ACTS WITH LANGUAGE: AN APPROACH TO COMPOSITION

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In "A Definition of Man" Kenneth Burke implies a warning to those of us who are concerned with writing pedagogy. Defining human beings as "symbol-using animals," he identifies one of our specific traits as the tendency to seek "perfection." There is,
he writes, "a principle of perfection implicit in the nature of symbol systems; and in keeping with his nature as symbol-using animal, man is moved by this principal." We thus, according to Burke, tend to seek the answer. Jorge Borges in "The Library of Babel" has created a fiction around the same human tendency. In his library, a human — like many of us in composition — desperately searches for the book which will vindicate for all time the acts of that individual. Borges ironically comments: "The Vindications (such a book) exist . . . but the searchers did not remember the possibility of a man’s finding this vindication, or some treacherous variation thereof, can be computed as zero." I suggest that much the same search for a single and perfect answer obtains among teachers of composition. A multiplicity of approaches to the teaching of writing is unsatisfactory. There is great pressure to find the perfect method for teaching composition, one which will in turn redeem all of our struggles. In its most pernicious form, a method (any method) becomes an end in itself, and therefore students learn methodological assumptions rather than how to create more effective acts of language. It is precisely this problem which James E. Tanner responds to in his recent "The Ethics of Literacy Training": "I will stop searching for a new technique. If there is any magic in the writing classroom it comes from engagement." While we acknowledge as teachers of composition the desire for a perfect method, we should perhaps not forget that teaching writing is engagement, involvement — two human beings involved in language, acting with language, to the end that one (or both) might become more effective in its use.

The writing approach I will describe is derived from both my classroom experience and my understanding of the nature of language. I do not suggest that this approach is "hierarchically" superior, to use the Burke term, to other approaches. It is not offered as a perfection. Instead, it is offered as another possibility among many others for teachers approaching a composition course. As a final caveat, I should add that this approach was designed for yet another of our neglected constituencies, “good” writers who want to improve.

Many composition courses include student-centered writing and the application of some mode of description to that writing, and in this sense, the pedagogy of my course is not unique. What is unique is the way these methods have been intensified and integrated by a theory of language. At the course’s center is a pair of guiding assumptions based in such a theory. One holds that students have an innate capacity to act with language; this has a corollary: that writing is a self-conscious manifestation of that capacity. The other assumption holds that students gain more control of language, become more effective in its use, when they are able to discern more of the specific rhetorical and stylistic features of prose. These assumptions I brought together by asking students to act with language and then to analyze as meaningful the features of style and rhetoric in their own writing. Such analysis deepened the student's understanding of her own capacity to act with language while at the same time it expanded her knowledge of stylistic and rhetorical features. Related to these assumptions is my conviction that writing (like other acts in language) is a meaningful human act. As such, it manifests the writer's functional understanding of the elements of the rhetorical situation and his command of the features of rhetoric and style at the time of writing. When considered this way, all student writing (all writing, for that matter) is meaningful. Error and lack of clarity reveal meaning as much as correctness and precision. Each draft, then, is a separate meaningmaking act of language. The writer's comprehension of the rhetorical elements might subsequently deepen, change, and as a result, the writer would wish to act again. However, this subsequent act need not make all and meaningless the original act. This view of language acts, which I have drawn from Kenneth Burke, has the advantage of doing away with the shadow-ideal in the mind of the instructor. Instead, writers learn to see their writing as having integrity as a meaning-making act of language. Their own writing is, then, a worthwhile subject for analytical study. Thus the analysis has the effect of confirming the integrity of the act of writing. Acting with language to make a difference and analyzing that act are, as a result, integrated and mutually reinforcing activities.

Teaching writing students stylistic and rhetorical analysis will seem, to many, controversial. This dimension of the course originated in my perception that students can’t see, are blind to, the language surface of their own prose. As Lanham, and Silverman and Torode, among many others, suggest, students view language as transparent, as not there. As long as they see language in this way, they cannot gain stylistic and rhetorical control of their own language; their writing will be a matter of luck and habit. Stylistic and rhetorical analysis gives students the tools to see — to make discriminations about — the language surface. Analytically, to see a stylistic or rhetorical feature is to acknowledge alternatives to that feature. This, in turn, puts the student in a position to see that feature as either chosen or used by habit. Put another way, a writer has not choices (that is, proceeds by habit) if he or she is not aware of alternative features. Doing this analysis thus puts the student in a position to see that his writing is the product of an act involving the selection of features by choice and habit from among alternative features. I assume that the student who has this recognition will, when she next writes, make more choices (both conscious and intuitive) and therefore use correspondingly fewer habits. If this proves true, and I believe in most cases it does, the process of the student’s writing is opened up to more choice and control. Although there is admittedly the risk of paralyzing self-consciousness in teaching students such analysis, there is perhaps a greater risk — if not condescension — in refusing to teach capable writers the rhetorical and stylistic resources of their language.
But this analysis is a dead-end if it is not integrated with writing that originates in the student’s own motives. While an assignment is still an assignment — that is, an external constraint, an imposition — some seem less so than others. I’ve best engaged the student’s own motives for acting with language when I’ve repeated throughout the semester, as many as eight times, the following assignment: Explore in an open-ended way a personal experience you can vividly remember, and do so until you feel a difference in your understanding of, and/or relationship to, that experience. Some students dealt with very small moments, such as stepping outside on a cold winter afternoon, while others chose major events, surgery they had undergone, a beating they had received from a parent. Paired with each of these autobiographical assignments was an analytic assignment which asked the student to describe prominent features — rhetorical and stylistic — which he or she used in that writing. Students concluded their analysis with speculation on the significance of the features they had noted. What meaning did these features have? Why these features instead of others? They were thus intensely reading the feature-meaning relationship in their own language. They found the meaning of features in their deeper attitudes toward the remembered experience, in the conditions surrounding the writing of the paper (i.e., busy with other work, propped with instructor), in their lack of confidence in the discourse, in their lack of self-confidence, in vaguely realized audience, and in a new comprehensive understanding of the remembered experience. The act of looking in this way at one’s own writing was more important than locating precise meaning. Almost every student expressed, at some point in the semester, amazement at the meaning they had been unaware of in their own writing. The analysis thus led to greater self-understanding as well as to deeper understanding of how language creates meaning. Students were learning to read as they learned to write and learning to write as they learned to read. These paired assignments are, I think, an internalized and personalized form of the writing and reading activity of the workshop format so widely used in writing pedagogy. Both involve acting with language and then reflexive attention to the product of that act. Indeed, this relationship between acting with, and attention to, language seems to me to be fundamental to any language learning.

