STATIC ABSTRACTIONS AND COMPOSITION

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The continuing revitalization of rhetoric that has made it such an exciting subject in our day has given us many novel pedagogical techniques, and as new teaching methods slowly displace the hoary tenets of current-traditional rhetoric, we have a tendency to cast the older ways aside without examining them carefully. This is, I believe, a mistake. Current-traditional rhetoric has much to tell us about how we have come to be who we are as teachers of writing, and it well repays historical and analytical study. If we are to avoid the pitfalls that caught our disciplinary forebears in ineffective and even harmful teaching methods and philosophies, we must examine what they did and try to understand why they did it. If we can thus determine what sorts of theoretical roads lead to dead ends, we can begin to learn from the mistakes of our progenitors. With this approach in mind I would like to examine one of the important historical components of the current-traditional rhetoric we have inherited from the nineteenth century: the element of "static abstractions."

Static Abstractions: Nature and Early History

First of all, a definition is necessary. What are these "static abstractions" and what have they to do with the teaching of composition?

"Static abstractions" is a term coined by Albert R. Kitzhaber in his seminal Ph.D. dissertation, Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900, to refer to the famous triad of "Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis." I have broadened the term to include any pseudo-heuristic listing of derived nominals—abstract adjective-based nouns—whose purpose is to define good structure in prose writing. Common examples of such terms are Unity, Variety, Precision, Energy, Clearness, Order, Economy, etc. Such terms are static because they exist in an unchanging theoretical context, are presented as paradigmatic and absolute, and are concerned with labeling finished texts. They are abstractions because they exist only as general terms, without qualifiers or specificity. Static abstractions, of which "Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis" are merely the best-known examples, have been an important element in composition teaching for the past one hundred years. They first appeared during the mid-nineteenth century, attained almost absolute acceptance by the end of the century, and have remained an important element in composition teaching down to our own time. They have been the revered "master terms" of hundreds of composition courses; they have been the touchstones against which thousands of students have been instructed to compare their writing. And they evidence, I believe, an essentially flawed conception of how to teach writing, a conception that has broken down almost completely in our day. Let us examine the use of these terms in teaching.

Although the use of lists of static descriptive nouns might seem to be a traditional part of discourse education (indeed, one 1963 text defends Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis as parts of classical rhetorical theory!), important use of static abstractions in the teaching of rhetoric is less than 100 years old. Like so many elements of current-traditional rhetoric, static abstractions can be traced back no farther than the post-Civil War period in America, a time when the novel discipline of "composition" was striving to define itself. In order to understand how the use of static abstractions (hereafter designated as SAs) evolved and grew, we must look at the forces that shaped rhetorical education in the nineteenth century, both before and after the "composition revolution" of the period 1880-1900.

From 1790 through the 1850's, discourse education in America took place at colleges that were small, private, and usually religiously-affiliated. Rhetorical training at these schools consisted primarily of training in oratory (often pulpit oratory) and in style, taste, literary appreciation, and the writing of fine sentences. Classical rhetorical theory was important to such courses, but far more important was the work of the great English rhetoricians of the eighteenth century, George Campbell and Hugh Blair. Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric of 1776 and Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres of 1783 were reprinted scores of times in America during the period 1800-1860, and the rhetorical teaching of the time reflected their work—especially the work of Blair—faithfully.

Neither Campbell nor Blair can be said to make real use of SAs as I have defined them. Their concerns were primarily with style and persuasion, and though much of their discussion was informed by Aristotle's "four virtues" of style—clarity, propriety, dignity, and correctness—Campbell and Blair did not structure their treatments of style around these terms, and thus never turned the terms into prescriptive SAs. Campbell indeed spoke often of Purity, Perspicuity, and Vivacity, but never in any mechanical way. Blair mentioned "the properties most essential to a perfect sentence" as "I. Clearness and Precision. 2. Unity. 3. Strength. 4. Harmony." This was, however, as far as Blair's Lectures went in listing adjective-based descriptions however; neither Blair nor Campbell was interested in lists for their own sake.

But rhetorical education was changing, especially in the United States. With the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, Congress created the land-grant Agricultural and Mechanical Colleges that were to grow into the major state universities. The era of mass higher education was at hand, and with the increase in the number of college students after 1870 came a need for new sorts of courses. The older type of rhetorical education, with its stress on oratory, stylistic beauties, fine sentences, and analysis of belletristic literature, had served well enough for small private schools turning out doctors, lawyers, teachers, and ministers. Students at the new A&M colleges, however, needed something else. Agriculturists had little use for stylistic analysis; businessmen were uninterested in pulpit oratory; engineers did not much appreciate sentence-by-sentence analysis of the Beauties of Johnson. The once-popular rhetoric of Blair and Campbell began to seem extraneous to the curricula of many students.
These new A&M students, however, had other needs that were to call forth a new sort of rhetorical education. Many of them were from public schools and had seldom been asked to write compositions of any extended length. Many were studying technical or professional fields and needed to be taught all-purpose forms of written communication to meet their career plans. Some students, to the chagrin and shock of older professors, could not write with perfect grammatical correctness—or indeed with any fluency at all. To meet the needs of these students in both the new and the more established colleges (which also felt the effects of the ongoing Industrial Revolution), a new sort of rhetoric course was developed. This course stressed written discourse and ignored oral; it concentrated on mechanical correctness and conventional usage over stylistic beauty and sentence analysis; it demanded short “themes” written to order from its students rather than relying upon examinations; and it was concerned with structure and predictability in writing rather than with the development of an individual stylistic voice or persuasive ability. This new course was, of course, the prototypical freshman English course.

The use of SAs in these early composition courses grew, as Kitzhaber points out, from the earlier Blairian tradition of stylistic rhetoric. Although Blair’s use of SA-like terms in his Lecture was not structurally important, American rhetoricians influenced by Blair can be seen developing a “list-consciousness” of the sort that would lead naturally to SAs as early as the 1820s. Much of this fascination with abstract descriptive terms was probably a result of the popularity of Lindley Murray’s English Grammar, first published in 1795 and reprinted countless times in abridged form during the period 1805-1860. Murray made the application of the terms “Purity, Propriety, Precision, Clearness, Strength, Unity” much more mechanical than had any of the rhetorical theorists, and his delight in listings soon found followers in America. Samuel Newman in his A Practical System of Rhetoric of 1827 lists the “qualities of a good style” as “Correctness, Perspicuity, Vivacity, Euphony, and Naturalness.” In his Advanced Course of Composition and Rhetoric of 1854, George Quackenbos follows Lindley Murray, listing the “essential properties of style” as “Purity, Propriety, Precision, Perspicuity (Clearness), Strength, Harmony, and Unity.” Indeed, the alliterative euphony of the first four terms made them very popular during the midcentury period; Purity, Propriety, and Precision, sometimes supplemented by Perspicuity, are often seen linked in the texts of the time.

