

**From Pen to Mouth**  
Excerpts from *My Early Life*<sup>1</sup>  
By Winston S. Churchill  
AP English Language Lesson by Eileen Bach

British statesman Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain during the Second World War, is remembered as an intellect who won the Nobel Prize for Literature. In this excerpt from the chapter titled "I Leave the Army," Churchill discusses his progress as a writer. Read this excerpt carefully and answer the questions below.

[pp.208-213] [Line numbers are in parentheses]

I had meanwhile been working continuously upon *The River War*. This work was extending in scope. From being a mere chronicle of the Omdurman campaign, it grew backwards into what was almost a history of the ruin and rescue of the Soudan. I read scores of books, indeed everything that had been published upon the (5) subject; and I now planned a couple of fat volumes. I affected a combination of the styles of Macaulay and Gibbon, the staccato antitheses of the former and the rolling sentences and genitival endings of the latter; and I stuck in a bit of my own from time to time. I began to see that writing, especially narrative, was not only an affair of sentences, but of paragraphs. Indeed I thought the paragraph no less (10) important than the sentence. Macaulay is a master of paragraphing. Just as the sentence contains one idea in all its fullness, so the paragraph should embrace a distinct episode; and as sentences should follow one another in harmonious sequence, so the paragraphs must fit on to one another like the automatic couplings of railway carriages. Chapterization also began to dawn upon me. Each chapter must (15) be self-contained. All the chapters should be of equal value and more or less of equal length. Some chapters define themselves naturally and obviously; but much more difficulty arises when a number of heterogeneous incidents none of which can be omitted have to be woven together into what looks like an integral theme. Finally the work must be surveyed as a whole and due proportion and strict order (20) established from beginning to end. I already knew that chronology is the key to easy narrative. I already realised that 'good sense is the foundation of good writing'. I warned myself against the fault of beginning my story as some poor people do 'Four thousand years before the Deluge', and I repeated earnestly one of my best French quotations, 'L'art d'être ennuyeux, c'est de tout dire'<sup>2</sup>. I think I will repeat it (25) again now.

It was great fun writing a book. One lived with it. It became a companion. It built an impalpable crystal sphere around one of interests and ideas. In a sense one felt like a goldfish in a bowl; but in this case the goldfish made his own bowl. This came along everywhere with me. It never got knocked about in travelling, and there was never a (30) moment when agreeable occupation was lacking. Either the glass had to be polished, or the structure extended or contracted, or the walls required

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<sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill, *My Early Life* (London: Eland Publishing Ltd., 2000), 208-213

<sup>2</sup> "The art of being boring is to say everything."

strengthening. I have noticed in my life deep resemblances between many different kinds of things. Writing a book is not unlike building a house or planning a battle or painting a picture. The technique is different, the materials are different, but the (35) principle is the same. The foundations have to be laid, the data assembled, and the premises must bear the weight of their conclusions. Ornaments or refinements may then be added. The whole when finished is only the successful presentation of a theme. In battles however the other fellow interferes all the time and keeps upsetting things, and the best generals are those who arrive at the results of (40) planning without being tied to plans.

On my homeward steamer I made friends with the most brilliant man in journalism I have ever met. Mr. G. W. Steevens was the 'star' writer of a certain Mr. Harmsworth's new paper called the *Daily Mail* which had just broken upon the world, and had forced the *Daily Telegraph* to move one step nearer Victorian (45) respectability. Harmsworth relied enormously upon Steevens in these early critical days, and being well disposed to me, told him later on to write me up, which he did in his glowing fashion. 'Boom the Boomsters' was in those days the motto of the infant Harmsworth press, and on these grounds I was selected for their favours. But I anticipate.

(50) I was working in the saloon of the Indiaman, and had reached an exciting point in my story. The Nile column had just by a forced night march reached Abu Hamed and was about to storm it. I was setting the scene in my most ceremonious style. 'The dawn was breaking and the mists, rising from the river and dispersing with the coming of the sun, revealed the outlines of the Dervish town and the half circle of (55) rocky hills behind it. Within this stern amphitheatre one of the minor dramas of war was now to be enacted'. 'Ha! ha!' said Steevens, suddenly peering over my shoulder. 'Finish it yourself then,' I said getting up; and I went on deck. I was curious to see how he would do it, and indeed I hoped for a valuable contribution. But when I came down again I found that all he had written on my nice sheet of paper was (60) 'Pop-pop! pop-pop! Pop! Pop!' in his tiny handwriting, and then at the bottom of the page-printed in big letters 'BANG!!!' I was disgusted at this levity. But Steevens had many other styles besides that of the jaunty, breezy, slap-dash productions which he wrote for the *Daily Mail*. About this time there had appeared an anonymous article upon the future of the British Empire called 'The New Gibbon'. (65) One would have thought it had been lifted bodily from the pages of the Roman historian. I was astounded when Steevens confessed himself the author.