Examples will clarify and make more specific how the analysis was integrated. A student had written a short autobiographical account of being wheeled into an operating room for major surgery. When she analyzed her writing she noted: “This you section seems addressed to the reader almost conspiratorially, aligning him with the ‘I’ against the ‘they’ of the hospital staff. The focus soon returns to the ‘I.’ This seems to signal not only a more personal tone, but also perhaps a self-centered feeling. Most of the sentences in this paper have ‘I’ as the subject. Could this give the sensation of the ‘I’ being so anxious that she’s totally wrapped up in herself and how things affect her? This paper is grounded almost completely in the ‘I’ pronoun — this may give a sense of helplessness, of being ‘stuck’ in the self and totally absorbed by one’s own reactions, unable to move away.” This analysis, focused on the ‘I’ pronoun, is not sophisticated. Yet the student can discriminate a prominent stylistic feature and sensitively read the meaning of that feature. As she learns to see the surface of her prose, she learns to see her own experience in a clearer way.

Here is a different analysis. The student is examining his account of a frightening storm at sea: “The use of opaque words is generally infrequent. Most of my words are simple and infor-

mal. In cases of extreme emotion, however, my use of opaque words increases, contrasting with the use of my more simple language. A good example is in the third paragraph in which my use of opaque words suddenly increases. Words such as ‘gibberish,’ ‘fragment,’ ‘verbalize,’ ‘premonition,’ and ‘offensive.’ This language is confused and mixed up, indicative of my confusion at the moment. Whereas in my last paragraph the use of opaque words is considerably lessened. I have resolved my situation. I use words such as ‘sat,’ ‘day,’ ‘life,’ and ‘water.’” This analysis of diction allows the student to see in a new way the rich and sensitive relationships between words and the experiences they render. Without an analytical tool such as bound and free morphemes, he could not make such discriminations about his own language and he would, consequently, be insensitive to the meaning implied by the selection of such words. Through such analysis the student begins to become aware of the expressive potentials of language.

Other students attempted more difficult analyses of sentences and sentence patterns. Here is one struggling with a change she has noted in her sentence patterns in her account of her first boat outing on the ocean: “The third paragraph leaves most of the alliteration behind and sentences are shorter in length. As I reflect on it now the sentences seem to illustrate the movement of the boat. The boat leaves the shore behind, and with it goes much of the nervous and negative feelings that I had about the trip. The sentences represent the hesitating steps I was taking in my mind. I never have time to make slow, meaningful responses. It’s as though I was taking notes and desperately needed to get everything down. This is incredible! The more I read the more interesting this is... I can’t swim, and I must confess that there was probably fear in my mind.” Though less precise than the preceding selections, there is in this analysis the discrimination of a language feature (i.e., the short sentences) and an insight into the meaning of that feature (i.e., how it reflected the state of her mind at that time). The analysis again leads to self-knowledge and knowledge of how writing makes meaning.

A final selection illustrates a sophisticated analysis of syntax. The student had written about a personal experience in nature; he refers to himself in the third person in the analysis:

What we see is a fluctuation of complexity with each sentence, while the overall complexity goes up. Here are the sentences broken into their structures:

sentence 1: noun-verb-prepositional phrase
sentence 2: noun-verb-direct object-prepositional phrase
sentence 3: noun-verb-direct object
sentence 4: noun-verb-3 direct objects-prepositional phrase-relative clause
sentence 5: noun-verb-direct object-relative clause

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You can easily see that it builds its complexity, yet fluctuates as it builds, until the last sentence . . . The experience and the language are at first simple ('Lying in the cool wet grass') but as the experience becomes more involved, so does the structure of the language, until the writer finally leaves the experience altogether and goes to his own emotions, so the language reverts to its simple structure.

The student has noted a pattern in his syntax, and he is relating this feature to meaning — to what it might suggest about the quality of the experience he had that afternoon. Without the analytical tools he has applied to his prose, he could not discern such qualities. By seeing such features, he gains in the ability to use them with more awareness.

As is evident from these student examples, I did not present a comprehensive program for analyzing style or rhetoric. At different times I introduced analytical tools drawn from linguistics, traditional grammar, and rudimentary stylistics (e.g., Walker Gibson’s “Model T Style Machine”; Edward P. J. Corbett, “A Method of Analyzing Prose Style with a Demonstration Analysis of Swift’s A Modest Proposal”). For rhetorical analysis I have extensively used the persona-content-implied reader triad, Burke’s concept of identification and division, and of course, Burke’s concept of structure as function. With moderate success I have tried to maintain to the students that these tools are means and not ends — not knowledge but facilities. The particular tools for discerning with greater specificity what is occurring in the language surface, and in the rhetoric it implies, are not especially important. What is important is that students be presented with some useable means for seeing their own language.

One of the most critical aspects of this approach is the manner of the instructor’s response to the student’s writing. I have observed that the instructor’s attitude toward the student’s writing often becomes, through internalization, the student’s attitude toward his own writing. The approach I suggest here would not work unless I assume that a student writer means exactly and precisely what he or she renders into language. As I read student writing, I do not posit a meaning intended, a purpose unrealized. Such shadow-ideals sap the vitality out of the student’s capacity to act with language. In effect instructor responses which reflect such shadow-ideals indicate to the student that his language has not yet meant anything. It is more enabling to the student to describe the features he has used and to suggest the meaning of those features. Doing this helps the student to realize that he can act meaningfully with language. I hope that my attitude toward the student’s writing will become his or her attitude, and furthermore, I hope that such attitudes relative to language will remain with the student far beyond the conclusion of the writing course. With such a view of the act of writing, and with some ability to analyze the products of such acts, the student can continue to learn to use language more effectively.

