

Students can also read Jack Selzer's analysis of the same essay in the *Instructor's Manual to Arguments in America*.

**Chemical Toilets and Buses of Death:
Preferring the Traditional Country School in E.B. White's "Education"**
John J. Wolfe.

At first, E. B. White's "Education," a description of his son's experiences in both a private city school and a public country school, seems fairly even-handed. White doesn't seem to think very much of *either* school system. The private, progressive city school seems to be fussy and overly-controlling. At this school, his son was "worked on" by a team of "half a dozen teachers and a nurse." [25] The language of impersonal, institutional efficiency runs throughout the description of the city school. On the other hand, the country school seems run down, shabby and poorly staffed. The two teachers in the one-room schoolhouse teach "what they know themselves." [26] This is surprising; we'd expect teachers to know a lot more than their first-, second-, and third-grade students. They pound this knowledge into the students "just as fast and as hard as they can manage." [26] The reader, it seems, is left with a choice between soulless city efficiency and country bumpkin brutishness. In the final paragraph, White tells us that he, his wife and son can find only a few differences between the two systems. [26] On closer examination, however, it is clear that that White has written an essay to subtly persuade his readers that the country school experience is better, suggesting that for all its flaws, the country school is warmer, more rugged and ultimately, more American.

White's preference for the primitive country school becomes more understandable if we examine the rhetorical situation of this essay. "Education" was first published in 1939 in *Harper's Magazine*. *Harper's* is a fairly upper-class magazine; it tends to be bought and read by more educated people who live in cities (or larger towns) and have more professional jobs. In

1939, though, a lot of these people would have recently moved from the country to the cities. Back in 1939, America was much more a nation of farm communities and small towns. The readers of *Harper* would have a kind of nostalgia for the small-town and country schools of their childhoods. What strikes us as primitive and dreary might have reminded them of their childhood homes. In addition, White's audience was possibly a little uncomfortable with the privileged lives they were living. Maybe they felt that some of the features of progressive, private school education – ceramics classes and kilns, “athletic instructors” and “dietitians” – were excessive. For these people, White's description of the primitive country school would be deeply satisfying.

The original audience – and probably contemporary readers too – would also respond well to White's persona. In the text, White creates a persona that's friendly, sympathetic, and trustworthy. White's friendliness comes through in his chatty, conversational tone and quiet humor. He talks about his personal life, telling us about “my boy” and “my wife,” very much in the style of a talkative man at a dinner party. He's eager to share slightly off-kilter observations, describing the country school teacher's duties as “Augean,” or resembling Hercules's famous labor of shoveling a never-ending supply of horse crap from the Augean stables. He also tells funny stories about his son's school life, such as the story of the angel fainting at his son's Christmas pageant. Stories like this make us like the writer more.

More than friendly and funny, White also wins our sympathy by obviously caring for his son. His vivid memories of his son's nervousness on the first day of school, when “the tension . . . almost blew the windows out of the sedan,” reveals this. We tend to trust a man who cares so clearly about his children. White is also upfront about his biases, and it's an interesting fact that freely admitting biases tends to make people appear more trustworthy. White, for example, tells

us early on that he has “always rather favored public school over private school.” His reasons for this bias, though, make the reader trust him even more: First, White prefers public schools “because ... you meet a greater variety of children.” *Harper’s* is a fairly liberal magazine, and the original audience would appreciate the democratic feelings of the narrator. White is also honest about the possible other reason for this bias: because he attended a public school. This fact is important in establishing White’s credibility. While his wife went to a fancy private school, White is a public school boy, “one of us.”

Funny, friendly, sympathetic and trustworthy -- while this may describe White’s personality, it’s also the persona that he has created to deliver his message. In other words, it’s clearly part of White’s strategy to win the audience’s affection and trust, which in turn will make us more likely to agree with whatever he says.

