WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR.

Why Don't We Complain?

William F. Buckley Jr. is one of the leading voices of conservative politics. Best known as founder and longtime editor of the opinion journal National Review *and host of the PBS political talk show* Firing Line, *Buckley, born in 1925 in New York City, has also written a syndicated column, contributed to many magazines, and written over forty fiction and nonfiction books.*

"Why Don't We Complain?" originally appeared in Esquire *in 1960. Buckley's connection of political apathy to failures to act in other parts of life is still timely today. As you read, though, think about all that has happened in America since the writing of this article.*

It was the very last coach and the only empty seat on the entire train, so there was no turning back. The problem was to breathe. Outside the temperature was below freezing. Inside the railroad car, the temperature must have been about 85 degrees. I took off my overcoat, and a few minutes later my jacket, and noticed that the car was flecked with the white shirts of passengers. I soon found my hand moving to loosen my tie. From one end of the car to the other, as we rattled through Westchester County, we sweated; but we did not moan.

I watched the train conductor appear at the head of the car. "Tickets, all tickets, please!" In a more virile age, I thought, the passengers would seize the conductor and strap him down on a seat over the radiator to share the fate of his patrons. He shuffled down the aisle, picking up tickets, punching commutation cards. *No one addressed a word to him.* He approached my seat, and I drew a deep breath of resolution. "Conductor," I began with a considerable edge to my voice. . . . Instantly the doleful eyes of my seatmate turned tiredly from his newspaper to fix me with a resentful stare: what question could be so important as to justify

my sibilant intrusion into his stupor? I was shaken by those eyes. I am incapable of making a discreet fuss, so I mumbled a question about what time were we due in Stamford (I didn't even ask whether it would be before or after dehydration could be expected to set in), got my reply, and went back to my newspaper and to wiping my brow.

The conductor had nonchalantly walked down the gauntlet of eighty sweating American freemen, and not one of them had asked him to explain why the passengers in that car had been consigned to suffer. There is nothing to be done when the temperature *outdoors* is 85 degrees, and indoors the air conditioner has broken down; obviously when that happens there is nothing to do, except perhaps curse the day that one was born. But when the temperature outdoors is below freezing, it takes a positive act of will on somebody's part to set the temperature *indoors* at 85. Somewhere a valve was turned too far, a furnace overstoked, a thermostat maladjusted: something that could easily be remedied by turning off the heat and allowing the great outdoors to come indoors. All this is so obvious. What is not obvious is what has happened to the American people.

It isn't just the commuters, whom we have come to visualize as a supine breed who have got onto the trick of suspending their sensory faculties twice a day while they submit to the creeping dissolution of the railroad industry. It isn't just they who have given up trying to rectify irrational vexations. It is the American people everywhere.

A few weeks ago at a large movie theatre I turned to my wife 5
and said, "The picture is out of focus." "Be quiet," she answered. I obeyed. But a few minutes later I raised the point again, with mounting impatience. "It will be all right in a minute," she said apprehensively. (She would rather lose her eyesight than be around when I make one of my infrequent scenes.) I waited. It was *just* out of focus—not glaringly out, but out. My vision is 20-20, and I assume that is the vision, adjusted, of most people in the movie house. So, after hectoring my wife throughout the first reel, I finally prevailed upon her to admit that it *was* off, and very annoying. We then settled down, coming to rest on the presumption that: a) someone connected with the management of the theatre must soon notice the blur and make the correction; or b) that

someone seated near the rear of the house would make the complaint in behalf of those of us up front; or c) that—any minute now—the entire house would explode into catcalls and foot stamping, calling dramatic attention to the irksome distortion

What happened was nothing. The movie ended, as it had begun, just out of focus, and as we trooped out, we stretched our faces in a variety of contortions to accustom the eye to the shock of normal focus.

I think it is safe to say that everybody suffered on that occasion. And I think it is safe to assume that everyone was expecting someone else to take the initiative in going back to speak to the manager. And it is probably true even that if we had supposed the movie would run right through with the blurred image, someone surely would have summoned up the purposive indignation to get up out of his seat and file his complaint.