(Later on Steevens was kind enough to read my proofs and offer valuable advice which I transcribe. 'The parts of the book I have read,' he wrote, 'appear to me to be a valuable supplement to the works of G. W. Steevens, indeed a valuable work (70) altogether. I think it first rate, sound, well got up and put together, and full of most illuminating and descriptive pages. The only criticism I should make is that your philosophic reflections, while generally well expressed, often acute and

sometimes true, are too devilish frequent. If I were you I should cut out the philosopher about January 1898, giving him perhaps a short innings at the very end. (75)He will only bore people. Those who want such reflections can often supply them without assistance.' His gay, mocking spirit and rippling wit made him a delightful companion, and our acquaintance ripened into friendship during the summer months of 1899. This was the last summer he was to see. He died of typhoid fever in Ladysmith in the following February.

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(80)I paused in Cairo for a fortnight to collect materials for my book and enlist the co-operation of several important actors in the Soudan drama. In this way I met Girouard, the young Canadian Royal Engineer who had built the desert railway; Slatin Pasha, the little Austrian officer who had been ten years the Khalifa's prisoner and whose book *Fire and Sword in the Soudan* is a classic in its sphere; Sir Reginald (85)Wingate, head of the Intelligence, to whom I was already indebted for an important meal; Garstin, head of the Egyptian Irrigation Service; together with a number of the leading Egyptian statesmen and personalities. All these able men had played their part in the measures of war and administration which in less than twenty years had raised Egypt from anarchy, bankruptcy and defeat to triumphant (90)prosperity. I already knew Chief, Lord Cromer. He invited me to visit him at the British Agency, and readily undertook to read my chapters on the liberation of the Soudan and Gordon's death, which I had already completed. Accordingly I sent him a bulky bundle of typescript, and was delighted and also startled to receive it back a few days later slashed about with blue pencil with a vigour which recalled the (95) treatment my Latin exercises used to meet with at Harrow. I saw that Lord Cromer had taken an immense amount of trouble over my screed, and I therefore submitted dutifully to his comments and criticisms, which were often full and sometimes scathing. For instance I had written about General Gordon becoming private secretary to Lord Ripon at one period in his career 'the brilliant sun had (100) become the satellite of a farthing dip'. On this Lord Cromer's comment was "'brilliant sun" appears to be extravagant eulogy and "farthing dip" does less than justice to Lord Ripon's position as Viceroy. Lord Ripon would not mind, but his friends might be angry and most people would simply laugh at you'. I wrote back to say I was sacrificing this gem of which till then I had thought so highly, and I also (105) accepted a great many other strictures in a spirit of becoming meekness. This disarmed and placated Lord Cromer, who continued to take a friendly interest in my work. He wrote 'My remarks were, I know, severe, and it is very sensible of you to take them in the spirit in which they were intended which was distinctly friendly. I did for you what I have over and over again asked others to do for myself. I always (110)invite criticism from friends before I write or do anything important. It is very much better to have one's weak points indicated by friendly critics before one acts, rather than by hostile critics when it is too late to alter. I hope your book will be a

success and I think it will. One of the very few things which still interest me in life is to see young men get on.'

(115) I saw Lord Cromer repeatedly during this fortnight and profited to the full by his knowledge and wisdom. He represented in an intense degree that phlegm and composure which used to be associated with high British administrators in the East. I was reminded of one of my best French quotations 'On ne règne sur les âmes que par le calme'<sup>3</sup>. He was never in a hurry, never anxious to make an effect or sensation. (120) He sat still and men came to him. He watched events until their combination enabled him to intervene smoothly and decisively. He could wait a year as easily as a week, and he had often waited four or five years before getting his way. He had now reigned in Egypt for nearly sixteen years. He rejected all high-sounding titles; he remained simply the British Agent. His status was indefinite; he might be nothing; (120) he was in fact everything. His word was law. Working through a handful of brilliant lieutenants, who were mostly young and who, like their Chief, had trained themselves to keep in the background, Cromer controlled with minute and patient care every department of the Egyptian administration and every aspect of its policy. British and Egyptian Governments had come and gone; he had seen the Soudan lost (125) and reconquered. He had maintained a tight hold upon the purse strings and a deft control of the whole movement of Egyptian politics. It was very pleasant to see him thus with his life's work shining around him, the embodiment of supreme power without pomp or apparent effort. I felt honoured by the consideration with which he treated me. We do not see his like nowadays, though our need is grave.

[p. 208]

(130) The regiment were very nice to me when eventually I departed for home, and paid me the rare compliment of drinking my health the last time I dined with them. What happy years I had had with them and (165) what staunch friends one made! It was a grand school<sup>4</sup> for anyone. Discipline and comradeship were the lessons it taught; and perhaps after all these are just as valuable as the lore of the universities. Still one would like to have both.

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<sup>3</sup> "One can only impose one's authority on other people by being calm and confident."

<sup>4</sup> Churchill's father believed he was too poor a student to attend university; in fact, although he had passed Latin, he had not taken the required course in Greek. Therefore, he spent two years at Sandhurst, England's military academy, before joining the army.

