpose?

What Richards is talking about here is how to free our minds from the tyranny of definitions, and I can think of no better way of doing this than to provide students, as a matter of course, with alternative definitions of the important concepts with which they must deal in a subject. Whether it be molecule, fact, law, art, wealth, genes, or whatever, it is essential that students understand that definitions are instruments designed to achieve certain purposes, that the fundamental question to ask of them is not, Is this the real definition? or Is this the correct definition? but What purpose does the definition serve? That is, Who made it up and why? 28

I have had some great fun, and so have students, considering the question of definition in a curious federal law. I refer to what you may not say when being frisked or otherwise examined before boarding an airplane. You may not, of course, give false or misleading information about yourself. But beyond that, you are also expressly forbidden to joke about any of the procedures being used. This is the only case I know of where a joke is prohibited by law (although there are many situations in which it is prohibited by custom). 29

Why joking is illegal when you are being searched is not entirely clear to me, but that is only one of several mysteries surrounding this law. Does the law distinguish, for example, between good jokes and bad jokes? (Six months for a good one, two years for a bad one?) I don't know. But even more important, how would one know when something is a joke at all? Is there a legal definition of a joke? Suppose, while being searched, I mention that my middle name is Milton (which it is) and that I come from Flushing (which I do). I can tell you from experience that people of questionable intelligence sometimes find those names extremely funny, and it is not impossible that a few of them are airport employees. If that were the case, what would be my legal status? I have said something that has induced laughter in another. Have I, therefore, told a joke? Or look at it from the opposite view: suppose that, upon being searched, I launch into a story about a funny thing that happened to me while boarding a plane in Chicago, concluding by saying, "And then the pilot said, 'That was no stewardess. That was my wife.'" Being of questionable intelligence myself, I think it is a hilarious story, but the guard does not. If he does not laugh, have I told a joke? Can a joke be a story that does *not* make people laugh? 30

It can, of course, if someone of authority says so. For the point is that in every situation, including this one, someone (or some group) has a decisive power of definition. In fact, to have power means to be able to define and to make it stick. As between the guard at the airport and me, he will have the 31

power, not me, to define what a joke is. If his definition places me in jeopardy, I can, of course, argue my case at a trial, at which either a judge or a jury will then have the decisive authority to define whether or not my words qualified as a joke. But it is also worth noting that even if I confine my joke-telling to dinner parties, I do not escape the authority of definition. For at parties, popular opinion will decide whether or not my jokes are good ones, or even jokes at all. If opinion runs against me, the penalty is that I am not invited to many parties. There is, in short, no escaping the jurisdiction of definitions. Social order requires that there be authoritative definitions, and though you may search from now to doomsday, you will find no system without official definitions and authoritative sources to enforce them. And so we must add to the questions we ask of definition, What is the source of power that enforces the definition? And we may add further the question of what happens when those with the power to enforce definitions go mad. Here is an example that came from the Prague government several years ago. I have not made this up and produce it without further comment:

Because Christmas Eve falls on a Thursday, the day has been designated a Saturday for work purposes. Factories will close all day, with stores open a half day only. Friday, December 25, has been designated a Sunday, with both factories and stores open all day. Monday, December 28, will be a Wednesday for work purposes. Wednesday, December 30, will be a business Friday. Saturday, January 2, will be a Sunday, and Sunday, January 3, will be a Monday.

As for metaphor, I pass along a small assignment which I. A. Richards³² used on an occasion when I attended a seminar he conducted. (It is but one of a hundred ways to introduce the subject.) Richards divided the class into three groups. Each group was asked to write a paragraph describing language. However, Richards provided each group with its first sentence. Group A had to begin with "Language is like a tree"; Group B with "Language is like a river"; Group C with "Language is like a building." You can imagine, I'm sure, what happened. The paragraphs were strikingly different, with one group writing of roots and branches and organic growth; another of tributaries, streams, and even floods; another of foundations, rooms, and sturdy structures. In the subsequent discussion, we did not bother with the question, Which is the "correct" description? Our discussion centered on how metaphors control what we say, and to what extent what we say controls what we see.

As I have said, there are hundreds of ways to study the relationship between language and reality, and I could go on at interminable length with ideas on how to get into it. Instead, I will confine myself to three further suggestions.³³ The first is, simply, that the best book I know for arousing interest in the

subject is Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*.¹⁰ It is certainly the best account we have—from the inside, as it were—of how symbols and the abstracting process work to create a world.

Second, I would propose that in every subject—from history to biology to mathematics—students be taught, explicitly and systematically, the universe of discourse that comprises the subject. Each teacher would deal with the structure of questions, the process of definition, and the role of metaphor as these matters are relevant to his or her particular subject. Here I mean, of course, not merely what are the questions, definitions, and metaphors of a subject but also *how* these are formed and how they have been formed in the past. 34

Of special importance are the ways in which the forms of questions have changed over time and how these forms vary from subject to subject. The idea is for students to learn that the terminology of a question determines the terminology of its answer; that a question cannot be answered unless there are procedures by which reliable answers can be obtained; and that the value of a question is determined not only by the specificity and richness of the answers it produces but also by the quantity and quality of the new questions it raises. 35

