COGNITION AND COMPOSITION

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"It is not things themselves that disturb men, but men's judgments about those things." These words come not from a mad deconstructionist but from the stoic Epictetus, by way of the title page to Tristram Shandy. Like most stoic epigrams (and unlike most of Tristram Shandy), this one contains as much sense as poetry. To be sure, Epictetus has not quite given us the Key to All Mystagogies, but he does remind us that epistemology is more than just a current fad. Playing around with possible applications of Epictetus' rule should yield not only some fun but also some interesting ways of looking at politics and literature — including that humble and much-deprecated genre of literature known as the undergraduate English paper.

1. Language and Knowing: Three Compositions

To paraphrase Epictetus: We know not so much what is "out there" as what we tell ourselves is "out there." As a contemporary cognitive psychologist might put it: We do not know the world immediately; rather, we compose various representations of the world in a sense "know" only our representations. The nature and shape of these representations are of course determined in part by the objective nature of things and events. They are likewise determined in part by the knower's values, his physical and psychological needs, the amount of time he spends attending to the things in front of him, his previous ways of representing reality, and especially — and of especial interest to us — by his language. "Language" here does not mean "mother tongue," the langue in Saussure's sense: Ben Lee Whorf probably went too far in speculating that Hopis must perceive rifles or running men differently from the way Englishmen would. "Language" here means essentially parole: the lexicon an individual habitually uses, and her verbal ways of grouping objects as equivalent, and the abstract concepts she employs and the less-abstract concepts she subsumes under each more abstract one, and the verbal patterns of cause-and-effect she composes, and so on. As Section II of this essay will show, modern cognitive psychology (to say nothing of more esoteric mythologies) offers ample support for the ideas that each person comprehends reality, even the same reality, differently from the fellow sitting next to him and that his use of language strongly influences the way he comprehends that reality. These hypotheses should seem at least intuitively true to any teacher who, at the end of a semester, has read over evaluation forms from twenty-five students nominally taking the same section of the same course.

A perspective on language and knowing somewhat more familiar, i.e., rhetorical or literary criticism, will yield essentially the same view as cognitive psychology and is easier to apply to complex cognitive systems. So we might well begin by criticizing some complex (yet familiar) representatives of reality. Three interesting ones come to mind: one from politics, one from belles-lettres, and one from a composition course I taught last year.

Recall some political events that began in the Carter administration. With the encouragement of the Ayatollah Khomeini, certain young persons — whom we first conceived of as "students," later as "militants," and finally as "barbarians" — the last term being coined by President-elect Reagan — held captive for some four hundred days fifty-three Americans. Over approximately the same period of time, faulty transmissions manufactured by the Ford Motor Company killed or very seriously injured some one hundred Americans. Now, contrary to all laws of arithmetic, millions of bumper-stickers did not appear, exhorting, "Bomb Dearborn." Black ribbons were not tied around gas pumps, and the gang down at the Legion Hall did not, so far as I can ascertain, threaten dire consequences to Henry Ford II, could they only get their hands on him.

This is not to excuse the behavior of the Ayatollah and the Iranian students or militants or barbarians or whatever they were — one does wonder what we would have named them next — or to engage in a nostalgic denunciation of the evils of corporate capitalism. My point of course is to illustrate how the language we compose not only reflects but influences what we deem important, how we feel, what we know or tell ourselves we know, and how we act — or decline to act. Consider Henry Ford. To call the man a "murderer" sets up a complex chain of mental associations, and obligations on the part of the caller to act. To call him a "leading industrialist" sets up a different chain of associations and ethical obligations. Likewise with a "student" or a "militant" or a "barbarian." So we might say — going even farther than Orwell did — that politics is inseparable from, even determined by, the English language (or rather our uses thereof).

So the (to me) odd behavior of the American public these past few years shows us something, I think, about how our language — specifically the choices we make in naming things — influences our understanding of the world (and of course vice-versa) and hence determines how we act (and of course vice-versa) and hence influences how we are and become (and of course vice-versa). The perhaps idiosyncratic history lesson I've composed shows the effects as well of some other functions of language. At a fairly low level of cognition and understanding — the level of discriminating and naming a thing, for example — the activity of composing language is a means by which one simplifies and imposes a workable concreteness and order upon the "blooming, buzzing confusion" (as William James has it) of one's various, usually ambiguous, and frequently conflicting sense-impressions. But composing language involves more than just naming. It is likewise the means, at higher levels of cognition, of imposing a useful order upon, of connecting into more or less useful patterns, one's various experiences (direct and vicarious), thoughts, and bits of factual knowledge. Seen thus, the activity of composing language — the activity of writing a history or a scholarly essay, for example — is the activity of making some connections among an extremely complex set of perceptions, thoughts, and experiences of an infinitely complex world. Experimenting in composing words thus is experimenting in composing a structure of understanding. The Ayatollah Khomeini and Henry Ford cannot be perceived simultaneously. Unlike Chang and Eng, they are
not connected by nature. They may however be connected by language, for example brought together in a paragraph built on the pattern of "comparison and contrast" as I did, for better or worse, a few hundred words back. To create such a syntax, such a pattern of paragraph-development, is to create a certain way of understanding the world: perhaps a misleading and dangerous way, perhaps a useful way. A different syntax, a different pattern of paragraph-development — like a different way of naming a thing or event — would lead to a different way of understanding the world.

Thus we can say that, in a sense, a language-user composes the world in which he or she lives. Note that the actual existence of a concrete reality is not being denied here — only our ability to apprehend that reality immediately. Hence there is no need to bring in Bishop Berkeley and Dr. Johnson's sore foot. (And even Boswell, recall, did not think that kicking a rock demonstrated all that much.) But if reality is not directly affected, let alone created, by our verbal formulations, our understanding of reality is; hence so are the ways we will and can act in response to reality — and indeed upon it.

The relationship of acting to understanding and the relationship of understanding to language-using are also suggested in a well-known essay written by the highly-praised man of letters — we might of course name him, "the radical black activist"; for that matter, we might name him "the convicted rapist" — in a well-known essay written by the convicted rapist Eldridge Cleaver, published as Chapter 1 of Soul on Ice. In this essay Cleaver, incarcerated in Folsom Prison, describes how he decided to seek salvation, not through Christ but through composing written language. He writes,

That is why I started to write. To save myself.
I realized that no one could save me but myself. The prison authorities were both uninterested and unable to help me. I had to seek out the truth and unravel the snarled web of my motivations. I had to find out who I am and what I want to be, what type of man I could be, and what I could do to become the best of which I was capable. I understood that what had happened to me was also happening to countless other blacks and would happen to many, many more.

The passage is an old chestnut by now, at least among composition teachers, but it will repay closer analysis than it is usually given. Cleaver's means of freeing himself, if not from his immediate detention then from the life of a thug, was careful experimenting in composing words to represent reality anew and (thus) to suggest how he could best act, who he could best be. Composing a structure of words to show the way out was a most appropriate move for Cleaver, as it was essentially a structuring of words that had gotten him into Folsom in the first place: a verbal representation of the world that practically demanded (at the very least, licensed) his forcible raping of white women. Concepts derived from radical socialist literature (read, he tells us, "with very little understanding") had enabled Cleaver to comprehend his experiences in a racist society "through . . . new eyes." Certain attitudes evolved that were but logical implications of this new verbal model of reality. "Somehow I arrived at the conclusion," he tells us, "that, as a matter of principle, it was of paramount importance for me to have an antagonistic, ruthless attitude toward white women." Given this, and since "freedom" seemed to be synonymous with "stepping outside of the white man's law," and since white society was corrupt and vicious, and since the white man felt "consternation" at inter-racial sex with "his women," therefore a black man's raping of a white woman was not a base crime of violence but instead a noble "insurrectionary act." Q.E.D. So Cleaver had become a rapist: a move in part allowed by and in part caused by a certain verbal ordering of the perceived world, a system of naming, classification, cause-and-effect, evidence-and-conclusion, induction and deduction. If blind hatred and lust were also factors here, they were still passions not able to be translated into action until an elaborate new cognitive schema had been composed. The clinical tone Cleaver adopts throughout the essay, along with the almost-sylogistic form of his narration, further suggest that his were less crimes of passion than crimes of a highly idiosyncratic cognition, of a system of representation not devoid of all validity but ultimately deceiving and harmful — and not to his victims only. This Cleaver himself, in Folsom Prison, came to realize:

After I returned to prison, I took a long look at myself and, for the first time in my life, admitted that I was wrong, that I had gone astray — astray not so much from the white man's law as from being human, civilized — for I could not approve the act of rape. Even though I had some insight into my own motivations, I did not feel justified. I lost my self-respect. My pride as a man dissolved and my whole fragile moral structure seemed to collapse, completely shattered.