## From Pen to Mouth Work Sheet

Excerpts from *My Early Life*<sup>5</sup>

By Winston S. Churchill

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1. When Churchill leaves the army, he turns to writing, living “from pen to mouth,” an expression based upon the idiom “from hand to mouth.” What does this variation on that expression convey?
2. This excerpt ends with the observation, “Still one would like to have both.” To what is Churchill referring, and what may the reader infer Churchill lacked?
3. Churchill contrasts the writing style of Macaulay and Gibbon by noting that one uses “staccato antitheses” and the other uses “rolling sentences.” Explain.
4. “I warned myself against the fault of beginning my story as some poor people do: ‘Four thousand years before the Deluge...’ What is “the Deluge”? This hyperbole is intended to illustrate what fault of writers?
5. “Writing a book is not unlike building a house or planning a battle or painting a picture.” Here Churchill uses the rhetorical device litotes. Define this term. The sentences that follow comprise an extended metaphor. How is writing a book like building a house?

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<sup>5</sup> Winston Churchill, *My Early Life* (London: Eland Publishing Ltd., 2000), 208-213

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Excerpt from *My Early Life* copyright Winston S. Churchill

6. Churchill's description of Lord Cromer notes that "He rejected all high-sounding titles; he remained simply the British Agent." This is an example of what rhetorical device?

7. Lord Cromer also critiques Churchill's writing. He takes aim at purple prose and notes the value of seeking advice, which is?

8. Churchill writes of Lord Cromer that, "He rejected all high-sounding titles; he remained simply the British Agent. His status was indefinite; he might be nothing; he was in fact everything." This description of the modest man shows the influence of which writer mentioned earlier: Macaulay or Gibbon? Explain.

## From Pen to Mouth Answer Key

Excerpts from *My Early Life*<sup>6</sup>

By Winston S. Churchill

**1. When Churchill leaves the army, he turns to writing, living “from pen to mouth,” an expression based upon the idiom “from hand to mouth.” What does this variation on that expression convey?**

*Churchill earned his living by his pen, writing books, articles for magazines and newspapers, and speeches.*

**2. This excerpt ends with the observation, “Still one would like to have both.” To what is Churchill referring, and what may the reader infer Churchill lacked?**

*Churchill wishes he’d attended university in addition to his military training at Sandhurst.*

**3. Churchill contrasts the writing style of Macaulay and Gibbon by noting that one uses “staccato antitheses” and the other uses “rolling sentences.” Explain.**

*Macaulay used staccato lines, short and in rapid succession, such as “I came I saw, I conquered,” or “Loves me, loves me not,” or “You think so? No big deal.” He often arranged the lines as opposites (antitheses), such as “This car may be old, but it runs great,” or “You’d think this would be complicated, but it is really quite easy,” or “marathons are arduous yet satisfying.” Gibbons’ sentences were long and rolling, think commas and clauses.*

**4. “I warned myself against the fault of beginning my story as some poor people do: ‘Four thousand years before the Deluge...” What is “the Deluge”? This hyperbole is intended to illustrate what fault of writers?**

*The Deluge is the flood in the Biblical story of Noah’s Ark. It illustrates the common fault of including too much, flooding the reader with more than is necessary to tell your narrative.*

**5. “Writing a book is not unlike building a house or planning a battle or painting a picture.” Here Churchill uses the rhetorical device litotes. Define this term. The sentences that follow comprise an extended metaphor. How is writing a book like building a house?**

*Litotes is a figure of speech in which an idea is expressed by a denial of its opposite, for example: “She is not unattractive” meaning “She is attractive” (what Orwell called the ‘not un-‘ formation); or “19-0 isn’t a bad start to the season” meaning “Winning the first game 19-0 is a great start to the season.” Both writing a book and building a house require that an a strong foundation be laid first, a strong outline or an actual structure. Next come the details like the chapters or the rooms, and finally, the “ornaments or refinements” like the rhetorical devices or the décor.*

**6. Churchill’s description of Lord Cromer notes that “He rejected all high-sounding titles; he remained simply the British Agent.” This is an example of what rhetorical device?**

*Understatement*

**7. Lord Cromer also critiques Churchill’s writing. He takes aim at purple prose and notes the value of seeking advice, which is?**

*As Lord Cromer notes, “It is very much better to have one’s weak points indicated by friendly critics before one acts, rather than by hostile critics when it is too late to alter”*

**8. Churchill writes of Lord Cromer that, “He rejected all high-sounding titles; he remained simply the British Agent. His status was indefinite; he might be nothing; he was in fact everything.” This description of the modest man shows the influence of which writer mentioned earlier: Macaulay or Gibbon? Explain.**

*Macaulay’s influence is reflected in the staccato, balanced antithesis: “he might be nothing; he was in fact everything.”*

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<sup>6</sup> Winston Churchill, *My Early Life* (London: Eland Publishing Ltd., 2000), 208-213

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