But notice that no one did. And the reason no one did is because we are all increasingly anxious in America to be unobtrusive, we are reluctant to make our voices heard, hesitant about claiming our rights; we are afraid that our cause is unjust, or that if it is not unjust, that it is ambiguous; or if not even that, that it is too trivial to justify the horrors of a confrontation with Authority; we will sit in an oven or endure a racking headache before undertaking a head-on, I'm-here-to-tell-you complaint. That tendency to passive compliance, to a heedless endurance is something to keep one's eyes on—in sharp focus.

I myself can occasionally summon the courage to complain, but I cannot, as I have intimated, complain softly. My own instinct is so strong to let the thing ride, to forget about it—to expect that someone will take the matter up, when the grievance is collective, in my behalf—that it is only when the provocation is at a very special key, whose vibrations touch simultaneously a complexus of nerves, allergies, and passions, that I catch fire and find the reserves of courage and assertiveness to speak up. When that happens, I get quite carried away. My blood gets hot, my brow wet, I become unbearably and unconscionably sarcastic and bellicose: I am girded for a total showdown.

Why should that be? Why could not I (or anyone else) on that railroad coach have said simply to the conductor, "Sir,'—I take that back: that sounds sarcastic—"Conductor, would you be good

enough to turn down the heat? I am extremely hot. In fact, I tend to get hot every time the temperature reaches 85 degr—" Strike that last sentence. Just end it with the simple statement that you are extremely hot, and let the conductor infer the cause.

Every New Year's Eve I resolve to do something about the Milquetoast in me and vow to speak up, calmly, for my rights, and for the betterment of our society, on every appropriate occasion. Entering last New Year's Eve I was fortified in my resolve because that morning at breakfast I had had to ask the waitress three times for a glass of milk. She finally brought it—after I had finished my eggs, which is when I don't want it any more. I did not have the manliness to order her to take the milk back, but settled instead for a cowardly sulk, and ostentatiously refused to drink the milk—though I later paid for it—rather than state plainly to the hostess, as I should have, why I had not drunk it, and would not pay for it.

So by the time the New Year ushered out the Old, riding in on my morning's indignation and stimulated by the gastric juices of resolution that flow so faithfully on New Year's Eve, I rendered my vow. Henceforward I would conquer my shyness, my despicable disposition to supineness. I would speak out like a man against the unnecessary annoyances of our time.

Forty-eight hours later, I was standing in line at the ski-repair store in Pico Peak, Vermont. All I needed, to get on with my skiing, was the loan, for one minute, of a small screwdriver, to tighten a loose binding. Behind the counter in the workshop were two men. One was industriously engaged in servicing the complicated requirements of a young lady at the head of the line, and obviously he would be tied up for quite a while. The other—"Jiggs," his workmate called him—was a middle-aged man, who sat in a chair puffing a pipe, exchanging small talk with his working partner. My pulse began its telltale acceleration. The minutes ticked on. I stared at the idle shopkeeper, hoping to shame him into action, but he was impervious to my telepathic reproof and continued his small talk with his friend, brazenly insensitive to the nervous demands of six good men who were raring to ski.

Suddenly my New Year's Eve resolution struck me. It was now or never. I broke from my place in line and marched to the

counter. I was going to control myself. I dug my nails into my palms. My effort was only partially successful:

"If you are not too busy," I said icily, "would you mind handing 15
me a screwdriver?"

Work stopped and everyone turned his eyes on me, and I experienced that mortification I always feel when I am the center of centripetal shafts of curiosity, resentment perplexity.

But the worst was yet to come. "I am sorry, sir," said Jiggs deferentially, moving the pipe from his mouth. "I am not supposed to move. I have just had a heart attack." That was the signal for a great whirring noise that descended from heaven. We looked, stricken, out the window, and it appeared as though a cyclone had suddenly focused on the snowy courtyard between the shop and the ski lift. Suddenly a gigantic Army helicopter materialized, and hovered down to a landing. Two men jumped out of the plane carrying a stretcher, tore into the ski shop, and lifted the shopkeeper onto the stretcher. Jiggs bade his companion good-by was whisked out the door, into the plane, up to the heavens, down—we learned—to a nearby Army hospital. I looked up manfully—into a score of man-eating eyes. I put the experience down as a reversal.