That is why I started to write. To save myself.

Stone walls and iron bars do not the only sort of prison make. Cleaver is an extreme case, no doubt, but he is far from the only person to have been held hostage or imprisoned — choose your metaphor — by his own verbal representation of reality. If you have read many student essays, you may have seen this many times. Here is one written by a college senior:

The women of Iowa City really rub me the wrong way. They are constantly fighting for their cause, and seem to be against anything relating to men. Between meetings at the Women's Resource and Action Center (WRAC) and rallies to Take Back the Night, they rarely have time to view men on an individual basis.

These women generalize the male population as rapists only out to degrade women. I wish they could rationalize once in a while and not get so pissed-off about simple incidents. For example, a year or so ago a well-established restaurant mailed coupons to the male staff of the Univ. of Iowa entitled them to $3.00 off a dinner check. To female staff they sent a coupon for $1.50 off a lunch check. This upset many women who were looking for an excuse to get verbally pissed-off about men. These irate women did not realize that most men do not go to dinner alone, while most women do not pay for everyone's entree at lunch. Most men do pay an entire check at dinner.

Every day for two solid weeks something was mentioned about Iowa ERA, WRAC vs. men, or women taking back the

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The problem is not that the writer's ideas are Politically Incorrect but that his language is far too clumsy to make useful distinctions among — let alone make much sense of — the various women in this university town and their various beliefs and wishes. Doubtless, there's hope for the lad. His composition, like Cleaver's, is not totally out of touch with reality (which is not to say that he's hit the nail right on the head), and his connecting of specific events of the past with generalizations about the present suggests verbal and analytic abilities that may well lead, sooner or later, to his composing a representation of reality that will serve him better than this one.

The relevant verbal aspects here, as in Cleaver's earlier (i.e., pre-Folsom) representation of the world, are the naming, the system of cause-and-effect established, and the hierarchical abstraction of categories; in addition, there is a problem of internal consistency. The most striking bit of naming, of course, occurs with the last three words quoted, but there is also the naming (hence identifying) of the object of the WRAC's opposition: "men." The latter bit of clumsy naming is less extreme than, though in quite the same league as, naming half of human-kind 'rapists,' to which the writer rightly objects. The verbal system of causality established here is likewise striking, if a bit hackneyed; annoyance over a restaurant's apparent discrimination against women is caused by (and only by) women's longing for an excuse to become enraged at men, which longings is caused by (and only by), apparently, psychosis. The broad abstraction, "(concerns of) psychotic women libbers" here includes, hierarchically, three lower-level abstractions: active opposition to rape (the point of the "Women Take Back the Night" rallies), misanthropy at the WRAC, and support for the Equal Rights Amendment. This is a bold bit of categorizing! Finally, the composition's cogency and usefulness are vitiates by a somewhat comic verbal-logical inconsistency: the fifty-five thousand women of Iowa City are berated for failing "to view men on an individual basis." In sum, it appears that at least many of the writer's problems in coping with the opposite sex are not merely described by but created by his language. Fortunately for him, these are problems that might at least be mitigated by a stiff course in English composition.

II. The Arts and Sciences: Complementary Views

We've looked closely at three very different representations of reality — four, if we count my comparison-and-contrast of Tehran and Dearborn. Each amount to a small structure of knowledge, of understanding. In each case, I've tried to suggest, the structure of language that has been composed does not merely report some pre-existing, non-verbal knowledge; rather, the structure of the language is inextricably bound up with the knowledge. To change one's language, in any instance, would be to change one's understanding of the world, to change one's way of "seeing" things. This is quite what Eldridge Cleaver discovered in Folsom; what my disgruntled senior, I think, saw by the end of the semester; what many Americans came to suspect when, before their very eyes, on ABC, students began to metamorphose into militants and thence into barbarians.

That there is a complex and intimate relationship between language and knowing, of course, is hardly an original observation. Indeed, a generation ago Susanne K. Langer noted that it is "the somewhat diffuse apprehension of our intellectual age, that symbolism," notably the symbolism of language, "is the key to epistemology and 'natural knowledge':" A generation before that, 1. A. Richards had put it somewhat more gracefully. Language is not "a thin, but better-than-nothing substitute for real experience," Richards writes, "— language, well-used, is a completion and does what the intuitions of sensation by themselves cannot do. Words are the meeting points at which regions of experience which can never combine in sensation or intuition, come together. They are the occasion and the means of that growth which is the mind's endless endeavor to order itself." The linguist Edward Sapir, as do many modern theorists, goes a bit further even than this. He concludes that language "does not as a matter of actual behavior stand apart from or run parallel to direct experience but completely interpenetrates with it." Jerome Bruner, our contemporary, seconds Sapir (employing in the process a metaphor that recalls Cleaver): "Man does not respond to a world that exists for direct touching. Nor [on the other hand] is he locked in a prison of his own subjectivity. Rather, he represents the world to himself and acts in behalf of or in reaction to his representations." For Bruner and other cognitive psychologists the most powerful instrument of representation, though not the only one, is language. Susanne Langer puts the matter most succinctly: "The fact is that our primary world of reality is a verbal one" (p. 126).

The relationships of language and knowing are immensely complex ones, and not extremely well understood even by specialists in cognition. What is particularly interesting is that the conclusions of many humanists of decades past — of Richards, Langer, Sapir, whom I've quoted, and Wittgenstein, Whitehead, Cassirer, Wallace Stevens, Kenneth Burke of the '30s — are being corroborated by cognitive psychologists of our own day (or whose writings are only now appearing in English): Jerome Bruner and his colleagues at Harvard's Center for Cognitive Studies, L. S. Vygotsky, A. R. Luria, and many others of lesser renown. So far, I've been discussing language and knowing from the former, humanistic perspective, specifically from the perspective of a literary critic or rhetorician — looking closely at texts, teasing out some of their subtle meanings, and in general behaving like a normal English professor. (I trust that's not an oxymoron.) We can supplement that view with some insights derived from the work of cognitive psychologists.

One is that most of the mental activity that we call "thinking" apparently occurs in an inner "language" quite different in structure from the public language we speak and write. Consequently, a standard admonition of English teachers — "Each sentence should express one complete thought" — is worthless. Try defining "thought," in that context, and then try defining "complete." (If you find that you are making progress, you might test your definitions against any sentence by John Lyly and any one in the New York Daily News.)

A more useful view of the function of language in thinking was offered by the Soviet psychologist L. S. Vygotsky, whose studies of language-development in children led him to see verbal thought "as a complex, dynamic entity, and the relationship of thought and word within it as a movement through a series of planes." In the outer plane of "external speech" — "speech" here does not imply actual vocalization — "thought is connected with" and "embodied in words" (p. 149). The innermost plane, for Vygotsky, is "thought itself," which he defines as one's personal and full conception of things. This inner level has a structure but not an "automatic counterpart in words" (p. 150). The middle plane is that of "inner speech," "a dynamic, shifting, unstable thing, fluctuating between word and [inner, non-verbal] thought" (p. 149). "There remains a constant interaction
between inner and outer operations,” says Vygotsky, “one form effortlessly changing into the other and back again. . . . There is no sharp division between inner and external behavior, and each influences the other” (p. 47). So if we don’t exactly think in the King’s English, we don’t exactly think without it, either.

Vygotsky is speaking broadly, of course, and mostly about the more advanced and sustained forms of cognitive activity. Much more work in cognitive psychology, understandably enough, has focused on the so-called “lower” forms of cognition: perception, attention, memory, elementary problem-solving, and so on. What is interesting here is the crucial role of language in shaping knowledge even at these basic levels. That the most elaborate and complex structures of knowledge are, whether true or false, elaborate and complex structures of language should come as no surprise to us. Recall Cleaver—or Veblen or Marx or Newton. Vygotsky, Luria, Piaget, Bruner, and others show the crucial role of language in the less-complex sorts of thinking and problem-solving in which Western adults engage constantly. Other contemporary psychologists, notably Bruner and his colleagues, have shown that even the simplest acts of perception and memory are shaped by (among other things) one’s system of language. It seems that no experience or knowledge is ever to be had in a pure form, unmediated by our words. Language, we might say, affects our cognition in three different ways. First, it is a mode of representation; second, it is an influence on other modes of representation and on other mental processes (such as perception and memory); third, it is a tool of thought.