An extended example may illustrate how what might be taken for error is in fact what the student means. Here is a student writing autobiographically about feelings he received from his father: "I was not surprised when my father finally let loose the hatred that was pent up in his system. Nor was it astonishing that the flame that lit the fuse was of a trivial nature. Who would think that forgetting to say 'excuse me' would warrant a beating? Nevertheless, my negligence was immediately seized upon by my father, and I was ordered to go to my room. But for some reason — perhaps sheer fate — I decided to make a stand. Though I was only thirteen, I pleaded my case with a great deal of inten-

sity . . . Either my father would leave me alone or I would be beaten to a pulp. As it turned out, I was beaten to a pulp." The student and instructor set to work describing some of the prominent features of this passage. He agreed that the persona here was, to use Walker Gibson’s term, “stuffy” — e.g., “nor was it astonishing,” “warrant,” “pleaded my case,” “of a trivial nature.” He acknowledged the legal associations behind much of this dictio

n. He was interested in why he might have used, in the early part of the passage, a passive (“was seized upon by my father”) and been quick to accept blame (“my negligence”); this starkly contrasted with the more assertive use of the I’ pronoun in the conclusion of the passage — e.g., “I decided to make a stand.” “I was only . . . I pleaded . . . Either my father or I . . .” When we discussed his paper, I asked him what significance or meaning these features might have. What did they reveal of his underlying attitudes toward this painful experience? Almost immediately he saw that these features showed his sense of being a victim and his assertion against that condition. In addition, they signified both the pain of that experience and his desire to distance himself from that pain with a legalistic and slightly sententious elevation of language.

Now if I had applied a shadow-ideal to this passage, I would have gotten very different results. As I posited certain half-realized intentions, I would miss the complex and important meaning of this language. Thus I might have commented on the mixed metaphor of the opening sentences (“let loose the hatred” and “flame that lit the fuse”) and the underlying “problems” of intention and point-of-view. I might have taken the elevated diction (i.e., “astonishing,” “warrant,” “pleaded my case”) as indicative of muddy and evasive thinking. I might have taken the range of diction in this passage — that is, from “warrant” and “pleaded” to “beaten to a pulp” — as indicative of unclear intentions and/or an unclear idea of audience. The net result of such shadow-ideal reading of student papers is to take away from the student his own language and to diminish his ability to act meaningfully with words. I think it is pedagogically (if not morally) better to proceed on the assumption that students mean what they write. Doing so helps the student refine his innate ability to act usefully and rewardingly with language.

In the following passage, John Dewey responds to a William James metaphor; together they aptly sum up the concepts of pedagogy and language use which inform the approach I have outlined here:

William James aptly compared the course of a conscious experience to the alternate flights and perching of a bird. The flights and perching are intimately connected with one another; they are not so many unrelated lightings succeeded by a number of equally unrelated hoppings. Each resting place in experience is an undergoing in which is absorbed and taken home the consequences of prior doing, and, unless the doing is that of utter caprice or sheer routine, each doing carries in itself meaning that has been extracted and conserved.

The recent emphasis in writing pedagogy on the relationship between writing texts and reading texts is, in my estimation, a cognate of the dualistic nature of language use. John Lanham in Analyzing Prose states this emphasis in terms of the individual writer: "Acts of analysis, of self-introspection, alternate with acts of creation. We alternately cherish our self-consciousness and abandon it . . . The most difficult trick of all is to learn when to involve the analytical powers and when to forget them and write out whatever inside you demands to be written." Without this
focus on the writer reading his own texts, researchers have been examining the relationship between writing and the reading of other texts. This research is neatly summarized in Mariolina Salvatori's recent "Reading and Writing a Text: Correlations between Reading and Writing Patterns." Her research has indicated that "the improvement in a writer's ability to manipulate syntactic structures — their maturity as writers — is the result rather than the cause of their increased ability to engage in, and to be reflective about, the reading of highly complex texts." Alluding to George L. Dillon's Constructing Texts: Elements of a Theory of Composition and Style (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) and its "premise . . . that constructing texts embraces the activities of reader and writer, comprehension and composition," as well as to the work of Ann E. Berthoff and Andrea Lunsford, Salvatori is concerned with how to incorporate a writing-reading emphasis into a writing course: "if the two language activities are indeed related, the important question need not be 'what causes what,' but rather how to teach composition so as to benefit from the interrelationship of the two activities." The approach I have outlined here is one response to Salvatori's question; surely there will be others.

I have, of course, veered dangerously close to another "perfection," and this one like all others should be viewed with great skepticism. The Borges and Burke reminders that opened this essay apply no less to me. To center one's professional commitment in an approach, a pedagogy, is to withdraw energy and commitment from what is more important: authentic engagement between teacher and student. Rather than striving for the perfection of a particular method, I hope those of us who teach writing will instead affirm our deepest loyalties to the students who wish to use language, as we all do, more effectively and to more human ends.

Notes

3 College English 44 (1982), 24.
4 Language as Symbolic Action, pp. 15-16.
5 The term act is derived from Burke, who opposes act and motion: A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 3-49, 252-260. I understand that one acts on a division to bring about a new order within the agent or his setting; thus to act is to make a difference.

8 Art at Experience (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), pp. 48, 46, 56.
9 Analyzing Prose, pp. 10, 11.

**AGAINST LANGUAGE READERS**

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Language readers are a kind of thematic or topical reader (the topic is the English language) designed for a relatively uncommon version of freshman composition which is less a writing course than it is an introduction to sociolinguistics. Six language readers are on the market, most in their second or third edition: Exploring Language (hereafter EL), Language Awareness (LA), Language Power (LP), Reading and Writing About Language (RWL), Speaking of Words (SW), and Words and the Writer (WW). At least one more is now planned by a textbook publisher. Its immense suggests that this version of freshman composition will spread, even though it runs directly contrary to the best contemporary theories of writing pedagogy — and by the best I mean the process-centered pedagogies which, taken together, constitute what James A. Berlin terms the New or Epistemic Rhetoric ("Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories," College English, 44 [1982], 765-777).

I am against language readers in their existing form for two reasons. First, their selections impart a negative attitude toward language which certainly cannot enhance and in fact impair the student's writing process. They assume an anti-epistemic rhetoric, implying that language constrains our thinking more than it aids it. Process rhetorics, by contrast, view rhetoric as epistemic, as a means of arriving at truth and hold that "truth is impossible without language since it is language that embodies and generates truth" (Berlin, pp. 773-4). Whereas the process approaches suggest that language and thought work synergistically, these language readers insinuate that language subverts thought.