Once this topic is opened, it follows that some attention must be given to how such terms as *right*, *wrong*, *truth*, and *falsehood* are used in a subject, as well as what assumptions they are based upon. This is particularly important, since words of this type cause far more trouble in students' attempts to understand a field of knowledge than do highly technical words. It is peculiar, I think, that of all the examinations I have ever seen, I have never come across one in which students were asked to say what is the basis of "correctness" or "falsehood" in a particular subject. Perhaps this is because teachers believe the issue is too obvious for discussion or testing. If so, they are wrong. I have found that students at all levels rarely have thought about the meaning of such terms in relation to a subject they are studying. They simply do not know in what sense a historical fact is different from a biological fact, or a mathematical "truth" is different from the "truth" of a literary work. Equally astonishing is that students, particularly those in elementary and secondary schools, rarely can express an intelligible sentence on the uses of the word *theory*. Since most subjects studied in school consist largely of theories, it is difficult to imagine exactly what students are in fact studying when they do their history, biology, economics, physics, or whatever. It is obvious, then, that language education must include not only the serious study of what truth and falsehood mean in the context of a subject but also what is meant by a theory, a fact, an inference, an assumption, a judgment, a generalization. 36

¹⁰ *The Story of My Life* Book written by Helen Keller (1880–1968), who was born deaf and blind but learned language and wrote this inspiring autobiography.

❖ QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL READING

1. What is a metaphor and how does it affect our understanding?
2. What is Postman's concern about the questions we ask and their effect on the answers we get?
3. Who defines words? What word do you define differently than other people do?
4. Are definitions invented?
5. What does Postman mean by the term *abstraction* (para. 21)?
6. In what ways are we "time-binders"? Why is that metaphor important?
7. What does Postman mean by "world making through language" (para. 9)?

❖ SUGGESTIONS FOR CRITICAL WRITING

1. When Postman says, "Everything we know has its origin in questions," he directs us to consider how we come to an understanding of disciplines such as biology, physics, English, psychology, and sociology. Choose a half-dozen questions that are central to one area of study and explore the ways in which these questions help shape your understanding of that area. What new questions arise when you try to provide answers to those questions?
2. One of Postman's fundamental claims is that "our language habits are at the core of how we imagine the world" (para. 13). Write a brief essay for someone who has not read this selection and explain to that audience what Postman means and then defend or attack Postman's position. How can Postman think that our language habits shape our sense of the world? What evidence does he develop to bolster his position? What observations have you made that help explain Postman's idea?
3. Postman says that "one of the purposes of our education is to give us greater control of our situation" (para. 13). If you feel this is true, examine the details of your own education up to this point and explain how it has given you more control over your situation. Then look to the future and discuss how you think your education will contribute to your gaining more control of your situation. What do you think Postman means by the term *situation*? Is *situation* a metaphor?
4. In paragraph 25, Postman says, "we may conclude that humans live in two worlds — the world of events and things, and the world of *words* about events and things." Explain what Postman means by this statement and then examine your own experience with the world of events and things and the world of words about those events and things. How do the words you use actually "map" the world of your personal experience? You may limit yourself to talking about a single event and the things that are part of that event. For instance, how do you map your first hours of the day when you wake up and have breakfast? How do you map a first romantic encounter? Explain the richness of the word *map* used as a metaphor.

5. Find two different newspapers' accounts of a major national event and examine the use of metaphor in each. Do the same for the questions asked or implied and the definitions stated or implied. Is it possible to see that each newspaper "slants" the story somewhat differently by means of the metaphors used and the language choices made? Which story is the most trustable? Does either newspaper give you a sense of confidence in its general truthfulness? Try to avoid accounts that are "fed" to newspapers through an agency such as the Associated Press or Reuters because the accounts will be essentially the same.
6. Try a variation of I. A. Richards's experiment and write a brief essay that uses each of the following opening sentences:

(a) Culture is like a tree.	(b) Culture is like a river.
(c) Culture is like a building.	(d) Culture is like a zoo.

Are you convinced that any one of your essays is a more accurate and convincing description of culture than the others are?

7. Respond to Postman's complaints about the effects of television on children. Consider your childhood experience or the experiences of young children you know. Did you or the children grow up too fast and miss the pleasures of early childhood? Do you think television programming today emphasizes entertainment over information? Do you think it encourages young people to be consumers, to be materialistic, and to develop adult desires? Do you think television stunts the intellectual growth of people who watch it?
8. **CONNECTIONS** When Postman tells us that the world is not the way we see it, he seems to invoke the selection known as Plato's Cave — which appears in this book as "The Allegory of the Cave" (p. 580). How much in agreement are Postman and Plato about the question of perception of the world? Examine Plato's metaphors and decide how they help shape the meaning of his selection. In what sense is the cave a metaphor? How convincing is Plato's metaphor? Comment on his definitions and the questions he asks.
9. **CONNECTIONS** Our understanding of our own culture is linked to the words we use to describe it. Examine the language of Jacob A. Riis in "The Color Line in New York" (p. 209). What words are the most "loaded" with significance for understanding the cultural conditions of late-nineteenth-century New York? Which words clearly aim at helping us create an understanding of the world Riis describes? Margaret Mead (p. 236) also introduces a number of unusual words to help us understand the cultures she studied in the South Pacific. How do these words contribute to creating a cultural significance for us? How do these words create our understanding of the cultures these writers describe?