We must, however, carefully discriminate these lists of stylistic qualities from listings of static abstractions, which are concerned more with the structure of writing than with its style. Stylistic qualities are concerned with word-choice only, while static abstractions are meant to be applied to more complex structures like paragraphs and whole discourses. They are “assembly-words.” At the sentence level there may be some overlap between stylistic qualities and static abstractions; for instance, such static abstractions as “coherence,” “economy,” and “order” might be applied to the sentence, but not very usefully. Application at the paragraph and whole-discourse level is the test of SAs; such stylistic qualities as “purity” and “precision” are meaningless above the sentence level. Stylistic qualities were usually expressed as adjectives by the end of the nineteenth century, while static abstractions are by nature always nouns. Although lists of stylistic qualities such as those of Newman and Quackenbos never really died out of composition texts, after 1880 or so they were vastly less important in providing overall organization for textbooks. SAs, it can be argued, evolved from the practice of piling up descriptive stylistic adjectives, but they persisted long after stylistic rhetoric had died out.

There is no doubt about who introduced the first true SAs into American composition. Henry N. Day wrote 14 books on rhetoric and composition between 1844 and his death in 1890, and it is to his books Rhetorical Praxis (1861), Art of English Composition (1861) and Art of Discourse (1867) that we must look for the first popular use of SAs. Day's rhetoric provides a bridge between the earlier and later forms of the American composition course; it does contain a heavy dose of stylistic material, but in its love for lists, rules, and Laws it presages the schematic structural rhetoric of the eighties and nineties. In addition to the first listing of the “methods of exposition,” which were to become so important in the current-traditional rhetoric of the twentieth century, Day's texts present his prototypical SAs, which he called “Laws of Discourse.” Day posted four Laws that operated throughout all explanatory writing: “the Law of Unity, the Law of Selection, the Law of Method, and the Law of Completeness.” Students were expected to observe each “Law” in the writing they did. Without going deeply into the details of each Law, we can note Day's presentation of them. They are clearly not stylistic descriptions like Purity, Propriety, and Precision. They are primarily prescriptive, not descriptive; they are apodictic, not inductive. What we have in Day's Laws is a genuinely new sensibility, an approach to teaching composition that marks a radical departure from descriptive belletristic-stylistic rhetoric: Day is the first important rhetorician attempting to make composition “rational” and "scientific" through the introduction of strict definitions and comprehensive rules (or Laws).

He was, of course, not the last. This was a time when the names of Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer were in the air, and the possibility of a truly scientific rhetoric based upon discoverable laws of discourse seemed real in the burgeoning scientific atmosphere of the day. Early psychological explanations of the “laws" governing mental operations sounded impressive; surely, theorized midcentury rhetorical writers, these laws of mind were connected to discoverable laws of discourse. A number of early treatises posited the existence of these laws and some actually listed versions of them; undoubtedly the most complete, serious, and arcane of these was David J. Hill’s Science of Rhetoric in 1877, which assumed that composition was as much a science as botany or chemistry.

The Growth of Reducetionism

In conflict with the growing scientism of some theorists of rhetoric during the post-Civil War period was the attitude of many teachers who were becoming painfully aware of the ineffectiveness of any theoretical approach to teaching students to write. It had been, in fact, the essentially theoretical nature of Blairian stylistic rhetoric that had made it useless in the new "theme-writing" courses. Erasmus O. Haven expressed the atti-
tudes of many of the new practitioners in the Preface to his 1869 *Rhetoric: A Text-Book*:

Abstruse arguments about style and oratory, about the conflicting theories of taste and beauty, about conviction and persuasion and the laws of mind, and the philosophy of language, are all good and valuable in their place; but a student may read and repeat them with but little more effect on his own habits of speaking or power to write well, than he would receive from an equal amount of study in mathematics, medicine, or law, or any other subject. Instructors in the classroom wanted a teaching rhetoric, one that would make their intercourse with their charges easier and more effective. They needed teachable and seemingly practical course-content. The Laws of Day and Processes of Hill were a step in the right direction, but too much of their concern remained stylistic and theoretical. Teachers needed a teachable method, and in response to their need, one was developed.

Alexander Bain, who is the single largest contributor to current-traditional rhetoric as it was established in this century, was only an indirect contributor to the establishment of SAs in composition. His *English Composition and Rhetoric* of 1866, though it contained some stylistic terms, did not enunciate any SA-like terms. It did, however, establish a further expansion of the “list-sensibility” that would provide such a fertile soil for others’ static abstractions. Especially influential, of course, were Bain’s listing of the four “forms of discourse” and his list of the six rules governing construction of paragraphs. These rules, transmogrified, were to be the basis of the most popular SAs ever developed — the fabled trinity of Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis.

The leap from Bain’s six paragraph rules to Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis would not take place for twenty years, and during that period the demand for simplicity in theory came to fore. *After Day’s Laws* there were, however, no SA-like terms that gained general popularity for a time. Adams Sherman Hill presented the terms “Clearness, Force and Elegance” in his popular *Principles of Rhetoric* in 1878, but these terms, though they achieved a good deal of currency, were essentially stylistic; although they were presented prescriptively, Hill’s terms were concerned with word-choice rather than with structure. The great leap from the six “rules” of Bain to full-fledged SAs did not take place until 1886, when John Genung of Amherst College published his extremely influential *Practical Elements of Rhetoric*.

Genung’s text proposed three “fundamental qualities” of the paragraph, qualities that were obviously drawn from Bain’s rules but which supplied a simpler heuristic form. Bain’s rules were as follows: 1. Explicit Reference 2. Parallel Construction 3. Topic Sentence 4. Consecutive Arrangement 5. Overall Unity 6. Subordination. Genung’s simplification of these rules boiled them down to three static abstractions: a paragraph, said Genung, must be distinguished by Unity, by Continuity, and by Proportion. These three terms structured and illuminated the entire paragraph chapter in *Practical Elements*. Likewise the sentence, in Genung’s view, had two general qualities: Unity and Emphasis. Large sections of the text were devoted to these qualities, and this approach proved very popular; Genung’s book became the best-selling composition text of the late eighties.

Throughout this period the struggle to define “composition” that had been going on since the early sixties intensified. The remnants of the Blairian stylistic tradition were hardening and atrophying; what had once been a wide-ranging discussion of stylistic effects had by the late 1880’s become a series of prescrip-

tive demands for the “Four P’s” — Purity, Propriety, Precision, and Perspicuity. It began to seem that textbooks would be successful to the degree that they could reduce rhetorical theory to lists of prescriptive concepts, and thus SAs and the “Four P’s” proliferated. A teaching rhetoric was under construction, and by 1890 the stage was set for a truly radical simplification of the theory of composition.

In 1891 it arrived. Barret Wendell, an “English A” instructor at Harvard, published in that year *English Composition*, a textbook based on eight lectures he had given at the Lowell Institute in 1890. *English Composition* was immediately popular despite the fact that it broke the usual textbook mold, containing no exercises or supporting examples from literature. It was popular because it brilliantly reduced all the complex principles of the chaotic postwar rhetorical tradition to a few easily remembered and universally applicable terms. Wendell himself states his case best as he explains the problems he found in the composition texts of his time:

These books consist chiefly of directions as to how one who would write should set about composing. Many of these suggestions are extremely sensible, many very suggestive. But in every case these directions are alarmingly numerous. It took me some years to discern that all which have so far come to my notice could be grouped under one of three very simple heads, each of which might be phrased as a simple proposition. Various as they are, all these directions concern either what may be included in a given composition (a sentence, a paragraph, or a whole); or what I may call the outline, or perhaps better, the mass of the composition — in other words, where the chief parts may most conveniently be placed; or finally, the internal arrangement of the composition in detail. In brief, I may phrase these three principles of composition as follows:

1. Every composition should group itself about one central idea;
2. The chief parts of every composition should be so placed as readily to catch the eye;
3. Finally, the relation of each part of a composition to its neighbors should be unmistakable. The first of these principles may conveniently be named the principle of Unity; the second, the principle of Mass; the third, the principle of Coherence.