Second, language readers provide very poor writing models for the student to analyze and emulate. The majority of their selections are journalistic in style, haphazard in organization, and/or satirical in tone. Inadequate as exposition, they don't describe the uses of language so much as debunk it misuses. With the partial exception of Words and the Writer, these language readers are not formulary rhetorics. Their selections do not exemplify the rhetorical purposes, strategies, techniques, or forms that the freshman writer is expected to practice. Like too many other thematic readers, they are meant only to solve the supposed problem of what to write about in a course whose primary content is a process.

Language readers share the same origin: basically, all are elementary introductions to General Semantics, a now moribund school of linguistics founded by the Polish thinker Alfred Korzybski. The central premise of General Semantics is that language is not isomorphic with reality; that is, the structures of language and reality are not identical or coextensive. Korzybski expressed this premise in a famous analogy, "The man is not the territory," in which language is the map and reality the territory.

Several theorems derive from this initial postulate. First, language constrains our knowledge and perception of reality; in terms of the analogy, our exploration of the territory is limited by the map. Second, different languages constrain the knowledge of reality in different ways. Thus, a speaker of Kiowa or Mandarin or Basque perceives reality differently than does a speaker of English. (This theorem is popularly known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.) Third, each language depicts reality incompletely and thus inadequately and even misleadingly. No map can contain every detail of the territory; more features
always remain to be mapped. This theorem reveals that Korzybski's dictum is not a neutral assertion but a warning that language by its nature constrains perception and knowledge. And the theorem trails a nasty corollary pertinent to composition theory: rhetoric is not epistemic, writing is not a way of knowing. General semioticians don't stress the usefulness of mapping the territory but the inherent limitations of the map. Edward Sapir summed up their distrust: "And the word, as we know, is not only a key; it may also be a fetter" (RWL, p. 224). I'm sure most composition instructors would like to see those metaphors reversed.

From Korzybski's viewpoint, the greatest sin is the "insane" confusion of language and reality, *verba et re*, or what his popularizer Stuart Chase calls "semantic aphasia." General semioticians are fascinated by instances of language use which obscure the nature of the referents — such as euphemisms, cliches, and propaganda. At the simplest level the general semioticians are concerned that some people react to taboo words such as "shit" much as they would to the thing itself — as though, to adopt Suzanne Langer's distinction (SW), the word were not a symbol of the thing but a sign of the thing's actual immanence. At a more complex level, they are concerned that stereotypic words such as "nigger" or the generic "he" make their users think as racists or sexists.

The purposes of the language readers, as expressed in their prefaces, betray the suspicion of language typical of General Semantics. According to its editors, *Language Power* is designed to develop the following skills:

1. awareness of levels of usage and the importance of word choice;
2. recognition and use of rhetorical techniques for emphasis;
3. a critical eye and ear for pompous writing;
4. recognition and avoidance of cliches and language that stereotypes; and
5. discrimination between doubletalk and plain talk, between propaganda and reality.

Three of the five focus on deceptive language. *Exploring Language* has similar goals: it attempts to impart "knowledge of how language works, how it reconstructs the real world for us, how it can be used to lead, mislead, and manipulate us." The climactic order indicates the collection's emphasis — the language of delusion and deceit.

The chapter titles show that the language readers derive their topics from the concerns of General Semantics. *Speaking of Words*, for example, moves from Chapter 2, "How Language Shapes Our Thoughts and Attitudes," a relatively neutral exposition of the basic tenets of General Semantics, to the decidedly negative Chapters 3, 4, and 5: "How Language Reinforces Racial, Ethnic, and Sexual Discrimination," "The Misuse of Language," and "The Analysis of Propaganda." Similarly, in *Exploring Language* the relatively unbiased chapter "Perspectives on Language" is succeeded by "Language and Politics" (on propaganda), "Language and Sexism," "Language and Prejudice," "Language and Advertising" (propaganda, again), "Language Taboos" (how we degrade and conceal reality), and "Flabby Language" (cliches and jargon). All these chapters stress how language can adversely influence one's thinking, a lesson which, though true, nee's no emphasis in an introductory composition course.

Because they concentrate on deceptive uses of language, language readers are also implicitly anti-literary. They teach students how to distrust language, but not how to delight in it; how to search it for falsehoods, but not for felicities. Hence their disregard of topics such as verbal irony, which seems at least as distinguishing as euphemism. Irony exemplifies the whole range of nonliteral — including literary — language use which General Semantics is ill-equipped to deal with. Yet it is those cases, including the literary aspect of language which is primarily literary, that the introductory English course should concentrate on.

The views of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell illustrate the distrust of language endemic to the anthologies. Both men were active in the early forties, when the tenets of General Semantics were in the air, and both were serious satirists whose most popular works are dystopias (Brave New World, Animal Farm, 1984). Both view language primarily as a potent instrument of thought control. In a selection from his *Collected Essays* (RWL), Huxley writes, "Now language is, among other things, a device which men use for suppressing and distorting the truth.” And in the famous and far too widely anthologized essay "Politics and the English Language" (LA, LP, EL, WW), Orwell concurs: "But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.” Orwell views language as a necessary evil, whose use is to be avoided or at least postponed: "Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations." He depicts writing as a morally and intellectually dangerous endeavor: since each word or phrase may be deceptive or delusory, the writer constantly imperils his integrity as she chooses the language with which to convey her convictions. According to Orwell, one is less likely to discover or invent one's meaning as one writes than to betray or subvert it.

The danger of these General Semantics primers is not that their suspicion of language is unfounded — for language can indeed deceive and delude — but it is only half the truth, and precisely the wrong half to stress in an introductory writing course where students need most of all to gain facility and confidence in the process of discovering what they think by writing. A negative view of language could easily cripple one's ability to write, and we should hardly be teaching it to our students, who need to understand writing not as a way of distorting their thoughts, but, in Mina Shaughnessy's words, as "a technology for holding vast and complex units of thoughts together" (Errors and Expectations [New York: Oxford, 1977], p. 233). We should present writing as a scaffolding for thought, not as a mold.