It’s not just White’s personality and his own preference for public schools that convince the reader that country schools are better. The essay also carefully sets up a system of images that appeal to the reader’s emotion. The descriptions of the country school are filled with images and language designed to appeal to the audience’s sense of American values. The one-room schoolhouse, the loving teacher, the young student walking miles through the snow to get his education – all these things make the country schooling experience seem special and valuable. The teacher at the country school is described as a type of Ideal Mother. She’s a “guardian of their health, their clothes, their habits ... and their snowball engagements.... She cooks for the children on the stove that heats the room, and she can cool their passions or warm their soup with equal competence.” To me, that last line seems a little hokey, but I can imagine its appeal to a certain type of audience – the same people who like Norman Rockwell movies or who buy sentimental Hallmark cards. Aside from the teacher’s warmth, everything else at the country

school is kind of rugged, primitive and almost manly. The kids' games at recess ("cops and robbers"), the treats they buy at the school store (including "fiendishly" realistic fake cigarettes!), and even the chemical toilet all give the impression of a rough-and-ready, poor but honest, American smalltown experience.

The description of the city school, on the other hand, evokes a different set of emotions. Almost everything is cold and impersonal. First thing in the morning, the boy is picked up by a school bus, "a flashy vehicle as punctual as death." The whole scene is like a nightmare of mechanical efficiency:

... seeing us waiting at the cold curb, it would sweep to a halt, open its mouth, suck the boy in, and spring away with an angry growl. It was a good deal like a train picking up a bag of mail.

The school itself is equally efficient. Instead of one warm, motherly teacher, the boy is "worked on for six or seven hours by a half dozen teachers and a nurse." Instead of "cops and robbers," his recess is "supervised by an athletic instructor." Instead of carrying his lunch in a homey tin pail, the boy eats a lunch "worked out by a dietician." Where everything in the country school spoke of warm, homespun self-reliance, everything in the city school speaks of cold, professional efficiency. It's clear why White – and the audience – would prefer the country schools.

More than just in the images he includes, White's campaign to win us over to the country school is apparent in the details that he chooses **not** to reveal. White could have described some of the boy's city teachers. He could have told us about a passionate reading teacher, an eccentric science teacher, or a beautiful young art teacher – but he chose not to. This was a strategy. By choosing to leave the teachers in the city school faceless, White exaggerates the impersonal nature of the school. Similarly, he could have told us more about the differences in instruction. There's no way I can know, but I suspect that maybe the teaching was actually better in the city school: the classes were smaller (or at least, they didn't have three grades together), the teachers

were specialists, there were more resources (a ceramics room!), and White pretty much tell us that the teaching in the country school wasn't particularly strong. By avoiding all those details, however, White subtly suggests that those factors aren't really important. This avoidance of questions of academic content, then, is also a decision White made that probably also contributes to our preferring the country schools.

For me, though, the argument doesn't entirely work. It's easy enough for E. B. White to suggest that the day-to-day experience of school – the unsupervised games at recess, the self-reliance of walking in the snow, the chemical toilets in the bathroom – are the truly important things. After all, White is a professional writer, an essayist. His wife is a graduate of private schools. These are clearly people with education, culture, and money. I don't believe E. B. White ever had any serious concerns for his son's future. I wonder, however, about the other students at the school. The students who spent not just a couple years, but their entire education, "sit[ting] still at their desks," having knowledge pounded into them "as fast and as hard" as the teachers could manage. White seems to find this experience of education quaint and amusing; I'm not so sure. I'm not so ready to give up on progressive education, professional teachers, and buildings with resources. I realize, though, that part of my resistance is because I am a professional teacher, and another part is because I don't share the nostalgic memories of country schools that White's ideal audience did.

Still, I do see the power of his argument – especially for his original, 1939 audience. White's friendly, caring and trustworthy persona, the positive images of country schools, the negative images of city schools, and the careful exclusion of any images that might have sent other messages all work together to make a strong rhetorical case for preferring the country schools – chemical toilets and all.