

Unit 1 Test Reading Packet

Train of Thought

I searched through *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* to find information on the expression *train of thought*, but found nothing under either *train* or *thought*.

5 Certainly the origin of that expression couldn't have predated the invention of the locomotive in 1801. Before 1801, when a person was alert to a clattering onslaught of thoughts, big overloaded
10 boxcars of thought, thoughts linked together and barreling by, what expression would that person have used?

The etymology of this expression stems from the industrial age, that reign of
15 clanking mechanical contraptions, pistons pumping, conveyor belts conveying. But it's a sadly lacking expression for the post-industrial age,
20 when voluminous amounts of information are sent across continents in nanoseconds and practically every week physicists proclaim the existence of a subatomic particle that is smaller and
25 shorter-lived and more elusive than the particle thought to be the fundamental building block of matter the day before. And what with frequent technological advances in the rapid transmission of words and images, from telex to modem
30 to satellite dish, even the *lightning* in the term *lightning fast* seems feeble and inadequate, a waning glow in our vocabulary.

35 So the question is how to update the phrase *train of thought*, how to dust it off, streamline its antiquated angles, how to make it purr like a monorail. You can replace the cowcatcher with a nose cone,
40 use plutonium instead of coal, fit the caboose with a booster rocket, but that won't make it modern for long. At the rate science proceeds, rockets and missiles may one day seem like buffalo—slow,
45 endangered grazers in the black pasture of outer space.

It was only thirty years ago that my father read me asleep from *The Big Book of Trains*. Each page illustrated explained
50 the function of a single car—hopper, tank, flatcar, stock car—and I'd pull away from the station of my waking toward the deep, improbable twilight of dreams. In the realm of dreams there was a train,
55 too; but wheeling freely off its track, strange fumes spewing from the smokestack. In one dream from my childhood I was on a train with a woman who was dressed in an enormous satin
60 skirt. I was sitting in her lap and we ladled cupfuls of water into each other's mouths. "Where are we going?" I asked her. "To the city," she said, "where the rustling of a woman's skirt sounds the
65 same as the rain." I remember that dream because it was the first from which I awoke with a phrase intact, a phrase that withstood the morning light, and I fell in love with words.

Adapted from Bernard Cooper, "Train of Thought." Copyright 1996 by Bernard Cooper.