Language readers also offer prose models likely to mislead the student writer. They are decidedly not the standard college formularies: except in *Words and the Writer*, which is both rhetorically and topically organized, one will look in vain for an example of comparison and contrast. Rather than examples of the purposes, strategies, and forms that freshman students need to study and imitate, most of the selections are journalistic satires on the misuses and misusers of language.

These journalistic selections have all or most of the following characteristics: they are short, sometimes only two or three pages of undeveloped paragraphs that frequently lack topic sentences. They are "bottom-up" or, to borrow a term from Linda S. Flower and John R. Hayes, "writer-based" in structure, typically beginning with several examples before stating a thesis. Sometimes they never make a real point, becoming catalogues of entertaining trivia about a language topic. Consider the short, conversational sentences which open "Weasel Words," the most popular selection (it appears in all six readers):

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consider for a moment the kind of winning personality he must have. I mean, what kind of guy would get his jollies eating rats and mice? Would you invite him to a party? Take him home to meet your mother?

Such journalistic practices are inadequate models for college writers attempting to master mature exposition.

Most often the selections originate in popular periodicals, Language Awareness — to take one of the lesser offenders among the six — has five selections from The New York Times, two from Reader's Digest, two from Mad, and one each from Good Housekeeping, Sports Illustrated, Time, VF Magazine, Playboy, The New Yorker, and Saturday Review. A small minority have their origins in professional journals: one each from American Scholar, The Journal of Popular Culture, Today's Education, and even College English. LA also contains several selections by political columnists and social commentators turned pop grammarians, such as Russell Baker, H. L. Mencken, Edwin Newman, William Raspberry, and William Safire. But even the selections written by academics can show many of the journalistic tendencies: Richard Gambino's "Through the Dark, Glassily," Don L. F. Nilsen and Alleen Pace Nilsen's "Language Play," and Neil Postman's "Euphemisms."

Probably the most salient feature of the selections is their exhaustive catalogues of instances of language abuse, lists which frequently go beyond the length justified by pedagogical purposes or even entertainment value. Their length evidences instead the satirist's obsessive fascination with the object of satire, a fascination which does not suggest revulsion so much as a desire to participate. To a surprising extent the language readers are not collections of essays at all, but of satires masquerading as exposition.

In particular, many of the selections exemplify a device typical of Menippean satire: overwhelming "pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon" (Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957], p. 310). Otto Friedrich piles example upon example in the opening paragraph of "A Vivacious Blonde Was Fatally Shot Today or How to Read a Tabloid" (LA):

There is a joke among newspapermen that if a woman is pretty, she is called "beautiful"; if she is plain, she is called "attractive"; and if she is hideous, she is called "vivacious." Half the joke is the exaggeration; the other half is that this is no exaggeration at all. In describing a woman involved in a murder or a robbery or a divorce case, the same technique is generally applied to every aspect of her appearance. If she is tall, she is "statuesque." If she is short, the word is "petite." Thin women are "slender," while fat ones are "curvaceous." Physical appearance is not so important in a man, and the emphasis shifts to financial appearance. "Socially prominent" is a popular description of any man who is murdered by his wife. Bookies and gigolos may be identified as "sportsmen." And one connoisseur has defined "socialite" as "a tabloid term meaning human being."

And this list is only the first in Friedrich's satire.

Another typical Menippean strategy, a variation on listmaking, is to juxtapose examples of many different jargons so that each makes the others appear ridiculous by contrast. What results is an anthology of parodies held together by the thinnest of expository or narrative threads. Russell Baker's "Little Miss Muffet" (LA), for instance, presents "a conference of thinkers" — a sociologist, a militarist, a book reviewer, an editorial writer, a psychiatrist, and a student demonstrator — who successively analyze the story of little Miss Muffet, each employing a distinct jargon. Here is a slice from the psychiatrist's version:

**Psychiatrist:** Little Miss Muffet is, course [sic] neither little nor a miss. These are obviously the self she has created in her own fantasies to escape the reality that she is a gross divorcée whose superego makes it impossible for her to sustain a normal relationship with any man, symbolized by the spider, who, of course, has no existence outside her fantasies. Little Miss Muffet may, in fact, be a man with deeply repressed Oedipal impulses . . .

The thinkers' inflated theorizing is punctuated when the final speaker, a child, suggests that the story is simply "about a little girl who gets scared by a spider."

Such commonsense, plain English deflations — travesties, in effect — also typify Menippean satire. Stuart Chase uses travestic translation to debunk instances of gobbledygook:

An office manager sent this memo to his chief:

Verbal contact with Mr. Blank regarding the attached notification of promotion has elicited the attached representation intimating that he prefers to decline the assignment.

Seems Mr. Blank didn't want the job.

In its simplest form this pattern of alternating inflated with deflated language yields a glossary in which plain English definitions demystify jargon terms. Dan Carlin's "The Traveler's Guide to Hash-House Greek" (LA) exemplifies this extreme (a typical entry: "Adam and Eve on a raft Two poached eggs on toast").

All these Menippean strategies have the same goal: to grant the reader a parodic perspective from which the language varieties of their targets will appear ludicrous. Our students need to acquire such a perspective on inflated and inappropriate language, but they cannot do so until they have gained some literary sophistication. Freshman students usually lack the background necessary to distinguish targets of satire such as doublespeak and clichés from perfectly acceptable mature prose. For them, the test of doublespeak is not whether a passage is deceptive but whether it is difficult for them to read. And by this test most of the better writers collected in the language readers — Orwell and Huxley, for instance — seem masters of obscurity. Students fail similarly when they try to identify other instances of language misuse. The lesson to be gleaned from their failure is clear: they need to learn how to use language before they can really comprehend — and ridicule — its misuses. These readers push too much satire on the students too soon in their development as readers and writers.

Neither the content nor the rhetoric of current language readers is appropriate to English 101. But a language reader could be devised which would avoid fundamental faults. It would stress the positive — including literary and playful — uses of language. It would help students scrutinize language with pleasure as well as suspicion so that they would rely on it rather than avoid it. It would not be moralistic, scourging deceptive writers and speakers on the one hand and satirizing ineffective ones on the other. It would stress the epistemic value of language, writing as a way of knowing. It would be a rhetorical reader as well as a thematic one: its selections — drawn from across the curriculum, since almost all disciplines treat language — would display as well as describe the many motives of language use and exemplify the rhetorical strategies and structures (all of which have their own heuristic force) explained by the accompanying full rhetoric.
Such a language reader would serve English 101 in all its functions: as a service course in composition required by and responsive to the rest of the university; as the central course of the humanities curriculum; and as the introductory English course, a prerequisite (and, hopefully, an enticement) to more advanced courses in both writing and literature. The language readers we have now fall far short of this ideal and in some ways oppose it.