Language is a mode of representation, in one’s mind as well as on paper: this is to say that we know reality in part by verbal representation or, more generally, symbolic representation (which would include artificial symbol-systems as well as natural language). A = πr². Albania is a communist country. My phonograph cartridge is a medium-compliance unit of the moving-magnet type with an inductance of 600 millihenries. The Modern Language Association was founded in the Year of Our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and Eighty-Three. Insofar as I know any of these important facts, I know them verbally—indeed, only verbally, my sense-organs having received no clues to any of the above. Symbolic representation runs parallel to, aids, distorts, contradicts, and otherwise interacts with two other modes of representation: “ikonic” or visual representation, and “enactive” or representation through movements.

As the previous sentence implies, language is not only a means of representation itself; it is also an influence on other modes of representation and other mental acts. “Perception,” for example, is now understood to be not a passive recording of reality but an active, inferential, categorical activity influenced by the perceiver’s values, needs, prior ways of categorizing sensations (which ways are influenced by language), his expectations (which are influenced by his verbal model of the world), and the accessibility of potentially-relevant verbal categories (language again). Thus perception, concludes Bruner, is the same in essence as “higher cognition.”

That even our perceptions are in a real sense composed should seem evident upon introspection. Glancing about the room, we do not perceive “a blooming, buzzing confusion,” a psychedelic light-show of luminescence, colors, ever-changing shapes; we perceive real objects. Apparently we assign a few sense-clues from the environment to a certain “category” (ignoring many more clues than we attend to) and then in essence perceive the attributes we associate with the category, the construct. Our occasional realization that our perception is mistaken access to the inferential and categorical nature of the process. Closer inspection of the cat we see out of the corner of our eye reveals the object to be in fact a dropped sweater. Similarly, we “hear” a car going down the street (which may in fact be an expensive motorcycle going down the street), not a sequence of pulses of certain pitches, timbres, and dynamics.

Numerous empirical experiments—for example, studies of how people identify objects in blurry photographic slides brought slowly into focus—have in fact shown that one of the greatest barriers to accurate perception is people’s tendency to categorize very quickly, on the basis of very few sensory clues, and then to cling to this categorization, ignoring new, contradictory clues for as long as possible. Other experiments have shown the tendency of people to “screen out” or misperceive things they do not expect to encounter. In a classic experiment by Bruner and Leo Postman, twenty-eight Harvard and Radcliffe students, shown briefly (after a series of normal playing cards) a red two of spades, “saw” almost anything but what was before their eyes: “saw” a black two of spades, a red two of hearts, a purple or gray two of spades, an indistinguishable design.

Language, then, seems to influence visual perception (or “ikonic representation”) in several ways. One’s personal language system (as we saw with Cleaver) is instrumental in shaping one’s general Weltanschauung, particularly one’s set of beliefs concerning what exists and what is likely to occur. This cognitive “set” influences what perceptual clues will be readily attended to or ignored as long as possible—and incongruous clues are ignored as long as possible. Language furthermore shapes the categories one employs, and we more readily (on the basis of fewer clues) assign sensory input to familiar, accessible, frequently-used categories than to less-familiar, less-accessible categories. The lighter, briefer, and more ambiguous the sensory clues are, the more our perception seems to be affected by our language. Given high-grade sensory clues and adequate time to perceive them, Bruner believes (in contrast to Whorf), all adults should perceive an object identically. Yet in daily life much, perhaps most, of the information our senses register is at low-grade as that produced by blurry slides or split-second exposures to playing-cards. “For in everyday life,” he notes, “perception is, by and large, a series of quick looks, glances, inattentive listenings, furtive touches. Save for what is at the very focus of interested attention, the world of sense is more equivocal than our textbook writers seem to think.”

Memory as well as perception is influenced, in several ways, by our language. Much of the contents of our memory is our verbal representations of events, and the mechanisms of storage and retrieval seem to be in large part verbally-controlled. It is a common experience, needing a particular verbal trigger to release the memory of something that one had been seeking. Numerous experiments have shown that our verbal categorizing affects the shapes even of visual images in memory. Apparently in memory, as in perception, we tend to “see” the attributes we associate with our verbal categories as much as we see the thing itself.

As scholars and teachers of the liberal arts, we are, most of us, interested less in “lower” cognitive operations such as perception, attention, and memory than in the “higher” forms of cognition: in problem-solving, in connecting abstract concepts together by means of even-more-abstract concepts, in composing and testing theories, and so on. Yet the “lower” operations, these language-mediated modes of apprehending the world, are the basis, the raw materials, so to speak, of the “higher” operations (which themselves are even more thoroughly matters of manipulating language than are the “lower” ones). “For all concepts of theoretical knowledge,” as Ernst Cassirer has
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constitute merely an upper stratum of logic which is founded upon a lower stratum, that of the logic of language. Before the intellectual work of conceiving and understanding of phenomena can set in, the work of naming must have preceded it, and have reached a certain point of elaboration. For it is this process which transforms the world of sense impression, which animals also possess, into a mental world, a world of ideas and meanings. All theoretical cognition takes its departure from a world already pre-formed by language; the scientist, the historian, even the philosopher, lives with his objects only as language presents them to him. This immediate dependence is harder to realize than anything that the mind creates mediating, by conscious thought processes.\textsuperscript{18}

If we conceive of "language" not as \textit{la langue} but as any particular sub-species thereof (and thus speak of, say, "the language of the scientist," "the language of a historian," and so on), we can see that a discipline's "upper stratum of logic" and the language that delineates, names, and "presents" phenomena to the observer are even more closely related than Cassirer's formulation implies. The names that are employed may in fact proceed from the "upper stratum" of symbolic manipulation characteristic of whatever formal or informal discipline (we might use the term, "cognitive community") is taking account of the thing named. It is not merely love of jargon that leads different cognitive communities to name an object differently, as when a certain common substance is named \textit{C}_{6}H_{12}O_{6} by a chemist, "fructose" by a health-food retailer, "sugar" by a dental hygienist, "refined monosaccharides" by a nutritionist, "a white, crystalline substance" by a police-beat reporter looking for a story, and (to stretch things a bit) an instance of "Things sweet to taste [which] prove in digestion sour" by a politically-minded poet of the Renaissance. A chemist (for example) would adopt that odd-sounding name not to be arcane but because that name, subjected to the symbolic manipulations of modern chemistry, enables him to make useful inferences and conclusions about the weight, volume, composition, and possible metamorphoses of the substance. Given that name and about fifteen seconds he could infer the number of grams of carbon in a five-pound bag of the stuff. He could likewise, by another rule of symbolic manipulation of his discipline, predict what byproduct, and how much of it, would be obtained if the \textit{C}_{6}H_{12}O_{6} were transformed into ethanol (\textit{CH}_{3}CH_{2}OH):

\[
\text{C}_{6}H_{12}O_{6} \rightarrow \text{CH}_{3}CH_{2}OH + 2 \text{CO}_{2}
\]

A poet's symbolic manipulation, her artful composing of natural language, would perhaps involve treating the substance (perhaps named "sugar") as a metaphor or image or symbol of a less tangible concept \textit{a propos} the human condition, thus "making visible the invisible." If the poet were sufficiently imaginative, "sugar" might be transformed into a metaphor for "things pleasant." Marvell, moreadroitly, made it stand for a false piety that in a sense destroys what it preserves — as in strawberry jam.\textsuperscript{19}

Any academic discipline, we might then say, is in essence a language: a series of names for things and a system of rules for the symbolic manipulation of those names — to put it as tersely as possible, a discipline is a lexicon and a grammar. The lexicon, like the lexicon of a natural language, entails not only a list of terms but a hierarchy of abstraction: \textit{C}_{6}H_{12}O_{6} is a subset of "carbohydrates," which is a subset of "organic compounds," and so on. The "grammar" includes implicit or explicit rules governing the producing of "well-formed" statements (\textit{C}_{6}H_{12}O_{6} \rightarrow 2\text{CH}_{3}\text{CH}_{2}\text{OH}+\text{pretty little bubbles}" is true enough but unlikely to appear in any lab-report); it includes as well rules governing synonymy, the assigning of data to categories, causality, the canons of truth and falsehood, evidence and proof, and so on. Like a natural language, an academic language is a complicated system. To call its "grammar" "merely an upper stratum of logic" is, if to speak the truth in essence, to be rather bold with one's adverbs.