As I write this, on an airplane, I have run out of paper and need to reach into my briefcase under my legs for more. I cannot do this until my empty lunch tray is removed from my lap. I arrested the stewardess as she passed empty-handed down the aisle on the way to the kitchen to fetch the lunch trays for the passengers up forward who haven't been served yet. "Would you please take my tray?" "Just a *moment,* sir," she said, and marched on sternly. Shall I tell her that since she is headed for the kitchen *anyway* it cannot delay the feeding of the other passengers by the two seconds necessary to stash away my empty tray? Or remind her that not fifteen minutes ago she spoke unctuously into the loudspeaker the words undoubtedly devised by the airline's highly paid public-relations counselor: "If there is anything I or Miss French can do for you to make your trip more enjoyable, *please* let us—" I have run out of paper.

I think the observable reluctance of the majority of Americans to assert themselves in minor matters is related to our increased sense of helplessness in an age of technology and centralized political and economic power. For generations, Americans who

were too hot, or too cold, got up and did something about it. Now we call the plumber, or the electrician, or the furnace man. The habit of looking after our own needs obviously had something to do with the assertiveness that characterized the American family familiar to readers of American literature. With the technification of life goes our direct responsibility for our material environment, and we are conditioned to adopt a position of helplessness not only as regards the broken air conditioner, but as regards the overheated train. It takes an expert to fix the former, but not the latter: yet these distinctions, as we withdrew into helplessness, tend to fade away.

Our notorious political apathy is a related phenomenon. Every 20
year, whether the Republican or the Democratic Party is in office, more and more power drains away from the individual to feed vast reservoirs in far-off places; and we have less and less say about the shape of events which shape our future. From this aberration of personal power comes the sense of resignation with which we accept the political dispensations of a powerful government whose hold upon us continues to increase.

An editor of a national weekly news magazine told me a few years ago that as few as a dozen letters of protest against an editorial stance of his magazine was enough to convene a plenipotentiary meeting of the board of editors to review policy. "So few people complain, or make their voices heard," he explained to me, "that we assume a dozen letters represent the inarticulated views of thousands of readers." In the past ten years, he said, the volume of mail has noticeably decreased, even though the circulation of his magazine has risen.

When our voices are finally mute, when we have finally suppressed the natural instinct to complain, whether the vexation is trivial or grave, we shall have become automatons, incapable of feeling. When Premier Khrushchev first came to this country late in 1959 he was primed, we are informed, to experience the bitter resentment of the American people against his tyranny, against his persecutions, against the movement which is responsible for the then great number of American deaths in Korea, for billions in taxes every year, and for life everlasting on the brink of disasters; but Khrushchev was pleasantly surprised, and reported back to the Russian people that he had been met with overwhelming cordiality (read: apathy), except, to be sure, for "a few fascists