Notes


4 On the differences between “Writer-Based” and “Reader-Based” prose, see Linda S. Flower and John R. Hayes, “Problem-Solving Strategies and the Writing Process,” College English, 39 (1977), 449-61.

TEACHING AS RHETORICAL SITUATION

Jeffrey Sommers
Miami University, Middletown

William Wordsworth’s poems “Resolution and Independence” (henceforth called “Resolution”) and “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798” (henceforth mercifully called “Tintern Abbey”) both deal with man and Nature. There is a basic difference between the two, however. The content of each, though similar, is treated differently. A cursory glance at both reveals that one is written in stanzas and the other is not. Both use personification and imagery. The two poems have a similar foundation but each takes off in its own direction.

—excerpt from freshman composition paper

“Andrea del Sarto” is Browning at his best. The poignant drama, the realism, the characterization and plot are fascinating and stimulating. Browning at his best is a synonym for enjoyable poetry.

—excerpt from freshman composition paper

As teachers of English we have all read passages like the ones quoted above. I present them then not a fodder for some point I wish to make about the vacuousness of our current crop of students; I present them not even as curios from 1967. Instead I offer them as reminders to myself of the way I wrote as a freshman. I composed these precious passages—imagine patronizing Wordsworth and trivializing Browning during the same sixteen-week span—long ago when I was but an acorn rather than the great oak I have become. Lord knows what the graduate teaching assistant thought of me; he was kind enough to let these passages slide by without comment. But I offer these excerpts not as a means to jaunt down memory lane into the warm mists of nostalgia. Indeed, I searched for them in a file drawer or two for the better part of an evening because I felt they would explain quite a bit about why I teach the way I do, or rather about why I try to teach the way I do.

Not long ago at a conference on college English teachers, I heard the opinion that much of the poor teaching still to be found in the English classroom was the result of English teachers too vividly remembering their student days and too avidly emulating the teachers of their youth, teachers who were not always particularly effective in the first place. The group, gathered to discuss the problems of applying recent theory in reading and composing to pedagogy, met this idea with a murmur of assent. And there is a certain amount of logic in the argument: because we feel lost in the writing classroom, we bewildered teachers, especially as novices, fall back on the familiar, which in this instance is the instructor who stood in front of our own freshman English classroom, occasionally inspiring us but more often alternately boring and hectoring us. In a perversion of Santayana’s famous dictum, we who remember the past are condemned to repeat it anyway, or so the argument runs.

This suggestion troubled me as I listened to it, and it continues to trouble me now. I sought an analogy to clarify the point being made at the conference and found one in the repetitive pattern of child abuse which sociologists tell us is cyclical: the abused child (read “student”) grows up all too often to become an abusive parent (read “teacher”), presumably training the next generation of child abusers (read “the class of ’86”). But child

Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English

Principal consultants for the 1984 Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English to be held in Laramie June 25-29, are Cleanth Brooks, Yale University; Richard Ohmann, Wesleyan University; and Walter Ong, St. Louis University. People wishing to attend the Conference, or wishing to participate in panels, workshop, or address/discussion sessions should write to: Michael Leonard, Conference Director, Department of English, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming 82071. (Deadline for submissions is April 25, 1984.)
abusers are thankfully a minority and most of us were not victims of abusive parents, yet we are all, if we trust our paranoid recollections of childhood, "victims" of our parents in some ways, usually minor. Regardless of the many wonderful things our parents have done for us, we do remember and carry our grudges, usually followed by the proviso, "I won't treat my child that way."

It is this latter form of the analogy that seems applicable to the issue of how we remember our student days. I would argue that instructors who mimic the ineffective teachers who taught them suffer not from too inaccurate but rather from too defective a memory of those days. The solution to the problem of poor teaching is not for us to forget our student experiences—as my colleague was suggesting at the conference—but rather to remember them clearly, not to remember our teachers, but to remember ourselves as students, to remember not so that we can perpetuate the cycle of bad teaching but to remember so that we can say "I won't do that to my students."

In order to be able to make such a vow and keep it, one must make the effort to recall what it was like to be a college student. It was this effort that led me to that file drawer and to the excerpts with which I began. Before I criticize my own students, I feel an obligation to recollect in tranquillity what I myself was like as a student. That recollection for me has been a sobering experience.

No one has any respect for a "grade gruber"; we mock them among ourselves in the halls and in the faculty lounges. Yet I was one, at least at times. Even worse were the occasions when I magnanimously withheld my criticism of a particular grade as if to pity the poor dim-witted instructor who had failed to see the true merit of my work. Two or three years ago I found myself in conference with a member of my freshman composition class. This woman—poised, self-consciously attractive, well-groomed in what we think of as the "prep" style—had argued with me over her grades earlier in the semester. I had graded most of her work as "B" quality; she disagreed. During this second conference, however, it became apparent to me rather quickly that although she still disagreed with me, breeding had won out over impulse, and she would not say a word about her grades. We discussed her recent compositions, their strengths and weaknesses, and she managed all the while to keep silent about her grades, creating the feel of a regal interview—the patronizing aristocrat condescending to the boorish or well-intentioned tutor. The memory of that conference sticks, but it also reminds me of condescending comments I had made myself to friends and classmates a decade earlier about the misguided grading of my own boorish instructors.