No system of language, it would seem, is fundamentally truer or more accurate than the others (though within a given system certain compositions may be more accurate or more useful than others). This is why, presumably, we believe in studying Marvell and Shakespeare as well as Gay-Lussac, why many of us believe urban Black English to be as useful as the language of Dryden's prefaces — and \textit{vice versa}. Rather, each system of language is convenient for attending to and describing certain properties of certain things and events and for making certain sorts of inferences; each system of language is inadequate for attending to and describing other properties or other things and events and for making other sorts of inferences. The language of chemistry can easily and usefully attend to and describe the "specific gravity" of grape juice pressed at Château Latour and from that predict the alcoholic content of the resulting wine. That language cannot conveniently describe how that wine differs from a decent California Zinfandel and cannot at all ascertain whether or not the liquid is worth sixty-five dollars a bottle (Vintage 1978). The language of poetry does not enable one to attend to the feature of "specific gravity" or make any predictions about alcohol; on the other hand, it can very conveniently contrast the wine with its American cousins and evaluate the justice of its pricing. In brief, it appears that the most important difference among such language-systems lies not in the elegance of their terminologies but in the inferences each allows the user to make about his subject. To adopt a favorite phrase of Bruner: a language allows a perceiver to "go beyond the information given" by his senses.

A sophomore balancing a chemical equation is likely to be aware that her "going beyond the information given" is a matter of symbolic manipulation; in much of our lives, though, our "going beyond" by means of sophisticated symbolic manipulation comes so naturally to us (us literate adults living in a highly literate and technological culture) that we may think we are merely seeing what is in front of our noses or exercising the most rudimentary common sense — as when we "see" an obvious kinship among the visually-dissimilar objects we name "screwdriver," "hammer," and "Crescent wrench," or as when we note that since the keys are locked in the car and the spouse is out of town, we'll have to break a window or call a locksmith in order to drive home.

Some of our seemingly-natural exercises in cognition are apparently foreign not only to young children (i.e., those below what Piaget calls the stages of "concrete" and "formal operations") but also, in many cases, to intelligent, well-functioning adults in illiterate, non-technological cultures. A. R. Luria noted that the villagers in Soviet Asia, whom he studied in the 1930's, would categorize common objects according to their practical relationships, not according to genuine abstract concepts, even abstract concepts so basic as "tools," "animals," "containers." One triad of villagers, for example, classified under the heading of "tools" the following objects: axe, hammer, saw, wood, handle, carriage, pole, and also the tree we tether a horse to if there's no pole around.\textsuperscript{20} Luria likewise found that, though the villagers could "go beyond the information given" acutely in matters related to their immediate experience, they were quite inept in making inferences and drawing conclusions from data removed from immediate experience. One amusing passage of
Luria's account shows a villager giving a detailed and logical explanation of why this elementary syllogism posed by Luria is unanswerable: "In the far north, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zemlya is in the far north, and there is always snow there. What colors are the bears there?" The man's reply goes, in part, "Each locality has its own animals: if it's white, they will be white; if it's yellow, they will be yellow. . . . We always speak only of what we see; we don't talk about what we haven't seen. . . . If a man was sixty or eighty and had seen a white bear and had told about it, he could be believed, but I've never seen one and hence can't say. That's my last word" (p. 78-79).

Such a response was quite typical. The problem here, Luria concluded, is not lack of native intelligence but lack of prior occasion to engage in the sophisticated sorts of language-manipulation divorced from immediate experience that characterize literate, Western cognition. He notes that those villagers who had been attending the newly-established Western-style school "immediately drew the correct, and to us obvious, conclusion from each of the syllogisms presented, regardless of the factual correctness of the premises or their application to the subject's immediate experience" (p. 80).

So it appears that the mundane cognitive operations by which we make better or worse sense of our daily lives—whether we are an illiterate Asian villager or a patriotic American uncertain how to treat the Iranian students next door or an English teacher with his keys locked in the car—depend on our manipulation of language. The normal problem-solving and inference-making within the academic disciplines, as the discussion of sugar should suggest, likewise depend on the manipulation of language. And as we might thus expect, and as Cassirer and Bruner (with some authority) assert, the most advanced scholarly and empirical research likewise depend on the manipulation of language. "For it is seldom," notes Bruner,

on the frontier of knowledge or elsewhere, that new facts are "discovered" in the sense of being encountered, as Newton suggests, in the form of islands of truth in an uncharted sea of ignorance. . . . The history of science is studded with examples of men "finding out" something and not knowing it. I shall operate on the assumption that discovery, whether by a schoolboy going on it on his own or by a scientist cultivating the growing edge of his field, is in its essence a matter of transforming evidence in such a way that one is enabled to go beyond the evidence so assembled to new insights. It may well be that an additional fact or shred of evidence makes this larger transformation possible. But it is often not even dependent on new information.  

It is rather, as all of our mental life seems to be, dependent on the composing of a suitable language. Thus we can speak of (indeed have been speaking of for some time) a third function of language. It is not only a mode of representation and an influence on other "lower" cognitive processes but also a tool of thought—no less than the principal instrument of "higher" cognition.

III. Some Implications to Teaching

The commonplace, "If some is good, more is better," applies to languages better than to carbohydrates. For if a language enables a person to "go beyond the information given" in one way, many languages enable her to go beyond that same information in many ways, thus to increase her understanding of the nature, uses, and effects of any particular thing or event, to increase the connectedness she can discern between that thing or event and others, thus to increase the possibilities she can discover for wise action. To understand sugar only in the language of greeting-cards, to understand Iranian politics only in the language of American (or Islamic) jingoism, to understand violence only in the language of Bakunin's and Nechayev's tracts, is to have one's intellect and power constrained by "mind-forg'd manacles."

Clearly, more languages are worth mastering than can be taught and learned in a semester or two of English composition: the specialized languages of the academic disciplines, for example. Yet in an English course these languages can at least be examined for what they are capable of revealing and ignoring. Other, more-accessible sub-species of one's native language can be examined in more detail: the language of "Englishpaperese" and other sorts of soapbox-oratory, the language of general intellectual discourse in the humanities, the language of merchandising, the languages of conservative and radical politics, street-talk, and the countless ways of putting words, statements, and arguments together even within one's natural "idiolect."

Such languages can be examined in various ways, of course. English teachers typically examine them from a "formalistic" or "rhetorical" perspective. That is to say, they compare and judge the various languages (or "jargons," if the teachers don't like the lexicons) according to their literary grace or their suitability to persuading certain particular audiences. These perspectives are worthy ones, yet not the only ones. The perspective on language suggested by this essay might be called "epistemic" (from the Greek epistēma, "to know"); a teacher adopting it would focus on the structure of knowledge and understanding that a given composition establishes, the sorts of sense it makes of the writer's and reader's world, the usefulness of the composition as a guide to action. (One way of doing this is enacted in Part I of this essay.) To be sure, a writing teacher need not confine himself to a single perspective on language (though unity and coherence of some sort are as desirable in a course as in an essay). Because the various perspectives on language are in fact closely related, differing primarily in emphasis, it may not be even theoretically possible to teach purely from a single one. A writing course might indeed take a predominantly-epistemic view of language; it might likewise integrate epistemic ideas with a predominantly expressive or rhetorical or formalistic view of language. In any of these cases — so long as the epistemic perspective is deemed to have merit — certain changes in conventional teaching practices would seem warranted.

For one, a teacher would have to modify his critical vocabulary. For example, he would have to banish that common but wrongheaded term (and concept), "clarity." For this metaphor, insofar as it means anything at all, implies that reality is knowable independently of (rather than by means of) language and that the best language is that which least "obscures" the reader's view of things. The epistemically-inclined teacher would want to look, and to have his students look, not through "clear" words, but at words and at the structure of understanding they create.