Here, in a fine example of Wendell’s assured, convincing style, we have the prototype of the master-SAs of modern current-traditional rhetoric.

Wendell went on in his gracefully-written and extremely influential book to apply his principles of Unity, Mass, and Coherence to the three “levels” of discourse into which textbooks increasingly segmented writing after 1880: the sentence, the paragraph, and the whole theme. Greatly weakened by Wendell’s time was the decaying tradition of stylistic rhetoric that had made even Hill and Genung open their books with a “diction” section; Wendell plunged immediately into a discussion of the discourse levels of written composition.

It is not hard in retrospect to see what Wendell accomplished; his ideas were hardly new, and the stunning popularity of his text (the only composition text of the nineties which is still available today in two different editions) must have surprised even him. He had achieved this amazing success by taking Genung’s three-term application of Bain’s six paragraph rules, changing two of the terms slightly — “Continuity” became “Coherence” and “Proportion” became “Mass” — and by proposing to apply the resulting heuristic to all levels of writing. In an educational milieu seeking ever simpler, ever more teachable concepts, it was a reduction that could not have come at a more
propitious time. *English Composition* established the use of SAs as a central tenet of all the texts that followed its lead — and 90% of all texts did.

**Derivation and Stagnation**

The years between 1891 and 1910 saw some struggles of nomenclature, but in general Wendell's concepts swept the field, encountering only one important challenge. Wendell's term "Mass" was early seen as problematical; it was rather too vague even for a static abstraction, and in 1893 George Rice Carpenter suggested in his otherwise unexceptional *Exercises in Rhetoric and English Composition* that the trinity be changed to Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis (UCE). This formulation proved acceptable, and from that point on UCE were the main SAs in pedagogy.

There were several half-hearted attempts during the nineties to add to the canon of Wendell's terms or to change them further. Fred N. Scott and Joseph Denney's *Paragraph-Writing* of 1893 proposed the "general laws of the paragraph" as Unity, Selection, Proportion, Sequence, and Variety, but despite their book's importance in popularizing the Bainian organic paragraph, their "general laws" fell flat. In their *Composition-Rhetoric* of 1897, Scott and Denney gave in and used UCE as part of their exercises. Alphonso Newcomer introduced Sequence, Clearness, and Effectiveness on top of UCE, and his book sank without a trace. Wendell's terms as modified by Carpenter were showing themselves hard to compete against.

Not all textbooks went along with this gathering flood of SAs; however; older and more established text authors found Wendell's pill particularly bitter to swallow. John Genung resolutely kept his structural discussion concrete in his texts of 1893 and 1900, neither of which was as popular as *The Practical Elements* had been. A. S. Hill stuck with his stylistically-based "qualities of expression" (Clearness, Force, and Elegance, which Wendell had, in fact, utilized in the stylistic section of *English Composition*) in all his later books. But these were the voices of the past; the newer derivative textbooks of the late nineties and the early twentieth century latched onto Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis as they had on the modes of discourse, the organic paragraph, sentence grammar, and the other ritual treatments of an increasingly standardized teaching rhetoric.

Not all texts of this period, I must hasten to say, used UCE on all three levels. The terms were nearly always used to organize large sections of textbooks, and were most common at the paragraph level (from whence, of course, they had been drawn) or at the level of the whole discourse; UCE, being true static abstractions, were never very effective at the sentence level, and other terms were often tried in discussions of the sentence. (Failure to note the difference between SAs and stylistic terms has been a continuing confusion in current-traditional rhetoric.) Alternative SA formulations never really died out even in the heyday of UCE: there was Albert Granberry Reed's formula of Unity, Coherence, Effectiveness, Variety and Progression; Hammond Lamont proposed Unity, Order, Proportion, Clearness, and Interest; Edwin C. Woolley, in his *Handbook of Composition: A Compendium of Rules* of 1901 (which may well be the first dogmatic handbook), proffered Unity, Organization, and Coherence. C. S. Baldwin, perhaps the most influential text-author of the first fifth of the new century, had championed UCE in his 1902 *College Manual of Rhetoric*, but in 1909 he turned from the true faith and deposed UCE to secondary status behind his new master SAs, Clearness and Interest, in his *Composition: Oral and Written*. Throughout this period, however, Wendell's terms remained the clear favorites for most textbook writers.

Beginning around 1910, UCE had achieved such a clear victory that few new SAs appeared to challenge them. An avalanche of textbooks using the terms appeared: Canby's *English Composition in Theory and Practice*, Maxcy's *Rhetorical Principles of Narrative*, Hanson's *Two-Years' Course*, Slater's *Freshman Rhetoric* — the list goes on and on. Rival classifications never really died out completely, and there were always those authors who could not bear conformity and so changed "Emphasis" to "Proportion" or made other changes equally substantive, but after 1910 the concept of SAs meant for many years the Holy Trinity of Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis.

If the teens established UCE as the Master-SAs of the century, the decade of the 1920's was the great flowering of SA-consciousness. It saw the most sterile and mechanical use of the terms — for instance, Charles Harvey Raymond's *Essentials of English Composition* of 1923, which reduced writing to 90 rigid rules, all based on UCE — as well as their spread to nearly all textbooks. But the twenties also saw some changes that would eventually weaken the grip of UCE and then of SAs in general. Several novel sets of SAs appeared, indicating that even in their heyday UCE were not completely satisfactory to teachers. These new sets of terms are not remarkable because they displaced UCE; rather they are notable for their futility, the sense they give that the SA paradigm itself was coming to the end of its tether. Widtsoe and Lewis' *Effective Writing* of 1923, for instance, offered Clearness, Interest, and Effectiveness as its major terms. The Widtsoe and Lewis SAs are all obvious examples of what I call "tautological SAs" — terms that are so general, circular, and self-referential as to be almost completely uninformative. And Rankin, Thorpe, and Solve's *College Composition* in 1929 created a novel system of SAs that will probably never be tested for sheer mechanism. Their "Qualities of Good Writing" were Interest, Clearness, Organic Unity, Originality, and Sincerity and Restraint. All these terms were exhaustively detailed and were followed up by rigorous exercises — including "Exercises in Sincerity and Restraint" — an activity which illustrates how far divorced from reality SA-based teaching was becoming. Again, Rankin, Thorpe, and Solve's terms were largely tautological. SAs had become, in Richard Lanham's words, "a tedious repetitive, unoriginal body of dogma," and one is left with the impression that text-authors dissatisfied with UCE had few roads to travel that did not lead to inanity.

**Gradual Breakdown of Static Abstractions**

We cannot point to a date to which it can confidently be said that static abstractions as important elements of composition teaching began to die. Unlike the modes of discourse, which were suffocated by the growth of expository writing, SAs never drowned in their own waste products; they are in fact still extant today in some texts, though their power has been vastly reduced. We can trace a few currents in charting the gradual fade-out of SAs from textbooks, but they continue to hold sway today in the minds of many teachers, and the use of SAs in writing classes will probably not die out completely in this century. We do know that the 1930's, which was a revolutionary time for education at all levels in America, started in motion forces that would undercut SAs by reducing the need for them as content in writing courses. The influence of John Dewey's educational theories began to be important in the early thirties and became more so as the decade advanced. Texts began to appear that were psychologically more sophisticated, taking a more process-oriented approach to writing, paying more attention to students and their everyday experiences, attempting to link
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writing with vocational training and the "real world." Many of
these Deweyite books did incorporate UCE or other SAs, but the
terms were no longer central to the purpose of the texts as they
had been in the teens and twenties.

