

Professional Essay: Classification*

The Plot Against People**

Russell Baker

Russell Baker was a journalist and social commentator for over forty years before his retirement in 2004. His "Observer" columns, written for the *New York Times* and syndicated throughout the country, won him both the George Polk Award for Distinguished Commentary and a Pulitzer Prize for journalism. He has published numerous books, including *Growing Up* (1982), an autobiography that won him a second Pulitzer Prize; *The Good Times* (1989); and *Looking Back* (2002). This often-reprinted essay originally appeared in the *New York Times* in 1968.

Pre-reading Thoughts: What one possession or piece of technology in your life causes the most frustration for you? How do you successfully triumph over this misery?

- 1 Inanimate objects are classified into three major categories—those that don't work, those that break down and those that get lost.
- 2 The goal of all inanimate objects is to resist man and ultimately to defeat him, and the three major classifications are based on the method each object uses to achieve its purpose. As a general rule, any object capable of breaking down at the moment when it is most needed will do so. The automobile is typical of the category.
- 3 With the cunning typical of its breed, the automobile never breaks down while entering a filling station with a large staff of idle mechanics. It waits until it reaches a downtown intersection in the middle of the rush hour, or until it is fully loaded with family and luggage on the Ohio Turnpike.
- 4 Thus it creates maximum misery, inconvenience, frustration and irritability among its human cargo, thereby reducing its owner's life span.
- 5 Washing machines, garbage disposals, lawn mowers, light bulbs, automatic laundry dryers, water pipes, furnaces, electrical fuses, television tubes, hose nozzles, tape recorders, slide projectors—all are in league with the automobile to take their turn at breaking down whenever life threatens to flow smoothly for their human enemies.
- 6 Many inanimate objects, of course, find it extremely difficult to break down. Pliers, for example, and gloves and keys are almost totally incapable of breaking down. Therefore, they have had to evolve a different technique for resisting man.
- 7 They get lost. Science has still not solved the mystery of how they do it, and no man has ever caught one of them in the act of getting lost. The most plausible theory is that they have developed a secret method of locomotion which they are able to conceal the instant a human eye falls upon them.
- 8 It is not uncommon for a pair of pliers to climb all the way from the cellar to the attic in its single-minded determination to raise its owner's blood pressure. Keys have been known to burrow three feet under mattresses. Women's purses, despite their great weight, frequently travel through six or seven rooms to find hiding space under a couch.

* ♦ To help you read this essay analytically, review pages 179–181.

** "The Plot Against People" by Russell Baker from THE NEW YORK TIMES, June 18, 1968. Copyright © 1968 The New York Times Co. Reprinted by permission.

- 9 Scientists have been struck by the fact that things that break down virtually never get lost, while things that get lost hardly ever break down.
- 10 A furnace, for example, will invariably break down at the depth of the first winter cold wave, but it will never get lost. A woman's purse, which after all does have some inherent capacity for breaking down, hardly ever does; it almost invariably chooses to get lost.
- 11 Some persons believe this constitutes evidence that inanimate objects are not entirely hostile to man, and that a negotiated peace is possible. After all, they point out, a furnace could infuriate a man even more thoroughly by getting lost than by breaking down, just as a glove could upset him far more by breaking down than by getting lost.
- 12 Not everyone agrees, however, that this indicates a conciliatory attitude among inanimate objects. Many say it merely proves that furnaces, gloves and pliers are incredibly stupid.
- 13 The third class of objects—those that don't work—is the most curious of all. These include such objects as barometers, car clocks, cigarette lighters, flashlights and toy-train locomotives. It is inaccurate, of course, to say that they never work. They work once, usually for the first few hours after being brought home, and then quit. Thereafter, they never work again.
- 14 In fact, it is widely assumed that they are built for the purpose of not working. Some people have reached advanced ages without ever seeing some of these objects—barometers, for example—in working order.
- 15 Science is utterly baffled by the entire category. There are many theories about it. The most interesting holds that the things that don't work have attained the highest state possible for an inanimate object, the state to which things that break down and things that get lost can still only aspire.
- 16 They have truly defeated man by conditioning him never to expect anything of them, and in return they have given man the only peace he receives from inanimate society. He does not expect his barometer to work, his electric locomotive to run, his cigarette lighter to light or his flashlight to illuminate, and when they don't, it does not raise his blood pressure.
- 17 He cannot attain that peace with furnaces and keys and cars and women's purses as long as he demands that they work for their keep.

Questions on Content, Structure, and Style

1. What is Baker's purpose in writing this classification? What reaction do you think Baker wants to evoke from his newspaper audience?
2. Where is Baker's thesis statement? Would his essay be more effective if his thesis were preceded by a fully developed lead-in? Why, or why not?
3. Identify Baker's categories and principle of classification. What do these categories have in common?
4. Why does Baker give examples of items that belong to each category? Does this strengthen his essay? Why or why not?
5. Of the categories of inanimate objects discussed in the essay, which one is most effectively developed? List some examples of details.

6. Consider Baker's use of personification as he talks about inanimate objects. Give some examples of descriptions that give human qualities to these items. What effect does this have on tone and style?
7. How does Baker's word choice affect his tone? What does Baker's title contribute to his tone?
8. How does publication in a newspaper affect Baker's paragraphing style? How might paragraphs 7 and 8, for example, appear in essay format?
9. If Baker were to revise his article today, how might he change his word choice in paragraphs 2, 7, 11, 16, and 17 to make his language more gender inclusive?
10. Evaluate Baker's conclusion. Is it effective or too abrupt?

Vocabulary

inanimate (1)	locomotion (7)	constitutes (11)
cunning (3)	virtually (9)	conciliatory (12)
evolve (6)	inherent (10)	barometer (13)

Suggestions for Writing

Try using Russell Baker's "The Plot against People" as a stepping-stone to your writing. To parallel Baker's criticisms of objects that inflict misery, think about kinds of people or forces that you feel are secretly conspiring to destroy your peace of mind. Consider, for example, kinds of crazed drivers who are contributing to road rage today. Annoying telephone solicitors? Obnoxious wait-staffers or clerks? Grocery shoppers in the checkout line in front of you? Or consider the kinds of rules that govern your life. Inane parking regulations that ensure you will never find a space anywhere near campus? Financial-aid red tape only an accounting genius could cut through? Your essay might be humorous, like Baker's, or quite serious, as you expose still another "plot" against humankind.

Professional Essay: Division*

What Is REALLY in a Hot Dog?**

This 2008 article was written by the staff of SixWise, a Web site focused on family, career, and home safety advice. The mission of SixWise.com, and its newsletter, is to help its readers "be safe, live longer, and prosper."

Pre-reading Thoughts: Have you ever looked closely at the ingredients or the nutritional facts listed on a food or personal-use item and consequently rejected that product? In general, how important are healthful ingredients in your choice of favorite foods?

* To help you read this essay analytically, review pages 179–181.
 ** What Is Really in a Hot Dog? from www.sixwise.com.