A second phrase to be banished from the lexicon would be "effective communication," at least as a statement of a goal of the course. For language, as Sapir reminds us, should not be considered merely a medium for "conveying" or "communicating" thoughts and ideas if it is the very means by which thoughts and ideas are born and develop. A composition should indeed say something "effectively" to others, yet this would be a by-product of good writing, not the essence. From an epistemic perspective, the central task of the writer would be seen not as com-
municating what she already knows but as composing some new, useful, and more profound knowledge — which she can then communicate. (W. E. Coles once defined "had writing" as "that which says only what the writer already knew how to say.") Because they imply that composing language is but a series of mechanical operations rather than "the occasion and the means of the mind's endless endeavor to order itself," even the new buzzwords, "teach-writing-as-process-not-product," might well be banned. Making yogurt is a process; composing language is an activity, a humane and profound one.25

A teacher who keeps in mind the relationships of language and knowing would pay very serious attention to what students' papers say, to the use of language there to render experience intelligible, rather than spending the bulk of his time attending to such easier matters as transitional markers (except insofar as they affect the structure of understanding created), proper footnote form, and errors in spelling and usage. This is not to say that a teacher ought to condone sloppiness; it is rather to say that his marking of student papers should reflect his understanding of what the essence and significance of writing really are. (James Squire and Roger Applebee's remarks of high schools in 1968 may be applicable even to colleges, even today: "For most teachers, correcting errors is synonymous with teaching writing."")26

An epistemic view of language should reveal the limitations of the conventional writing assignment, that arbitrary short-order whose depth, structure, imagination, utility, and raison d'etre are sometimes inferior to those of the papers cooked up in response. I'm referring to assignments such as, "Compare and contrast two teachers (i.e., buildings or happy experiences) you know, keeping in mind what we've studied in class about organization." What is most wrong with such an assignment, seen from an epistemic perspective, is that it calls upon the student to compose language for the sole purposes of practicing and demonstrating facility in the mechanical aspects of comparing and contrasting (particularly in the mechanical aspects of organizing comparison-and-contrast papers). It does not attempt to help the student discover anything he does not already know, learn to do anything he has not already substantially learned how to do. At most it provides the student with an opportunity to practice writing. But if it is by composing language that we compose our knowledge, then it follows that an assignment in an English composition course ought to set students really to exploring the subject by means of writing. "The subject" here would be not only the superficial subject of the assignment (e.g., "two teachers") but the main subject of the course: composition in the English language.

One convenient way of impelling students to write so that they teach themselves some things about language and writing, instead of merely practicing what they have already learned, is for the teacher to compose two-part assignments. The first part would set up a writing task that students could carry out with some facility; the second part would engage students in exploring, in writing, one or more of the larger issues about composing that, with whatever degree of consciousness, they had to address in composing the first part.27 For example, an order to compare and contrast two teachers (or whatever) might be followed by (written) instructions to reflect upon the activity of composing that essay and explore (to cite only one of the possible areas) how the points-of-comparison or -contrast came to be chosen. Why these four or five points rather than others? Do these "points" exist in nature (as clover has three leaves, so teachers have four points-of-comparison?), or are they invented by the writer? If the latter, according to which principle(s) does the writer (i.e., did you) decide which points exist and are relevant, which exist and are not relevant, and which do not exist? Compare and contrast these two teachers again, this time confining yourself to a different sort of language (the language of Freudian psychology, say); did you deal with the same points-of-comparison in different words, or did you choose different points? In either case, how come? If you were to compare-and-contrast these same teachers for other readers — for the Dean, say, or the guys back at the dorm — would you choose the same points? If so, or if not, on the basis of what principle would you make your decision? Reflecting upon your reflections upon your composition, how would you respond to the assertion, "Comparison-and-contrast is a fairly easy sort of writing, because you mainly just write down what's there"?

This long catalogue of questions, more than should be asked in any single assignment, represents but a fraction of the important larger issues involving the composing of comparisons and contrasts. A teacher would choose whatever larger questions he would set students to exploring according to his own interests, the predominant approach to language his course is taking, the sorts of initial writing tasks that can conveniently be assigned, the capabilities of his students, and so on.

Ideally, each assignment would be not only useful in itself but also meaningfully relatable to all the others and would overtly or covertly invite each student to see which relationships she could establish (in writing) among them. In composing language thus to connect hitherto-unconnected ideas and data into a structure of understanding — to run some order through chaos, as Henry Adams would put it — a student would enact and be put in a position to understand some of the epistemic ideas that inform the course. It is a tricky business, composing a sequence of assignments that are relatable in several useful ways. A teacher has to avoid the rock of implying that the assignments form a jigsaw-puzzle with one correct solution and the hard place of suggesting that the assignments are (as is so often the case) random and essentially unrelated. This takes a good deal of practice.28

Whether within an assignment or within and among the assignments, a student would be both practicing writing and exploring (in writing) the writing-decisions she made and might henceforth make. In doing so, she is likely to grow as a writer (and as a language-user generally) more than she would from following conventional assignments that ignore the epistemic implications of composing language. She would also be more likely to learn some things about the nature and significance of compositions of language, things important to that portion of her life that she will spend outside of composition classes.

A final implication concerns the role of English composition courses in the college or university. Composition teachers often think of themselves as providing a "service course." We might explore a bit how such a course could best serve. If we see language not just as a means of information-transfer but as the very instrument of understanding — and if we therefore see a good writing course not as a series of drills in mechanical correctness or as training in the tricks of "effective communication" but as a series of exercises in composing understanding accompanied by exploration of how language shapes understanding — then we'd be performing a service of a rather profound sort. That would be to see a course in English composition not as mere preparation for, but as the quintessence of, a college education. Those are strong words, words with interesting implications themselves.
Notes

1(New York: Dell, 1970), p. 27; all subsequent quotations are from Chapter 1, pp. 17-29.


7Vygotsky’s innermost and outermost planes, “thought itself” and “external speech,” thus correspond closely to Langer’s “conception” and “concept”: see New Key, pp. 71-72. Michael Polanyi’s distinction between “tacit” and “articulate” knowledge (in Personal Knowledge, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964) is also suggested.


9On Perceptual Readiness,” in B.I.G., pp. 7-42.


14On Perceptual Readiness”; “Personality Dynamics and the Process of Perceiving” (loc. cit.).


19“Upon Appleton House,” stanza XXII.

20The Making of Mind, ed. Michael Cole and Sheila Cole (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), Chap. 4; the quotation is from p. 72.

21Luria, quite typically of researchers studying education, is unable clearly to distinguish the cognitive effects of literacy from the cognitive effects of schooling. A recent study of the Vai people of Liberia by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole suggests that the practice of writing, in itself, has less effect upon cognition than does Western-style schooling, with its insistence on abstract, logical thinking and problem-solving divorced from immediate experience: see their The Psychology of Literacy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981). In Western education, needless to say, writing serves as an efficient and important instrument of this thinking and problem-solving.

22The Act of Discovery,” in On Knowing, pp. 82-83.


24The definitive critiques of “clarity” as a norm, to which this argument is indebted, are Richard A. Lanham, Style: An Anti-Textbook (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), esp. chaps. 1-3; and Gulliver’s Travels, Book III, Chap. 5.


27Additional arguments which would support such a two-part structure can be found in John Dewey, Experience and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1963); and Bruner, “On Learning Mathematics,” On Knowing, pp. 97-111.

28The best published assignment-sequences are William E. Coles, Jr., Teaching Composing (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden, 1974) and his Composing II (Hayden, 1980). These sequences take a predominantly epistemic view of language; sequences based on other views of language are also possible. A useful study of sequencing is Virginia N. Steinhoff’s “The Theory and Practice in the Sequencing of Composition Assignments: Issues in Order,” Diss. Iowa, 1980.
SHOULD WRITING TEACHERS WRITE?

Robert C. Wess
Southern Technical Institute

Should composition teachers write for composition class? Should they introduce their own essays as models in the classroom, essays written either professionally for publication or specifically for students? Can their own writing (preliminary notes, drafts, etc.) be valuable in demonstrating process for student imitation? Does the classroom presence of teacher writing produce positive psychological factors which facilitate student writing? And can teacher writing further provide instructors themselves with professional practice and reflect artistic values for students?

Some teachers would unhesitatingly answer "no" to these questions. They would defend their position out of modesty, lack of time, or the existence of ample textbook models. They probably would not admit to other possible reasons, such as incapability, unwillingness to become vulnerable, or fear. Many other teachers, however, might respond that they just never thought of it. Party to answer the objections of the nay-sayers, but chiefly to encourage potential yea-sayers, I offer the following six reasons to show why the practice of teacher writing is a good idea for every composition teacher.