As the thirties advanced, more and more texts were "thesis
texts," which put forward as the controlling theme of the whole
book a single central idea about how writing should be
approached, and these theses seldom had anything to do with
SAs, further reducing their importance in the eyes of the newer
practitioners.9 A whole sub-genre of thesis texts was the "American
writing" text—Whitford and Foster's American Standards of
Writing, Davidson's American Composition and Rhetoric, Watt's An
American Rhetoric, most of which were consciously anti-
traditional and many of which avoided UCE in specific or SAs in
general.

These trends, important though they were, should not be seen
as destroying the power of SAs; UCE in particular kept rolling
along in derivative composition texts and by the thirties were
usually referred to as the "fundamental laws" of writing. (Like
many elements of late nineteenth-century rhetoric, UCE became
so widely accepted that their origins were lost by the 1930's and
they were generally presumed to be part of the primeval wisdom
of the race.) The degree to which the terms had become dogma
can be seen amusingly in William C. Hoffman and Roy Davis'.
Write and Speak Better, a Dale Carnegie-influenced advice-to-a-
businessman treatise from 1937. In a folksy, no-intellectuals-
here style, the authors put forward the usual nostrums for business
success through good communication, but then they stop,
shuffle for a moment, and admit that . . . uh . . . "a message
will be well-put only when it conforms to the old-fashioned
requirements of unity, coherence, emphasis, and harmony."

Now, it may be that you associate these terms with rather
depressing experiences . . . you remember unity, coherence,
emphasis and harmony from the "dear old school days" when you
"took" doses of English composition and speech training . . . it is not sufficient to keep your eye on the golf ball (unity)
and "follow through" on your drive (coherence). You must
"smack the pill" hard enough to make it go, and the force of
the smash (Emphasis) should be governed by the distance you
wish the ball to cover.10

As we can see, reliance upon SAs had become pervasive in all
sorts of instructional situations.

In the late thirties UCE began to break down in some texts
into less general terms. It was obvious to many teachers by this
time that UCE did not work well on every level of discourse,
and some authors began to experiment with more specific SAs
derived from UCE. John Kierzek's first Macmillan Handbook of
1939 allowed for Unity, Order, and Proportion on the theme
level, Unity, Order, Arrangement, and Transitions on the para-
graph level, and Clearness, Order, and Effectiveness on the sen-
tence level. Donald Davidson's American Composition and Rhetoric
in the same year broke UCE down completely into concrete dis-
cussions of how proportion can be achieved in writing, how to
use transitions, etc. Other texts responded to the weakening of
UCE by going in the opposite way: instead of avoiding SA terms
they piled them up with desperate abandon like sandbags on an
eroding levee. Harry Shaw's Complete Course of 1940 was built
around the terms Unity, Completeness, Clarity, Effectiveness,
Order, Proportion, Length, and Transition. Obviously the rad-
cal simplification that had been the great appeal of Wendell's
three terms was on the way out.

The 1940's brought more problems for UCE, as the General
Education "communications" movement and the General
Semantics movement became powerfully influential on compo-
sition courses. Most "communications" texts did not use SAs at
all, since they were concerned with all four of the "communica-
tions skills"—listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Writing
was, after all, only one-fourth of the purview of such courses,
and "communications" texts had no dearth of material to cover
without UCE. In addition, most "communications" texts reflected the beliefs of the Deweyite General Education move-
ment: they were audience- and process-oriented rather than
being concerned exclusively with the written product. General
Semantics texts were too much interested in words and their
meanings to pay attention to prescriptive abstractions; abstrac-
tion, in fact, was one of the elements distrusted in communica-
tion. Thus, the two great educational fads of the forties and early
fifties, though they themselves did not last, helped to weaken
many aspects of the older current-traditional rhetoric that pre-
ceded them.

After the 1940's, composition texts changed. Thesis texts
came more and more to be the standard texts, and as a result
textbook organization, which had once been ritually predictable,
became experimental and arbitrary. Authors seemed to have
given up on the "scientific" nature of composition; books after
the late forties tended to be discursive, filled with many short
subsections, process- and audience-oriented in novel ways. It
was a period of change, and though the use of SAs remained
widespread, their positions in the books that used them were no
longer so central. Even traditional books like Brooks and War-
ren's Modern Rhetoric of 1950 (which was modern only by the
standards of the twenties) and Richard Weaver's Composition of
1957 devoted only a few pages to UCE. Experimental texts used
SAs even less.

The "Back to the Basics" movement of the mid-fifties, fol-
lowed by the launching of Sputnik and the resulting "education
race" with Russia, put an end to the period of experimentation
of 1945-55. But although the obvious experimentation ended and
current-traditional rhetoric again put its stress on "traditional,"
the damage to SAs had been done. After 1960, only a few text-
books would use SAs to organize whole chapters, and none
would use them to organize whole books. Thesis texts typically
devoted five or six pages to UCE and then went on; the terms
were often found, but their power as a heuristic list was dimin-
ishing. Throughout the fifties and sixties, and even the early sev-
enties, SAs hung on in traditional textbooks. UCB was still the
most popular formulation, but such old friends as Continuity,
Movement, Variety, Effectiveness, and Economy were found as
well. Through the great theoretical upheaval of the sixties, SAs
continued to be seen in texts, and it is only in the mid-seventies,
when a crop of textbooks appeared that were informed by the
"new rhetoric" of the sixties, that we can see the deathgrip of
SAs relax. Beginning around 1975, almost as if by agreement,
new-textbook authors stopped using UCE and SAs in general.
Even texts that were largely traditional did away with the old
Wendell trinity and did not replace it with other SA terms. The
possible reason for this sudden rejection of SAs we will examine
in a moment.

Today SAs are found only in texts that have atrophied, like the
older handbooks and McCrimmon's Writing with a Purpose.
Newer texts have newer nostrums to offer—better systems with
which to organize essays, more informed models of the writing
process, more information on invention processes. Static abstrac-
tions as teaching tools seem to have come close to the end of their
rope, and they hang on only contingently, soon to be sent to join sentence diagramming and the subset outline in whatever afterlife there may be for discredited current-traditional myths.

Epilogue: The Bloom and Blast of a Myth

Before I go on to discuss the problems that SAs present as a teaching method, let me make one point clear. I am not proposing that good writing does not have the qualities of Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis. Of course it does. I hope this essay does. In addition, I hope it has the qualities of Clearness, Purity, Force, Beauty, Completeness, Effectiveness, Energy, Correctness, Smoothness, Dignity, Variety, Economy, Order, and Ease. Not to mention, of course, Sincerity and Restraint. This sheer piling up of SAs begins to make my case against them; while no one would deny that all these fine terms are indeed desirable qualities in writing, they are devalued by their sheer numbers. These terms may indeed describe good writing, but they are useless, I will argue, in helping students create it.