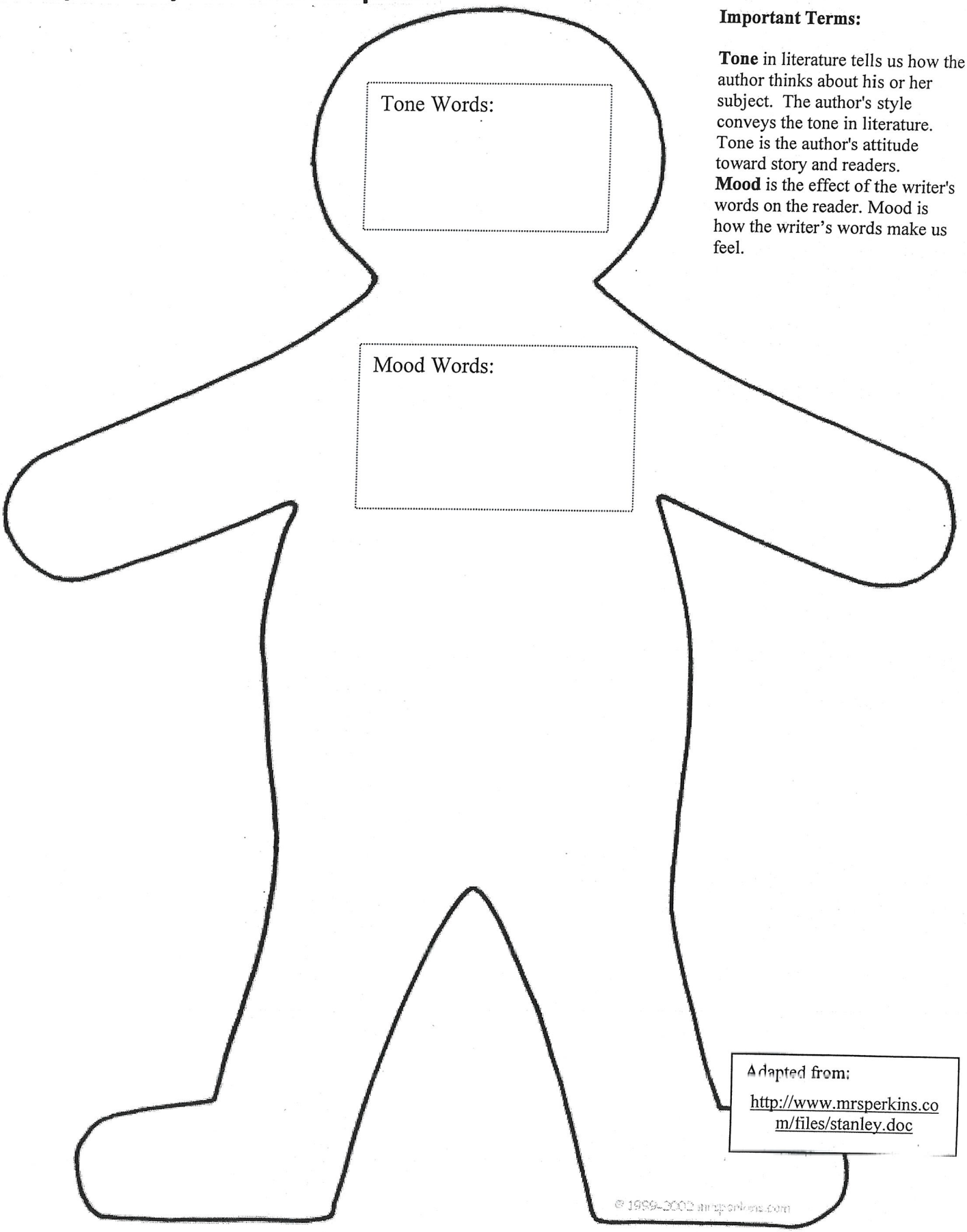
who followed me around with their wretched posters and should be . . . horsewhipped."

I may be crazy, but I say there would have been lots more posters in a society where train temperatures in the dead of winter are not allowed to climb up to 85 degrees without complaint.

For Discussion and Writing

1. What are Buckley's three examples of situations in which one might complain?
2. What does Buckley argue is the relationship between our failure to complain and our failure to care about politics? How does he attempt to convince us of that relationship?
3. Compare Buckley's argument about our behavior as citizens with Barbara Lazear Ascher's in "On Compassion" (p. 35). Do they focus on the same kinds of behaviors? How do their differences in subject relate to the differences in their essays?
4. Write an essay in which you reflect on your own political feelings and orientation. What do you care about, and why? How do you demonstrate your beliefs?

Buckley's "Why Don't We Complain"



Important Terms:

Tone in literature tells us how the author thinks about his or her subject. The author's style conveys the tone in literature. Tone is the author's attitude toward story and readers.
Mood is the effect of the writer's words on the reader. Mood is how the writer's words make us feel.

Name _____ Score _____
Class _____ Date _____ A. P. English Lang. and Comp.

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SUGGESTED APPROACHES

"Why Don't We Complain?" presents an easy-to-read argument on a familiar topic that should appeal to our students. The essay can be viewed as a model argument that moves deductively from a particular experience to generalizations and claims about broad issues. Students might discuss Buckley's use of that rhetorical process. Surely some may regard his general conclusions as too sweeping or too broad; others will doubtless agree with them.

The teacher might begin by having the class read the first three paragraphs, in which the speaker relates his experience aboard the train. In their notes, students would write a brief paragraph about a similar uncomfortable experience they have had. They would then read through paragraph 8, at which point they would stop and identify Buckley's argument. An excellent method to deduce Buckley's rationale is Stephen Toulmin's model for argument analysis (see Appendix).