Teacher writing reveals process. Teacher writing demonstrates the writing process in ways other models do not. First of all, it demonstrates the entire writing process from beginning to end, from opening an essay to final draft. Second, the teacher-writer is present to point out heuristic devices used, initiatory materials, various drafts, even retrospective notes. In addition, the teacher-writer may orally convey his or her position in writing, problems faced and solved, and rhetorical decisions made. Furthermore, the writer's presence enables the teacher to answer any student questions about either process or product, explaining decisions and projecting a realistic, real-life model of the writing process.

Teaching process through teacher writing, however, requires innovative methodologies. Those that follow, offered as examples, illustrate methods already tried and proved. One practice, the comparative study, considers the evolution of the text, focusing on student discoveries and critiques of alterations between first and final drafts (including prewriting materials), protocol analysis, and retrospective notes. Such data provides students with a natural history of the teacher's writing process and offers them a process-model for imitation.

Two other methods for presenting teacher writing focus on small-group discussion. One of these analyzes final drafts, utilizing small-group discussion to focus on methods, concepts, or values previously identified. A fourth method charges small groups to discuss the essay from the perspective of the communication triangle, in terms of speaker (the writer's persona), audience (the target group) and message (the writer's purpose). A variation of this method employs group triads, each student identifying with one aspect of the communication triangle and presenting the essay from that perspective.

A fifth method for demonstrating the writing process involves use of the blackboard. Through this medium, teachers can effectively demonstrate the craft of writing sentences, paragraphs, and even entire essays. Through such on-the-spot composing, teachers can authenticate the messiness of writing, the need for proofreading and revision, and the struggle to synchronize author's intention with written actualization. Finally, the modes of writing (expressive, transactional, or poetic), may be easily differentiated and demonstrated through blackboard presentation.

Teacher writing creates a bond between teachers and students. Bonding is a psychological term for the creation and development of close emotional ties between two people, for example, between two adults or between parent and child. The term also applies to teacher writing, for the teacher's engagement in the writing assignments of students shifts the level of their relationship. The teacher no longer dictates from a podium how writing is to be done, she demonstrates it from the writing desk. Rather than pronouncing abstract rules and principles, the writing teacher discusses their application in his own writing. Thus, compositions that teacher writes are shared with students, just as students share theirs with teacher. As teacher critiques student writing, so do students critique teacher writing. Such an environment — open, honest, bi-lateral — produces role identification between teacher and students, a spirit of camaraderie, a sense of bonding.

This bonding between teacher and students fosters a climate of trust in which teacher and students feel free to express themselves. If the teacher is willing to take risks in writing — discussing problems faced and opening up the reservoir of personal experience — then students will be inclined to do the same. Besides promoting student learning through writing, such teacher involvement activates learning as well. If both teacher and students generate writing, therefore, a complete community of learners is created. The classroom no longer remains a depository from which the composition teacher dispenses learning; rather, it becomes an activity center in which both teacher and students, bound together in a common enterprise, learn to write and write to learn.

Teacher writing provides a visual model of the writer. Textbook essays present visual models of written products. So do teacher models, but they also do more. They present unfinished products as well, revealing the false starts, the constant revision, and the struggle toward completion. As a result, students restructure their image of the writer, gradually eradicating their former image of the "perfect writer": one sitting at the typewriter typing final drafts only. In its place the picture of the writer as a real-life, flesh-and-blood person, one who writes with a purpose but who encounters numerous obstacles along the way, gradually develops. Although students' idealistic pictures of the writer may disappear forever, their emerging view will enable them to practice the craft of writing much more realistically.

John F. Kennedy, on his historic visit to Berlin in 1963, proclaimed: "Ich Bin ein Berliner" ("I am a Berliner"). In my view, every writing teacher would come to the first class meeting and announce: "Ich Bin ein Schreiber" ("I am a writer"). Such a proclamation would license the teacher's license to teach writing. Is not such a validation required in other disciplines? Don't athletes normally expect coaches to have excelled in performance? Do not investors who finance a building project expect their chosen architect to be an outstanding practitioner? In the arts, are not music teachers expected to perform, to give recitals and concerts? And do not art teachers practice their craft, oftentimes right along with their students?

I am not suggesting that composition teachers write each student assignment every semester. Teachers have already tried this project and have publicly acknowledged its impossibility. But what if writing teachers wrote one or two essays during the semester or in the summer? After several terms, such teachers would have a bank of essays from which to draw. By carefully cal-
lying all written products and processes, they could mint such materials for years to come.

Teacher writing offers a bridge between professional writing and student writing. One of the complaints students make about professional writing is that such models are inaccessible to them. For example, the subject matter of textbook models often seems remote or even alien to students. The style sometimes approaches a level of sophistication beyond their reach, and the length usually exceeds the limits teachers generally establish for their classes. Teacher writing, on the other hand, can provide topics closer to home, more relevant to student interests, and more equivalent in length. Besides, since the writing comes from a person they know, the material already has immediacy for them. Stylistically, teacher writing is also more flexible. It can closely imitate the informal style of expressive writing, or it can portray the objective style of reference discourse. By careful attention to audience, speaker, and message, the teacher essay can specifically model these concepts for students.

Let me provide examples. One expressive essay I have used in composition class, entitled "A Summer Romance," reflects a personal experience and makes me feel somewhat uneasy about using it. Students, however, report that they like the essay precisely because it is personal and written on a topic to which they can easily relate. Another essay, a persuasive piece I wrote as guest editor for a local newspaper, is entitled "Cultivating a Product: Farming and Writing." This essay analogically compares farming with writing in terms of planting, cultivating, and harvesting a product. It also illustrates for students the use of analogy, provides them with a concrete example of the writer as problem-solver, and offers a concrete application of the communication triangle.

Some teachers, even if they accept these views on teacher versus textbook models, would argue strongly for the even greater efficacy of student models. One of the problems with student models, however, is that they usually consist of final products only. Such examples, surely, are not a very good way to teach process. A second problem is that student essays oftentimes were written during a previous semester so that the author is no longer available to discuss either process or product. With teacher writing, however, the writer is present to discuss product, illustrate process, and respond to questions on the criteria for producing good writing. And who better than the classroom instructor can provide motivation and methodology to meet such standards?

Teacher writing is a professional obligation. From a negative perspective, students readily detect teacher hypocrisy. The teacher who implicitly or explicitly says to a class, "Do as I say, not as I do," will have a room filled with resentful and resistant students. In response, these students will become the very ones who later tell their children: "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." Surely, such a model is not the one English teachers wish to project. If this is so, why then is such a negative image so often communicated? Why is it that so many students are "torn off" by composition courses? Why is it that they remain so detached and uninvolved with the craft of writing? Could it be in part that their role models, the teachers of composition, are themselves unattached, uninvolved, unwilling to take risks or become vulnerable in writing even though these are the very roles they ask of students?

Teachers of writing are professionals, worthy of community praise and respect. They have a worthy contribution to make to society. Their job is teaching people how to express ideas and attitudes in writing and how to find satisfaction in the enter-

prise. But can writing teachers really expect others to value their discipline if they do not, cannot, or will not practice it themselves? People will praise writing teachers as speakers of the word only as long as they are doers/performers of the word as well. In other words, "Practice what you teach" must become the pass-

word of composition teachers.

Teacher writing demonstrates that writing is an art. Any art, including the art of writing, requires skill, hard work, and creativity. A pianist, for example, may master a given piece, yet without continued practice, his or her performance will be marred by mistakes. Notes, the diction of music, will lose their fineness of feeling. Phrasing will go awry, and creative performance will be wanting. So, too, the writing teacher who goes for long without practicing will weaken that skill and become a less effective writer. The prose will become turgid with wordiness; diction will lose its precision and intensity. Ideas will become less vital, less intensely perceived. Overall creativity will diminish.

On the other hand, the composition teacher who utilizes teacher writing in the classroom continuously demonstrates the skill, hard work, and creativity involved in that performance. Writing for class provides the teacher with or her workshop for implementing the skills of writing, for maintaining and expanding a repertory, and for augmenting a sense of personal confidence and accomplishment.

The writing teacher also offers testimony to the hard work of writing, to the fact that writing achievements result from 90% perspiration and only 10% inspiration. In his book on creativity, Abraham Maslow underscores this point: although all of us receive insights every day, few of us work hard enough to accomplish their reality. As Maslow points out and experience backs up, insights are not enough. Good writing, both for teacher and students, requires diligent labor as well as brilliant insight.