The use of SAs in teaching writing, like so many aspects of current-traditional rhetoric, became popular primarily because it appealed to teachers — not because it aided students. Casting about for something concrete to teach in a rhetoric course that was obviously cut off from traditional oratorical and bellicose concerns, the composition teachers of the late nineteenth century created a mythology: the modes of discourse, the methods of exposition, the organic paragraph, and static abstractions. These were the components, assembled over the course of approximately 25 years, of the “discourse theory” of current-traditional rhetoric. I have here omitted many other important elements, particularly the obsession with correct mechanics and usage and with pure diction, since these concerns are at or below the sentence level. I call these theories mythology not because they are fantastic or absolutely untrue. They are myth because they were passed on unquestioningly by true believers, because their theoretical origins were lost and they atrophied into dogma, and because they grew to have a powerful symbolic value for those who believed in them. Without any clear idea of how to teach a contentless course, early composition teachers were forced to create content from their subjective perceptions of what was important in writing; thus necessity became the mother of the invention of “composition theory.” Like other aspects of early current-traditional rhetoric, lists of SAs sounded complete, sounded helpfully descriptive of good writing, even sounded scientific to some. They offered teachers a simple, easily taught, and seemingly enforceable heuristic, and for these reasons SAs thrived for many years.

We do not, however, have to look very far to find problems with SAs as teaching tools. It was recognized as early as 1910 that the use of such abstract terms was not helpful to students. In Francis Berkeley’s A College Course in Writing from Models, she attacked the use of SAs unequivocally:

It is my firm belief that no student ever yet learned to write by means of studying rules and abstract principles from a textbook on rhetoric. After a fairly long experience with the endeavours of Freshmen and Sophomores, I feel absolutely sure that, to these long-suffering youngsters, “unity, mass, coherence,” and all their works remain “miching mallecho” to the end of the chapter. Still another objection to this sort of teaching, besides its abstractness and consequent unintelligibility to the undergraduate mind, is that such teaching is mainly destructive.

By “destructive,” of course, Berkeley means that the UCE formula was used mainly to cast doubts on already written student work, to force students to constantly view their own work through the fun-house mirror of SA terms.

A more specific criticism of SAs was levied by Henry Burrowes Lathrop in an article in Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature in 1918 and extended in the preface to his 1920 text Freshman Composition. Though Lathrop believed that Wendell’s English Composition was “the beginning of a rational treatment of structure in English composition,” he also complained that Wendell was “inaccurate in various ways”:

The first is the erection of three apparently coordinate principles of structure. There is one principle — unity; and to consider unity, coherence, and emphasis as things in any way independent tends to make students try, as one of mine put it, to “apply” them successively to their work. The result is a definite rigidity, a tendency to mechanism in style.12

Lathrop’s complaint goes directly to the heart of the problem of using SAs in composition classes: students must try to “apply” them sequentially to their writing, to make linear a process we know to be recursive. It is for this reason that the use of SAs is one of the defining elements of the “product-orientation” of current-traditional rhetoric.) This process of attempting to apply SAs while writing has never been very helpful to students.

One of the main reasons for the failure of SAs to work well, as these early authors recognized, was the very abstractness of the terms. Such terms might create a neat descriptive list, but their generality made them useless as prescription. Such general terms live for highly educated people in a thick nutrient stew of examples, synonyms, antonyms, experiences, experiments, considerations. But unless SA-type terms are informed by this sort of background knowledge they remain useless buzzwords. I. A. Richards was not directly addressing the question of SAs in his Philosophy of Rhetoric in 1936, but his thoughts on this question are helpful. “The stability of the meaning of a word,” said Richards, “comes from the constancy of the contexts that give it its meaning.”

You will see, I hope, that these criteria — precision, vividness, expressiveness, clarity, beauty — are representative instances of them — are misleading and unprofitable to study unless we use them with a due recognition of this interdependence among the words we use . . . and an alert distrust of our habit of taking words and their meanings for examination in isolation. The isolation is never complete, of course; a completely isolated word would be meaningless. The detachment we attempt is by means of a supposed standard setting, an imaginary schematic context which is assumed to be representative.13

When teachers look at such terms as “Coherence” or “Precision” in isolation, they may seem useful and even genuinely descriptive, but only because of the informed “interdependence” that exists in our own minds. Students very seldom possess that informed context for such terms, and as a result, such abstract descriptors are indeed often “miching mallecho” to them.

The closest analogy we have for the pedagogical use of SAs on the level of discourse structure is the use of what Louis Milic has called “metaphysical descriptions” on the level of style. For most of history, says Milic, style study has languished under the same sort of general descriptive terms we have been discussing. As we saw during the breakdown of stylistic rhetoric during the nineteenth century, such terms as “clear,” “pure,” “precise,” “ener-
getic," have been used to describe individual styles or just "good" style with little attempt made to clarify the meaning of the terms. "Stylistics," says Milic, "has for most scholars still no method beyond the method of impressionistic descriptions and a vague use of rhetoric . . . . when all these descriptions are placed side by side, they amount to little more than a glossary of adjectives." The relationship between the "metaphysical adjectives" about which Milic is complaining and the nouns which I have called static abstractions is fairly clear: both sorts of approaches try to make terms that are essentially personal appear to be objective. Milic's metaphysical terms are analogous to SAs also in that they refer not to the activities of the writer but rather to the perceptions of the reader. "Though clear may seem to refer specifically to the writing process," says Milic, "it actually describes the response of the reader. What is clear to one may not be to another." Similarly, what is Empathic to one may not be to another.

In critiquing metaphysical style criticism, Milic has also put his finger on the weakness of SAs as elements of writing-process pedagogy: both metaphysical terms and static abstractions are essentially based in the subjective responses of the reader rather than being in the affective domain of the writer. Trying to keep terms like "effectiveness" and "variety" in mind while composing is simply not possible — or at least is not productive. Even the master SAs, Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis, are simply abstract terms that cannot be mechanically gridded over the complex process of writing. Real writers do not process their intentions through such abstract and isolated terms, as the protocol analyses of Linda Flower and John Hayes show.

Admitting that SAs cannot be useful as part of the composing process, what about their use in editing already completed drafts? Here again we encounter the problem of an informed sensibility and a context for such terms. Here also, I believe, we can find the reason why textbook SAs have almost completely disappeared in the last six or seven years.

As Lathrop suggested in 1920, the most common student use of SAs was as editorial terms; students were encouraged to "apply them successively to their work," checking their writing against the teacher's list of terms. That this process always had problems in practice there is little doubt, since it was condemned as early as 1910. But as long as students had any sort of informed context for SA terms like Unity and Coherence, their use was at least plausible, conceivable. They might not have worked well, but throughout most of this century they had some meaning for students, and their methodological problems could thus be ignored. So long as most students had read a few books and could vaguely grasp what Unity or Coherence looked like in practice, SAs were at least defensible.

After 1970, however, no teacher of composition could take for granted that any of his or her students had read anything more complex than Jaws or "Peanuts." With open admissions, teachers were suddenly confronted with students for whom the term "coherence" was not merely a crude generalization but a complete mystery. If SAs were made minimally useful only by an informed context for their use, it is not surprising that without such knowledge, SAs became for students in the seventies mere words, with no recognizable meaning at all. How can a student be expected to recognize "proportion" or "clarity" in writing when his or her reading has been confined to high-school textbooks and TV Guide?