Oh, how often I cut a class to study for a test or to read an assignment or—let me really be honest about it—to get an extra forty-five minutes sleep, to loll in the sunshine, to see my girlfriend. One scheme I devised to muffle my nagging whispers of guilt was "constructive curbing," a plan which decreed that I would spend an equivalent amount of time studying the material for the class I had cut. This policy, needless to say, never lasted more than a day. I cannot count the number of jelly doughnuts I ate on the sly in the rear of lecture halls or the days when I read the sports page in those same halls. I am less than proud to say that Vietnam passed me right by. Of course, the draft was very real and my friends and I spent an inordinate amount of time scurrying about searching for ways to stay clear of the armed forces; but on the night of the first draft lottery, it was our girlfriends who stayed home and watched the televised event, not us. We were at the opening game of the university basketball season. Now I see newsreel footage of the war, but I did not see the war then—our source of news was the Smothers Brothers' TV show. We subscribed to Sports Illustrated, not to Time. No one read the newspaper's front page. Sure, we heard about the protests and the student strikes, but that was dismissed as the "other guys." I never did make it to any protests, although my roommate occasionally went. He and some of his cronies would go to a sit-in or speech and conduct "fishing expeditions" as they called them, a polite phrase which meant they would float through the packed in crowd sinking their hooks into attractive girls in the usual places, the size of the crowd granting them immunity. One of my current colleagues describes his university days by saying he was distinctly "glandular" for most of four years. So what if our students do not know who the Ayatollah Khomeini and Philip Habib are (as mine have not in some numbers)? They are as glandular now as we were then. That was the class of '71 at all those pep rallies, frat parties, pizza joints, and beer blasts, wasn't it?

I do not offer any excuse for our current students, for, by and large, they do seem even less informed than I was, or at least markedly less widely read. My point, however, is that I recognize in them the me of 1967-1971. And I assume that they suffer a fool in front of the classroom with as poor grace as I did. We who teach composition stress the need to write to an audience, the need to anticipate the needs of the reader as we write, if we hope to communicate. This, it strikes me, is the very soul of rhetoric: communicating to an audience. By extension, then, just as we must always be aware of how our written messages will come across to our readers, so we must be equally aware of how our teaching message comes across to our students. This awareness of audience in the classroom comes about by remembering to put ourselves in the shoes of our students. Those Fry boots and toppers that they wear are merely our own metamorphosed penny loafers and desert boots.

There is a certain amount of pie-in-the-sky, or worse, 60's-sounding rhetoric here. But I still think the essence of the message is valid. I cannot teach these students effectively unless I remember what it was like to be taught. The implications for my teaching have been significant.

I have learned that there is no excuse for harassment of students; the obvious form of harassment (sexual) aside, the less obvious forms also need to be avoided. Being humiliated in class by the sharp tongue of a verbally adept pedagogue ("Well, we haven't heard from you in all of ten seconds, Mr. Smith"), being skrewed in writing in a comment appended to an assignment ("You have cast about as much light on this subject as does the sun on a cloudy day"), receiving back a composition which drips in blood-red ink from top to bottom constitute harassment of an equally important sort. The humane instructor who would never sexually harass a student far too frequently thinks nothing of slicing open the student's jugular with a sharpened pen or tongue.

A while back I had a student bring her paper to me to talk over its problems as literary analysis, a paper which for the most part had been competent, as my grade and comments, I thought, indicated. At one point, however, she casually gestured at my almost indecipherable scrawl in the margin and noted, without rancor, that this was one part of the paper I had evidently not appreciated. I was surprised since I had written "Good" next to the paragraph, so I asked for clarification. She explained that she had assumed I thought very little of her argument since I had written "Garb" in the margin, a comment she interpreted to mean "Garbage." This story is somewhat amus-
ing, but it has serious implications. That this student assumed an English teacher would curtly dismiss her work with an epiphet, a truncated one at that, indicated something rather alarming about her expectations, presumably based on experience, of what English teachers say to their students. She was not angry nor even upset; this, it was clear, was typical English teacher behavior. If she was right, and I suspect a disturbing amount of validity in her assumption, then the situation needs to be changed. I don’t wish to insult my students until they become inured to my insults; I now simply try not to insult them at all.

Too often my faulty memory has allowed me to forget that as a student I had a life outside the college classroom, off campus, in the “real” world. So too do my students now. These students have lives with job responsibilities, family responsibilities, even responsibilities in other courses. I can’t say that I ever consciously reduce an assignment for fear that it will take up too much time for the students to complete, but I do remain conscious of what it is reasonable to ask from students in a particular course at a specific level. And I do check the calendar to take into account holidays, breaks, vacations—I remember geology field trips deliberately scheduled year after year to coincide with home football games. Not that the calendar alone ever determines the schedule of assignments I give my students, for there are times when the work must take precedence over all else, but I never make assignments without at least first consulting the calendar. I will never again assign The Mill on the Floss to be read during midterm week.

I find it amusing at the end of the film version of The Paper Chase when the young law student, Hart, finds himself alone on the elevator with the redoubtable Professor Kingsfield and takes the opportunity to heap praise on the great man, only to find the smiling curmudgeon asking him, for the umpteenth time, “What’s your name?” I laugh at the truth of the situation, but I wouldn’t laugh if I were Hart. In fact, I know I did not laugh when I was Hart. Years ago when I first began teaching, I shared an office with an incredibly ingratiating fellow, the sort who would tell a student, grinning at him all the while, “Now look, we both know this paper of yours is horse manure” and have the student agree with a sheepish smile. These little folksy conversations always began and ended, however, with the same question: “What’s your name, son (or honey)?” I think now that I owe my students enough respect to make the effort to remember who they are—Kingsfield tried, my office mate did not—and treat them civilly. Faculty complaints about students who never show up for appointed conferences are legion, but I have little doubt now about what my students must have said about me when I skipped office hours without announcing that I would be doing so. I was anything but understanding when, as a graduate student, my two-hour bus ride to meet with a member of my dissertation committee was capped by his secretary informing me that he was out of town that day.

And finally, perhaps most importantly, there is my strongest memory: of the power of the teacher. I admit to a certain admiration for my former teachers gained in retrospect when as a neophyte instructor I found myself always arriving ten minutes early for class. I would stand around, fiddling with my notes, looking out the window, trying to avoid the stares of my students until the bell rang starting class. That is when memories would flood back of sitting in a full classroom with the clock’s hands pointing at the hour when the door would suddenly fly open, admitting the professor who majestically stalked to his podium. But with only a bit more concentration I remember how I squirmed as that same professor, after having made a Loretta Young entrance, would make a Man Who Came to Dinner exit: late. Making us wait for class to begin and keeping us late at the end were clearly ways for the teacher to demonstrate where the power resided in our classroom.