Once students know the Toulmin model, they will be familiar with the following sentence construction: Because _____, therefore _____, since_____. In analyzing an argument, they would fill in the first blank with the data or support, the second with the assertion, or claim, and the third with what Toulmin calls the warrant. A warrant—usually tacit—is the assumption necessarily shared by the speaker, or writer, and the audience that establishes the logical connection between the data and the claim. With this formula, a claim seems like not merely an assertion but rather a logical conclusion. Toulmin's model is applied quite simply: Because such an approach helps students understand the elements of argument, therefore it is a valuable pedagogical technique, since greater understanding among our students is a desirable quality. We see here, of course, that our support is actually a claim. Teachers and their students may test that claim in class.

After discussing Buckley's claims through paragraph 8, the class would continue to read through paragraph 18, discussing his reluctance to complain, his subsequent resolution to do so and its ironic conclusion at the ski-repair shop. Buckley's anecdotes serve to support his concluding claim about Americans' passivity.

QUESTIONS ON RHETORIC AND STYLE

1. Buckley begins his essay with a specific example before he identifies his topic or states his thesis. What is the effect of such an approach?
2. Does Buckley's method at the beginning appeal more to ethos, logos, or pathos? Explain.
3. Note Buckley's diction. What is the effect of "virile" in paragraph 2? Of "freemen" in paragraph 3?
4. Explain the rhetorical function of paragraph 4.
5. Using the "because, therefore, since" format, write statements of the claims made in paragraph 8.
6. Note the parallel structures Buckley uses to formulate his claims in paragraph 8. Explain the effect.
7. Explain the purpose and effect of the phrase "in sharp focus" in paragraph 8.
8. What is the purpose of the statement "Strike that last sentence" in paragraph 10?
9. What purpose is served by the ironic incident related in paragraphs 13–17?
10. Write statements of the claims Buckley makes in paragraphs 19 and 20. Use the "because, therefore, since" format.

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

These multiple-choice questions refer to paragraphs 1–9 of the essay.

1. In the first three paragraphs, Buckley presents all of the following contrasts EXCEPT
   a. inside and outside
   b. present and past
   c. assertiveness and complacency
   d. discomfort and comfort
   e. action and submission

2. Which of the following words from paragraphs 1 and 2 is intended to be ironic?
   a. resentful
   b. doleful
   c. freemen
   d. dehydration
   e. stupor

3. Which of the following describes the organizational method of the passage?
   a. movement from general principles to specific examples
   b. development of qualifications to underlying assumptions
   c. movement from specific examples to general conclusion
   d. presentation of argument and counterargument
   e. progress from descriptive narration to detailed exposition

4. Paragraph 4 serves which of the following rhetorical functions?
   I. It provides a transition between the specific arguments in the paragraphs before and after it.
   II. It qualifies and challenges a position developed in the previous paragraph.
   III. It extends the example of previous paragraph to a more general application.
   a. I only
   b. II only
   c. I and II only
   d. I and III only
   e. I, II, and III

5. The writer uses each of the following EXCEPT
   a. anecdotal narration
   b. personal experience
   c. specific observation
   d. statement of opinion
   e. expert testimony

6. Paragraph 7 serves which of the following rhetorical functions?
   I. It draws a connection between the two examples given in the preceding paragraphs.
   II. It provides possible solutions to some of the complaints raised in earlier paragraphs.
   III. It presents factual information as support for the claims made in previous paragraphs.
   a. I only
   b. II only
   c. I and II only
   d. I and III only
   e. I, II, and III

7. Paragraph 8 concludes with a tone of
   a. admonition
   b. ambiguity
   c. uncertainty
   d. disappointment
   e. encouragement

8. The final phrase of paragraph 8, "—in sharp focus," derives its power from which of the following?
   I. It provides a linguistic connection to an event related earlier.
   II. It emphasizes the importance of the action enjoined.
   III. It provides transition to the ideas introduced in the next paragraph.
   a. I only
   b. II only
   c. I and II only
   d. I and III only
   e. II and III only