Thus, the use of SAs has declined in textbooks until today there are relatively few texts that use such terms in any important way. UCE do live on in certain more traditional (and usually older) books, but the doughty trinity seems to be on the way out even there. After almost 90 years our discipline has finally grown beyond the facile use of "comparisons, analogies, and similarly crude approximations," as Milic puts it. We are at last coming to realize that all truly useful advice to students must be text-specific; such convenient generalities as SAs just don't help students compose or edit their own work. It took a genuine literacy crisis to give the quietus to SAs, but now that we are seeing the myths of current-traditional rhetoric dissolve we can at last begin to work toward replacing them with effective methods. If static abstractions teach us anything, it is that we as teachers must always be wary of near, comprehensive-sounding conceptual schemes that are easy to teach but that have no real contact with what students need to learn.

Notes

4 Alexander Bain, English Composition and Rhetoric (New York: D. Appleton, 1867), pp. 142-152.
7 The degree to which SAs had become part of the conceptual baggage of the composition course can be seen in student annotations of textbooks from this period. Even in texts that use UCE very heavily, flyleaves and margins often show that students were expected to write them again and again. The list was obviously drummed into freshman heads. Even the process of seeking SA-type terms was encouraged. For instance, in a copy of Thomas Rankin's 1917 text The Method and Practice of Exposition in the Middlebury Library at LSU, the student annotations tell a strange story. Rankin, a student of the iconoclastic Fred Newton Scott at Michigan, totally avoided SAs in this, his first textbook. And yet, on a page in the discursive section of the book in which Rankin describes the nature of exposition, the student owner of the text has numbered and underlined every SA-type noun: "1. Truth, 2. clear, 3. interesting, 4. convincing, 5. controlled, 6. ethical." For that student (and for that teacher), SAs were the way in which good writing was conceptualized.
9 For more on the concept of thesis texts, see Robert J. Connors, "The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse," CCC 33 (Dec. 1981), 451. It is ironic that Wendell, who originated the UCE trinity, was also the author of the first of the thesis texts that would eventually help to weaken his SA theory.
The editor reserves the right to edit essays so that their usage conforms with the Guidelines for Non-sexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications.

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UNDERGROUND WRITING

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The publication of Janet Emig’s article “Writing as a Mode of Learning” in CCC in 1977 was a crystallizing event for writing teachers. That article presents writing as a powerful and unique instrument for learning, a way of understanding and coming to terms with the world. Some of us felt that our strongest intuitions about the special importance of writing had finally been articulated. Some of us even felt evangelical. “Let us carry this view of writing to students, to our colleagues in writing, to our colleagues in other disciplines. Writing is a way of knowing; thought and language are inseparable. Understand this and make use of its power.”

We brought this sense of the importance of writing, as well as some of the attendant zeal, with us when we set out in the fall of 1980 to study the writing behavior of 31 sophomore students at the University of Iowa. Our focus was mainly on academic writing; we wanted to get some idea of how much and what kind of writing undergraduates did after completing the freshman writing course. We arranged to call each of our 31 students about every three weeks to ask questions about their writing. We decided first of all to ask about three different kinds of writing in terms the students would be familiar with: class assignments, class notes, and responses to tests and quizzes. After we had discussed and experimented with these categories for a while, it struck us that all of them featured teacher-directed, teacher-dominated tasks. Since we do believe in the value of writing as a learning and not just a responding activity, and since we agree with James Britton when he says that writing serves that writer well who is free to follow his or her own intentions, we decided to include the additional category, “self-sponsored” writing. Self-sponsored writing was going to be our catch-all, designed to cover all writing that students did “on their own,” excluding letters. Frankly, given the structured academic settings most of our students were working in, we did not expect there to be much of it.

We got two surprises of our study. First, much more self-sponsored writing was going on than we had imagined. Of our 31 writers, 11 were doing self-sponsored writing regularly. We also checked with two freshman writing classes to see if our group of sophomores was atypical; about half of those students reported doing self-sponsored writing.

Our second and biggest surprise: students valued self-sponsored writing more highly than their other writing. We asked students for a subjective estimate of the value of their writing in the various categories, using a scale of 1-10. On the average, students valued their class writing assignments (largely reports and analytical “papers”) at 6.9, their writing on tests and quizzes at 6.9, their lecture notes at 7.4, and their self-sponsored writing at 9.3. Self-sponsored writing clearly seemed to be the writing which mattered most.

We had to learn more about this writing which was valued so highly. We arranged to interview eight students currently enrolled in the freshman course who did self-sponsored writing. We found they had two main motives:

(1) coming to terms with the ideas of others; and
Six of the students kept reading-notes; they were insistent that writing — in some form or other — is vital to understanding what goes on in their courses. When pressed to explain this, most students took the position that notes condensed things and helped them remember. Students who would speculate further were to the idea that their notes are more "understandable [than textbooks] because they are in my own language." One student said that note taking and writing about her reading gave her the opportunity "to analyze material the way the book presents it, and then synthesize it the way that works for me. I break apart and then pull it back together in a way that makes sense to me and a way I'll remember." Another student said that making notes helped her "read between the lines," helped her reach "my own interpretation, my own perspective, my own point of view.

Writing had important uses beyond school, however. One student was a Mississippi River commercial fisherman who writes regularly about his work: the water levels in the river, water temperature, weather conditions, and the spawning habits of the buffalo fish that make up his livelihood. He said that he writes "to prepare for what might happen in the future." He is so attached to this work log that he intends to leave it to his younger brother as a record of himself.

The other main use of self-sponsored writing is for dealing with feelings. Five students told us that they write when in the grip of strong moods: happiness, frustration, boredom, depression, confusion. One student said, "When you feel really good, you don't want to forget how you felt, so you write it down." One young woman, for example, told us about "writing a novel" (meaning that she wrote a lot) when she broke up with her boyfriend, trying to figure out what caused what. In a fascinating variation on this kind of writing, another young woman told about writing fairytales, allegorical narratives, often illustrated, with animals for characters, when she felt in conflict. Another writer regarded his writing as problem-solving, as giving himself advice on how to live better. For him, interestingly, the value of the act of writing itself seems indistinguishable from the values of the written product:

Student: I just write basically what I feel at the time. Looking back over it, it mainly seems to be a lot of philosophical stuff — ideas about how to improve things, or how to live better. Things like that — to solve problems.

Interviewer: What's more valuable to you, the piece of writing itself or writing it?

Student: Writing the piece of writing. And then learning from it, reading it. The writing is just a means to an end. Just to get there.

Interviewer: And the end is what?

Student: Understanding myself better in the world.

Interviewer: How did you start this?

Student: I always liked to write. I always like to think. But then it got to be that problems were too complex or situations too complex that I just couldn't think them all out. So I would just write down what I thought — not in an outline or anything, but just write. I'd forget a lot of things and I'd think up a lot of things, and at the end I always would have a sort of solution.

As these results were coming in, we felt not unlike sex researchers who go out in the field with a hypothesis about any kind of sexual behavior — hetero, homo, or polymorph perverse — and learn that more people are doing it in more ways than ever dreamed of. People discover what gives pleasure, fills needs, and solves problems, and if writing is indeed the powerful instrument of learning that we want to claim, it makes sense that our discovery has been anticipated in actual behavior, that people are out there writing now because writing accomplishes things for them when no other activity will suffice. Indeed, we learn that a large proportion of student writers are underground writers, doing the writing that really matters to them privately, almost furtively, sometimes not even thinking of their self-sponsored writing as real writing. At this point, we felt somewhat silly as evangelists of writing when in truth so many we had imagined heaven are secret converts, writing down in the catacombs.