In addition to skill and hard work, the teacher who writes for class also models its creativity, demonstrating what writing experts emphasize — that all writing is creative. For even the expository writing of freshman composition involves the creative selection of topic, purpose, audience, and speaker. The entire writing process, in fact, demands creative decision-making — what to include in the essay and what to discard, how to pattern the essay's structure, and how to say it with an appropriate style. Like a beautifully wrought mosaic, the finely worked essay is an artistic product, with an overall design carefully constructed, each part and piece carefully placed. Teacher writing for composition class exemplifies this art, for the teacher writer is the model artist, demonstrating skill, hard work, and creativity.

In a survey I administered in June of 1981 to teachers attending the Purdue Seminar on "Current Theories of Teaching Composition," I found that of the 47 respondents (46 of whom teach on the college level), 25 respondents or 53 percent use teacher writing in the classroom. This impressive percentage suggests a widespread use of teacher writing. Could it be that the majority of all composition teachers are "closet" teacher-writers; that is, they use it but do not discuss it? If so, a need exists to document further the effectiveness and methodologies of this significant teaching strategy. Other responses in the survey strongly support the value of teacher writing and overwhelmingly document its benefits to students.

In Fall Quarter of 1981, in two freshman composition classes which had written analogical essays, I asked students to rank in order of importance the various methodologies used in their study of analogy. The majority listed their own pre-writing as the greatest help. Three found textbook models most helpful. A
good number, eight students in all, ranked the use of teacher models as most helpful. From this latter group, the following comments were gleaned. One student focused on content and strategy: "The teacher models are ranked highest. They showed me what an analogy was and how it should be carried through the entire essay." Another responded to their easiness of understanding: "I like to have something to go by and the teacher models were easier to follow than the textbook essays." For another, structure was significant: "I thought the patterns of the teacher essays were important and they helped me in my essay. Two others discussed invention. One student commented: 'The teacher . . . example played a part in generating my analogy, for it supplied me with good examples, usages, the carrying on of the subject throughout the essay, and diction.' It is the same vein, another said that "the teacher models helped me generate my own essay the most. Before reading the teacher essay, I had no idea of what an analogy essay should consist of. The textbook didn't help me at all because I can't even remember it."

All of these reasons, from the six-point rationale to teachersurvey responses to student commentary, strongly support the case for using teacher writing in the classroom. Its benefits appear obvious and irrefutable. But winning an argument or gaining agreement is not the goal. Rather, my primary purpose has been to encourage more composition teachers to become writing teachers, who use their own essays as models for class, share their writing processes with students, serve as realistic and real-life writing models, and continue to develop their art through constant practice.

Notes
1The term "retrospective notes" here refers to description of a writing process as recollected. The concept is derived from John Ruskiewicz's "introspective notes" as described in his essay "Back to the Source: Personal Research in Writing," College Composition and Communication, 30 (May 1979), 222-223.

2For discussion of rhetoric as decision making, see Robert M. Gorrell's two essays: "The Traditional Course: 'When Is Old Hat New,'" College Composition and Communication, 23 (October 1972), 264-270, and "Usage as Rhetoric," College Composition and Communication, 28 (February 1977), 20-25.

3Protocols, detailed records of the writer's mental processes while writing, usually include a written transcript of a tape recording made during the writing process itself. Such an analysis would be a valuable project for every writing teacher in better understanding his or her own writing process.

4For further elaboration of these four methods, see my article, "Presenting Teacher-Written Essays in the Composition Class," Journal of English Teaching Techniques, XI (Winter/Spring 1982), 75-84.

5As a demonstration of this practice, see Richard B. Larsen's essay, "Back to the Board," College Composition and Communication, 29 (October 1978), 292-294.


7See Jim Corder, "What I Learned at School," College Composition and Communication, 26 (December 1975), 334.


future, instead of spending all your time belittling the work of others, you would, sir, do well to examine your own abilities.

This, we may suppose, is the kind of writing for which the student was accustomed to getting "A's." Indeed, there is much here to admire. The diction is evocative — "ludicrous," "sardonic," "castigating," "ludicrous," "belittling" — and the style overall is vigorous and purposeful (with a cumulative sentence, number three, of which Christensen might have approved). "Menial mentality" is a bit self-conscious, but in an age of waning verbal skills, one readily excuses such alliterative exuberance. The writer, I am told, received a round of congratulations from his peers, who felt that their rhetorically-talented classmate had put the inquisitive columnist in his place.

Yet viewed as persuasive discourse, the letter is scarcely more than what Hayakawa calls a "growl," a cathartic venting of the spleen. The "In conclusion, I submit ..." gives a specious sense of a reasoned argument being copped off, but, in fact, no reasoned argument has preceded, only a hodgepodge of tenuous assertions. A conosseur of logical fallacies (which any English teacher might do well to be) has a field day with the letter. Shady of abusive form of ad hominem appear in the opening sentence with "atrocity," and in sentence two the abuse becomes explicit: "sardonic creature." Sentence two also commits the fallacies of extension (one's doing a high school science project does not mean that one will someday be a scientist) and hasty generalization (we cannot infer habitual enjoyment from one instance). Sentence three embodies both a false analogy and an unwarranted hypothesis contrary to fact. Sentence four has more shades of ad hominem, hints of ad populum, and is also something of a non sequitur. Sentence five reflects more extension and contains ad misericordiam (do not criticize the fruits of labor). Sentence six is a textbook example of the circumstantial form of ad hominem. Sentences seven, eight, and nine house contradictory premises ("intelligent" and "menial mentality" clash). Sentence ten holds another unwarranted extension ("spending all your time.")

The letter cannot be dismissed as a mere oddity. Over the years I have observed in student writing a steady increase in fallacies of all kinds (formal, petitio principii, equivocation, irrelevance). Students are usually unaware of fallacies, whether the fallacies appear in their own writing or the in the writing of others. While the upsurge (I am assuming that my students are typical) in faulty reasoning is, I believe, linked in part to broad cultural developments beyond the control of writing instructors, some of the responsibility is, I fear, our own. For in spite of all our advances, our predecessors seem to have done a better job than we in teaching principles of sound reasoning.

Many of our textbooks have sections on inductive and deductive reasoning, but the treatment is usually general, the two types of reasoning presented as structuring principles for large units of discourse. Some textbooks also illustrate the three main kinds of syllogisms — categorical, hypothetical, disjunctive — and list fallacies; yet, all in all, the treatment is negligible compared to the handling of style, arrangement, audience (pathos), voice (ethos), and tropes. We are so over-taxed in our writing courses already that we could well wish for a revival of courses in logic to exempt us from yet another claim on our time. Or we could wish for some cerebral mutation by which the ability to recognize (and to avoid using) fallacies would become an innate faculty, unneedful of instruction. Neither wish, unfortunately, is likely to be granted.

For the last few years we have been trying to redress what some had perceived as an imbalance in the way we were deploying our pedagogical energies. We were accused of over-stressing form and style at the expense of invention, throwing in with the euphuisms of the world, more concerned with surface pulchritude than solidity of content. Textbooks and articles have of late focused on methods of generating ideas, of "places" (topoi) to find information on a variety of subjects. The attention is well directed, but I am afraid that if we do not give equal attention to methods for testing the logical validity of the uses to which such information is put, we may still be disappointed with the writing (especially "persuasive") our students produce. Even our best writers may turn out articulate illogicals — if I may use the oxymoron — like those in the letter. In fact, it has been my experience that the most verbal writers are often the worst violators of sound logic. They are the worst because they are the most insidious. As teachers, we may be captivated by the unawakened verbal adroitness and therefore be oblivious to (or willfully ignore) the ragged reasoning underneath. It is the adroit writers who resurrect memories of Plato's charge against rhetoric — echoed periodically ever since — that, misused, it beguiles the mind and enables falsehood to pass for truth. The unskilled writers are less likely to deceive because their brand of fallacious reasoning is usually palpable. Still, writers both skilled and unskilled need to know what constitutes valid reasoning. Knowing, they are less likely to be deceived by sophisticians arguments and less likely one hopes — to try to deceive others.

High school students and college undergraduates are by no means the only ones subject to deception. In an English teachers' workshop, I gave teachers passages containing various kinds of dubious reasoning and asked them whether they saw anything "wrong." The teachers usually could see no violation of logic when the fallacies were at all subtle. Sometimes the teachers sensed that something was amiss, but they had trouble homing in on the problem. No one, for example, described the deficiency in formal logic in the following excerpt from E. M. Forster's "What I Believe." Forster is speaking of the desirability of trusting people even though people are not, by nature, absolutely trustworthy:

For the purpose of living one has to assume that the personality is solid, and the "self" is an entity, and to ignore all contrary evidence. And since to ignore evidence is one of the characteristics of faith, I certainly can claim that I believe in personal relationships.