Our survey has two obvious implications for teaching. First, when we recognize that many students naturally write to themselves to try to understand whatever they are studying, we have confirmation that the writing across the curriculum or across the disciplines movement is headed in exactly the right direction. Since informal, exploratory writing is a powerful, natural tool for learning about anything, all disciplines can benefit by learning strategies that bring this kind of writing into the classroom. Teachers in all fields need to learn how to work with writing at that stage when it is shaping the thinking of their students — not merely to use writing to test what students have already learned, presumably by other means. One way to accomplish this is to have students keep an informal journal in which they write their impressions, reading, other students' talk, other students' writing. Such a journal could, in the terms we have been using, serve as an extended set of notes, putting the learner's experience into the learner's own language. For most of the students we talked to, this issue of language seemed central. Not only are the procedures and concepts of their course work often unfamiliar and confusing, but the language of the teacher and the textbook is also somehow alien, removed from them. It speaks to them, yet not quite. It is only after the ideas of others have been actively put into the student's own language that thorough understanding takes place. Our commercial fisherman in particular teaches us this lesson. Even though he understands the techniques for catching fish and the signs under which they can best be caught, he understands as well that he has a fully operational knowledge of his world only by creating a cumulative record of his experience in his own language. In effect he has rewritten the book of nature after his own purpose and design. Here is what one student who kept a journal for an anthropology class wrote about the need for such activity:

Ideally, education is something that a person should be able to apply in some fashion to his/her life. It should be something that is useful to the individual. . . .

I think that's where the value of the journal comes in. In order to write an entry, it is required that I think about the anthropology class and what was going on in it, and that, in turn, made me consciously relate what was being taught and what I thought about what was being taught. And, thus, I became more aware of how the class was affecting me and my thinking. It added new dimensions in my perception of the class. Instead of the course acting on me, I was reacting to the course.

Our second implication is an old truth, which has been explored in many ways by many people. Much freshman writing is crippled, castrated, rendered empty because students are afraid to record authentic feeling, because they are afraid to be themselves on the page. And yet, our survey suggests to us that many of these same students do writing which has great power for them, which helps them deal with the world. Teachers need to create a context where this kind of writing can come up from
underground, a context where writing helps students feel, shape, control their experience. It is the sort of context that James Britton has talked about, at various times and in various places, where the students' own intentions become the focus and starting point for writing. Many of the classroom activities, evaluation procedures, and writing assignments that teachers use ignore the fact that students do bring their own intentions into the classroom, and that those intentions can awaken a dormant capacity for good writing. Granted, good writing does not just happen, but, like anything else that is good, it must be encouraged in a way that suits the needs and desires of the writer. Here is an excerpt from the anthropology journal written by the student quoted above. (This is the sort of writing Britton would call a "muffling over of sessions" in which students are free to explore matters that are most important to them in a course of study.)

2/24/82. Saw another film in lecture yesterday, *The Ascent of Man*, narrated by J. Bronowski, an Australian mathematician of all things. He said in the film that he became interested in hominid evolution about 1950 when he was asked to take some measurements on the teeth of a skull found in east Africa, I believe. He was also the narrator in a film we saw earlier on Mendelian Genetics, or rather, on Mendel and his experiments in genetics. In both films, Bronowski is a *visible* narrator. He strolls through the monastery where Mendel planted his peas. In *The Ascent of Man*, he walks and talks about the hot and desolate Rift Valley, considered to be the birthplace of man. Bronowski even pauses in his narrative to very deliberately wipe his sweating forehead, first one brow, then the other, thereby emphasizing perhaps the heat of this "birthplace" as compared to the biblical Garden of Eden where no one had to work by "the sweat of their brow." This action could be interpreted as a very subtle attack against creationists, or... simply as emphasis of the humorous paradox of the Rift Valley being the "Garden of Eden," the birthplace of man.

Or maybe the sweat was just stinging his eyes. But if that's the case, why waste film showing him wiping his brow.

Anyway, Bronowski seems to enjoy adding a certain dramatic flair to his narratives. I guess this gives the films an entertainment value as well as their being a means of teaching.

This writing, done as part of a course of study, is not unlike the writing students in our survey described doing entirely on their own. Its purpose is explanatory, questioning; its language is the writer's own. It is writing that begins with the writer's own difficulties and amazements, and aims, directly or indirectly, at their ultimate resolution. It is writing that at once answers the needs of the student for making sense out of new information and at the same time works toward fulfilling the educational objectives of the teacher. In any case, good writing can come of giving students the opportunity to write for themselves, and such writing in and of itself has an important part to play in the lives and the learning of students. Just as important for writing teachers, it also has an important part to play in the writing process by serving as a basis for further, more formal, more formed and informed writing. Wherever it may lead, our survey suggests that students are writing on a larger scale than we ever imagined. Significant numbers of students do write in order to learn and do write about what they care about. Let this happen regularly in school, where such writing can influence us and the others in the class, and we in turn can influence the writer.

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**TEACHING THE DREADED COURSE**

Brock Dethier
University of New Hampshire

"You have to take Freshman English this term? You poor sucker!"

The Word around campus says that English 401 is a pain: something to be dreaded, and, because it's required, something to be put off as long as possible and then stoically endured.

But the Word, innumerable freshmen have told me, is wrong. Although hypercritical teachers "bleeding" red ink on papers have so deeply engrained writing anxiety in some students that it can't be excised in only one semester, many 401 students find that, as the course progresses, they get less upset at the prospect of writing a paper—a major step. And most are quick to appreciate the benefits of Freshman English: the personalized attention of weekly one-on-one conferences, an attention matched by few other University courses; the relatively small classes which allow them to exchange ideas and feelings on a wide range of topics; the option of taking a "special section" focused on a subject that interests them, from the family to the media to the sixties; and of course the chance (the requirement!) to express themselves in weekly papers, to explore ideas, feelings, and subjects which might never get aired in other classes, an exploration that often leads to personal change and growth.

When the egos of those of us who teach 401—an energetic crew of lecturers, part-timers, graduate students, and an occasional "real" faculty member, with M.A.s, Ph.D.s, publications, and a wealth of experience to our credit—need a boost (particularly on payday), we sometimes find solace in thinking of these benefits, and of the quality and quantity of the work we do in the course. (The lecturers spend an average of almost 25 hours a week on each course.) Like everyone else, I need such solace, but I also have my own reasons for teaching the course: I'm fascinated by watching my students and reading their papers. The first year in college inevitably produces academic and personal development and growth, and students' papers and conferences provide a window through which to view that growth, and often a catalyst ensuring that it continues. Students sometimes find it an odd type of interest ("My paper didn't bore you?"), but I continue to be intrigued by "The Dynamics of a Family Splitting Apart," or "The Sexual Attitudes of Fraternity Men," or "Coping with Autism." I teach, quite simply, to learn, not just about the attitudes and mores of undergraduates, but about interferon, shortwave radio, wind-surfing, or the meaning of "agoraphobia."