The last sentence is a type of enthymematic reasoning. (Aristotle called the enthymeme the very "substance" of argument.) If to an enthymeme we supply the implied premise (in some cases the conclusion is implied), we can then construct a syllogism the more easily to judge the validity of what is being said. The Forster enthymeme yields the following categorical syllogism:

Major Premise: All who ignore evidence are people who have a characteristic of faith.

Minor Premise (implied): I am a person who ignores evidence.

Conclusion: I am a person who believes in personal relationships.

The syllogism is invalid because it has four terms (instead of the obligatory three). The only valid conclusion one can draw from the two premises is, "I am a person with a characteristic of faith." Actually, Forster's own conclusion repeats the point implied in the sentence before, and the two sentences together illustrate circular reasoning.

We must, of course, grant to a writer a certain latitude in his use of logic. Aristotle distinguished between the "infallible"
logic of scientific demonstration and the less rigorous standards acceptable in forensic, epideictic, and deliberative discourse. But many writers—and not students alone—almost habitually fail to observe a proper distinction between legitimate license and wanton disregard for canons of validity. For several years now, I have had my freshman classes compile lists of fallacies they find in the essays they read. Many students become quite adept at recognizing fallacies. Below are some fallacies that students noticed in essays by Joyce Cary (“The Mass Mind”), Loren Eiseley (“An Evolutionist Looks at Modern Man”), and Forster (“What I Believe”). I cite instances from these authors because their essays are frequently anthologized and because as talented writers, they are skillful at concealing illicit reasoning beneath a patina of rhetorical embellishment.

Contradictory Premises: “Tolerance, good temper, and sympathy are no longer enough in a world which is rent by religious and racial persecution... their action is no stronger than a flower, battered beneath a military jack-boot.”

Then several paragraphs later: “The sensitive, the considerate, and the plucky [i.e., those who show tolerance and sympathy] represent... the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos.” (Forster)

Hypothesis contrary to fact: “If our parents had actually practiced one of the philosophies that now flourish among us, if our remote ancestors had achieved that degree of sophistication which would have enabled them to discount their social responsibilities for the day’s pleasure, we—you and I and all of us—would never have enjoyed the experience of living.” (Eiseley)

Extension: “This belief [in the existence of a mass mind] is now so completely accepted that it underlies half the writing and thinking of the time.” (Cary)

False Analogy: “If you deny it [the mass-mind notion] you will get exactly the same response as Galileo when he said that the earth moved through the sky.” (Cary)

Either/Or: “Man has not really survived by toughness... he has survived through tenderness.” (Eiseley)

Dictum simpliciter: “As soon as people have power they go crooked and sometimes do as well.” (Forster)

Non sequitur: “The memory of birth and the expectation of death always lurk within the human being, making him separate from his fellows and consequently capable of intercourse with them.” (Forster)

In my freshman course, I normally spend three to four class periods discussing syllogistic reasoning and fallacies. It is, to my mind, time well spent. The students not only become more perceptive critics of arguments used by others but, just as importantly, more conscious of fallacies in their own writing. While it is not practical, and perhaps not even desirable, to restore to logic the kind of prominence it had in the Medieval trivium, we can, I think, profitably devote more time to teaching logic than most of us now do. The effort would help students not only to become better writers, but also to respond more intelligently to the world around them.

A CASE FOR THE RESEARCH THEME

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With good reason, the research paper, sometimes euphemized to “the library paper,” is the most dreaded freshman English assignment for both students and instructors. Nobody seems to know what to do with it. While basic composition classes at some colleges center around a research project, other schools have made it optional to the instructor or dropped it altogether, a case of too much or too little. I believe that one of the responsibilities of a freshman writing course is to teach students basic research form, but it doesn’t have to cause the misery it commonly does.

For the past two years, my solution has been to require some research on at least one theme in every writing class. My department is one of those which has made a research assignment optional, but even for schools where a full-scale project is required, I recommend the research essay as a more productive alternative.

About midway in a writing class, I assign an essay of at least five hundred words on a serious topic of the student’s choice and require that it include (1) something from a book, (2) something from a journal article, (3) a quotation, and (4) a paraphrase, in any combination. To emphasize the point that using research doesn’t relieve writers of the responsibility of offering their own thoughts, I demand that the papers include only one of each of the four research elements. For example, the research requirement may be met by a paraphrased idea from a journal and a quotation from a book. Students also must supply formal footnotes and a bibliography page.

But first I take the class through a plagiarism exercise in the workbook accompanying my textbook. (For those who wish to rush out and buy a copy, it’s The Writer’s Craft Workbook, Wadsworth, 1980.) For illustration, this exercise is preceded by a passage lifted from an article, followed by examples of the common forms of plagiarism based on this passage, each faulty sentence accompanied by a corrected version. The exercise itself begins with another quotation, followed by several versions of ideas taken from it. The student is asked to identify any that are plagiarized form. Finally, the students are given yet another quotation and asked to use it to form their own research-type quotation and paraphrase.

Any students who do poorly must complete the exercise again before beginning the research theme. When I return the graded exercises, I go over them with the class, focusing on any items that a number of students had trouble with, usually those involving paraphrase. Such drill is necessary to correct the ignorance about documentation that no doubt causes far more plagiarism than dishonesty does.

In my experience, results have justified the considerable time spent on this exercise. Before, when I merely lectured about plagiarism and pointed out textbook examples of it, unacknowledged quoting and quotation posing as paraphrase abounded in my students’ papers. The drill, which forces students to actually do something with plagiarism, hasn’t eliminated it altogether, but it has reduced it even further than I had hoped.

Instructors who don’t have access to a workbook may devise a similar exercise with little trouble. Another method, but one
which hasn’t worked quite as well for me, is to try to head off research errors via a practice paper. Assigning a research essay rather than a lengthy paper allows time to do this.

But isn’t requiring a paper with a minimum of research and specifying which types an artificial assignment? Of course, and if the question comes up, I readily admit that it is (though such an assignment is probably no more artificial than demanding that anybody write anything merely for practice and a grade). The objection usually won’t arise in a freshman class, but one way to quiet it is to offer any complainers the alternative of doing a full-length conventional research paper.

To my mind, the quibble over artificiality is irrelevant, for I regard any freshman research paper as primarily an exercise in form. I believe that basic writing instructors have done their duty if their students learn to correctly incorporate and correctly document the four major items they would use in a research paper of any length: book, article, quotation, paraphrase.

I make it clear to my classes while they are working on this assignment that a passing grade requires that all the research features be in letter-perfect form and that papers be devoid of even the milder forms of plagiarism. Instructors who consider this too demanding may withhold grades until they have read corrected second drafts, and those who feel that one such paper isn’t enough may of course assign several. (They can be graded almost as quickly as a regular set of themes.) Masochists may even use short papers to build to a full-length job.

What are the advantages of the research theme? Foremost for me is that it really teaches the basic principles with a minimum of pain for both student and teacher. A second plus is the positive psychology of students getting the dreaded research project over with by writing a paper no longer than the themes they are used to. The very brevity of the assignment discourages a negative attitude and encourages greater care—and more honesty. I am convinced that most blatant plagiarism is the result of inexperienced thinkers having to produce ten to twenty pages of writing on a subject about which they may have only a page or two of their own ideas.

There is plenty of time later for students to use the basics learned from this short paper to produce a correctly written article-length piece of research, which brings me to the final virtue of the research theme: it is realistic. Unlike the full-fledged research paper, it does not pretend that eighteen year-olds are already accomplished scholars.

Special Issue of Teaching Writing
The Fall 1982 issue of Teaching Writing (Vol. 6, No. 1) features essays by sixteen teachers of graduate courses in “Teaching Composition” at major universities across the country. Contributors include Frank D’Angelo, Edward P. J. Corbett, and Joseph Comprone. The essays describe structures, reading assignments, and requirements and wrestle with the problems of balancing theory and practice. Copies of this issue are available for $2.00 (first-class mail). Make checks payable to the “University of Delaware” and send to George Miller, Editor, TW, Department of English, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19711.

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THIRD CLASS