When weighed against this kind of learning, enthusiastic student evaluations, the memories of significant breakthroughs, and the satisfaction of having undergraduates come back to see me not as students but as friends, the reputation of 401 in the dorms (whatever it might be) doesn't bother me much—except when I wonder what part the faculty plays in forming that reputation.

For it is one thing to be undervalued by those who sign my paycheck—every New Hampshire state employee knows that feeling—and quite another to be disparaged by those whom I'd like to call "colleagues." In the four years I've been teaching 401, good words about the program have trickled down to me only once from people outside the English department—apparently someone at Residential Life appreciates the role 401 instructors play as listeners and counselors to confused freshmen.
Otherwise, our program seems to be brought up most often in phrases like, "If those people would just do their bs . . . ." Such attitudes cause most resentment when echoed by official publications; the General Education report of the Undergraduate Curriculum Review Committee, for instance, says, "the minimal level of competence required in English 401 sometimes too minimal." Disturbed by such criticism, sometimes we even turn on ourselves, wondering, when faced with poor writing of a senior in another course, "How could this student pass 401, and still write so badly?"

Of course it's naive to think that even the best one semester course can always reverse the effects of a student's years of poor training or attitude. The University used to require (and fund) a good freshman writing course, and certainly the current program could be improved if the University were willing to make a financial commitment. But even without additional funding, the University faculty could improve the quality of writing across campus. No craft as subtle and complex as writing can survive two or three years of neglect; only by practicing what they are taught in Freshman English can students hope to keep their skills from atrophying. And all too often, when I ask juniors and seniors when they last wrote a paper, their reply is "401."

I certainly can't fault a professor with 150 students and no teaching assistants for requiring little writing; ultimately the student must take the blame for almost any current University occurring. But anyone who sees enough writing to complain about how badly it's taught can help to improve it — by requiring more writing, by encouraging rewriting, and by commenting on a few major points in a paper in a constructive, specific, positive manner as possible.

It takes time but, as I rediscover almost every day, it's worth it. For no matter which you label the chicken and which the egg, good writing and good thinking are inextricably linked; writers score as they write, making new connections which no amount of reading or listening could reveal to them, providing insights for information, thinking convergently and divergently. Students who begin a first draft recanting "My First Month of College" can end up with a final draft about "The Formal Communication Network in Stoke Hall" or "The Right Reasons to Go to College." If you want to see the difference the act of writing can make, talk to a student after she's finished her research for a paper, and again after she's written it. It's the difference between a dead fish and a good salmon dinner. Writing, in short, is learning, and it pays off both in perfected skills and in increased subject comprehension.

Even those who can't take the time to require more student writing or to talk to students about their writing can help the situation simply by displaying a positive attitude about writing. Professors would stress the importance of good writing in their fields, emphasize that students will indeed have to write papers outside of English courses, and encourage students to take writing courses, students might improve more on their own, and some of us who teach English 401 wouldn't have to overcome, at the beginning of each term, the stigma of teaching the University's dreaded course.

In the Fall 1981 Freshman English News, Robert Houston provides us with a primer of statistical terms used to describe the relationships between standardized tests like the ACT and writing ability and offers suggestions for our use of these statistics. To augment his lucid explanation of terminology and his sensible suggestions, I offer the following results of a study I carried out and some supplementary warnings about the interpretation of correlations between scores on standardized tests and grades in freshman composition courses.

Professor Houston reports that studies on the relationship between ACT: EUT scores and college English grades show low to moderate correlations (.28-.48) between the two. While teaching at Tennessee Technological University, I conducted a similar study of ACT English scores and grades in English 101, a required freshman composition course, for students enrolled in the Fall Quarter, 1979. The study entailed analyzing the scores and grades of 1123 students whose mean ACT English score was 17.47 (standard deviation 4.78) and whose mean 101 grade was 2.039 (standard deviation 1.12) on a four-point scale. A statistical analysis yielded a correlation of .527, standard error of estimate .953, significant beyond the .001 level of confidence. This correlation is higher than those typically reported by the researchers Professor Houston mentions, though only slightly so. What is initially more interesting is that these figures suggest students may be accurately placed in basic, regular, or advanced composition courses on the basis of ACT English scores, since they are compatible with the ACT's warnings that "predictive correlations below .45 are of dubious value" and that "Standard Errors of Estimate of 1.0 or higher for individual courses reflect a level of inaccuracy which makes the value of predictive information for individual students unreliable." If the ACT is correct, students at Tennessee Tech could be placed according to ACT English scores, and we could expect to find most students placed correctly.

However, an examination of what would happen if we were to attempt to place students in composition courses according to ACT: EUT scores alone casts some clouds on these superficially sunny figures and reminds us that the information statistics provide us must be interpreted within the specific context of the situation we are examining. ACT: EUT scores for students receiving B's: 8 to 31, C's: 4 to 27, D's: 3 to 23, F's: 4 to 27. While some of these discrepancies can be accounted for (for example, students at Tennessee Tech may not drop or withdraw from required English courses, so some high ACT students may receive low grades for failing to attend class or complete coursework), the wide overlap in the range of scores indicates the problem of establishing a placement cut-off point based on ACT scores alone. In order to identify correctly 90% of the D and F students, it would be necessary to establish an ACT: EUT cut-off of 19, higher than the mean score of entering freshmen. This would allow us to identify 259 of the 286 students who received a D or F in the fall of 1979, but it would also incorrectly place 415 students whose ACT score was less than 19 but who received an A, B, or C in English 101. Any reduction in ACT cut-off would
reduce the number of students incorrectly identified as needing remedial work, but would increase the number who might need remediation but would not be placed appropriately.

Obviously, an additional placement device is needed, and research indicates that to judge writing ability, nothing works like a writing sample (preferably more than one). Of course, writing samples are expensive to develop, administer, and evaluate, but if the goal is to accurately identify students who need remedial help and to make writing courses more homogeneous, they are worth the expense. And economic compromises, based upon correlations between standardized test scores and performance in writing courses, can be made. For example, at Tennessee Tech, placing students with ACT:ELT scores below ten in a remedial course would only misplace three of the students who received a B and thirty-three of the students who received a C in 101 in the fall of 1979. Students with scores between eleven and seventeen, who make up a rather broad “borderline” group, could be required to write a placement essay during registration or the first day or two of classes. Such an adjustment would reduce the number of essays to be graded, in this case by over 100 since students with scores of ten or less would not write essays, yet still improve the chances of correctly placing students in appropriate courses.

Standardized test scores can be useful to us as we try to cope with the ever-widening range of writing abilities our students come to us with, but the limitations of scores as predictors of success in writing courses and as placement tools should be recognized. Ultimately, it is how we apply the information these tests provide which determine their usefulness to us.

Notes


The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education has awarded a two-year grant to the CUNY Task Force on Writing, a CUNY-wide faculty committee, to create a National Testing Network in Writing (NTNW). NTNW will bring together test developers, administrators, and teachers in the ongoing preparation and evaluation of tests for postsecondary writers. The three project directors — Harvey Wiener, Karen Greenberg, and Richard Donovan — are currently collecting descriptions of writing assessment models and of research and development efforts, and they are planning a national conference to be held in New York City. The tentative dates are March 3-5, 1983.

Please send requests for information and descriptions of the writing tests at your institution to NTNW, Office of Academic Affairs, 535 East 80th Street, New York, N.Y. 10021.