Even more powerful was the teacher’s ultimate weapon, the semester grade, which more than once seemed poised to bludgeon me. I and my fellow lab sufferers were angered by the preferential treatment afforded our female classmate once she began dating our geology lab instructor two weeks into the semester. The “A” she received in the course seemed tainted to me, but it nevertheless remains an “A” to this day. I was angered at the separate set of rules I saw being applied to varsity footballers and basketballers in my classes. And I am sure my classmates were not any too pleased the time I walked out of an exam (because of some rather vague articulated personal problems) and received permission to take a make-up, presumably because I was among the more talented students in that class. Different rules for the attractive and the unattractive, for the athletic and the clumsy, for the good students and the bad, rules which seem to have been thought up on the spur of the moment, or which seem to have changed during the five-minute break in a two-hour class, are rules which only come about when teachers forget the proper uses of their power. A former president said a few years ago that life was not always fair; but life in our classrooms ought to be, at least to the greatest extent possible.

There is a humorous moment in John Updike’s “Tomorrow and Tomorrow and So Forth” when Mark Prosser, the high school English teacher who is the story’s protagonist, decides the time is ripe to “relate” to his students. Prosser, Updike tells us, adopts his “human among human” pose at that point. I think my humble trip down memory lane has taught me that this “human among human” pose can quickly make a teacher into a mere poser. I am myself, after all, quite human and once I have seen clearly through my own nostalgic mists, I perceive that my students must be likewise. When I stand before my classes to teach them, I must be aware, we must all be aware, of the tomorrow and tomorrows to come; what we are doing is intended to have implications beyond the mere moment. But those implications are contingent upon reaching across the inevitable barriers between teacher and student, for what hope is there of achieving our aims without touching our audience? I simply do not believe any longer that I can communicate with students unless I remember that I am in a rhetorical situation, one which requires careful analysis of audience. I think my freshman comp T.A. must have felt the same way because he did not heap scorn—neither in writing nor in class—on my sophomoric freshman papers on Wordsworth and Browning. Instead he focused on what I was trying to do in the rest of those papers, finding a few barbarities but more than a few felicities of thought and phrase. His humaneness to me, his cognizance of my needs as an audience for his instruction, reached me. The future implications in that rhetorical situation have turned out to be this career and more specifically this essay, but these are almost incidental consequences. What matters is that by treating me the way a student has the right to be treated, that instructor furthered my education by allowing me to grow. As a teacher I grew the day I began to learn that I too owe my students the same opportunities for growth. I become more strongly convinced the longer I teach that if I am going to help in any way today’s acorns to become the great oaks of tomorrow, I must remember what it was like being an acorn myself amidst a towering forest.
SELF AND AUDIENCE IN COMPOSITION

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In 1963, in “The Rhetorical Stance,” Wayne Booth insisted that a writer could not be successful until he had found, among other things, “a definition of his audience.” 1 Booth’s article has proved immensely popular, but if Stephen and Susan Judy are to be believed, even to this day, “texts that purport to teach composition give lip service” 2 to the question of audience. In their extremely useful book, An Introduction to the Teaching of Writing, Judy and Judy try to remedy this deficiency by devoting a whole chapter to an enumeration of a number of ways to supply audiences for student writers. As a list of opportunities and strategies for teachers, the chapter is very useful, but it does not try to define the relationship between writer and audience except in terms of a common interest in subject matter. Hence the question they suggest for beginning writers:

Given what you know about this audience, what do you have to tell it? What special skills, knowledge, or experience might you share? (p. 122)

But determining or discovering a shared interest is only one of the three requirements Booth thinks is necessary for a proper rhetorical stance. One must also, according to Booth, discover a sense of self (one’s “implied character” as a writer) and the “available arguments about the subject itself” (p. 111). What follows is an attempt to balance Judy and Judy’s emphasis on subject matter with a consideration of the other elements involved in a successful engagement with an audience. Since I believe Booth’s “available arguments” become clear only when the self and audience are properly perceived (or created, as I will argue), my concern will be with the importance to successful discourse of these two entities and of sustaining them once they have been posited in the test.

Any human utterance conveys a sense of ethos or self. Booth, for example, in “The Rhetorical Stance,” found a student who did not have the proper stance to be “pretentious.” Since Booth never defines what would be a “proper” sense of self (though he does attack both a show-off stance which conceals an absence of subject matter and an overweening desire to cater to audience preconceptions) presumably he thinks self will flow automatically from the writer’s sense of the audience-to-be-persuaded and the subject matter. Booth is so committed to the notion that persuasion which ingratiates without pandering should be the chosen form of discourse that he overlooks Polonius’ counter-claim that one should to his own self be true. Booth’s student, after all, may have been a genuinely pretentious individual. Any reader’s recognition of such pretentiousness is, of course, painful, since pretention involves disdain or contempt for a writer’s audience. But such pretentious selves do exist.

Richard Lanham is far more helpful on the subject. Advice to subordinate one’s self to audience or occasion co-exists with Polonius-like admonishments because our culture entertains two very contradictory notions of self:

Two conceptions of the self have prevailed in the West from the time of the Greeks onward. One we might call the central self, or the soul. To this, the sincerity exhortations are directed. The second depicts the social dramatic, role-playing self, man as actor not soul. This dramatic self derives its existence from the society surrounding it.Obviously, since communication is a social occasion, it is our social self which is operative in prose—we seek or choose a role to present to the public. In adulthood both the “soul” and the range of roles a particular individual can adopt are fairly set; but, following Erik Erikson, Lanham sees adolescence as “a time of role-experiment”:

A single self has not yet cohered. In this time of identity crisis, first one role is played, then another. Finally a comfortable dramatic creation falls together into a core self. Around this, the dramatic variations continue to play throughout life. Thus the adolescent speaks with literal accuracy of going to college to “find himself.” (p. 116)

If “role-experiment” distinguishes adolescence, then Lanham’s prescription for finding one’s self seems the only possible one: “The adolescent stylist should be encouraged to impersonate other people, not ‘be himself’” (p. 116). How else can he find the voices or roles which correspond to his personal self, which accomplish social function without violating his fundamental integrity?

Thus a writing class should not only search for audience or subject matter but also for acceptable roles. Indeed, since, as Lanham points out, “written utterance strives for imposture” (p. 118), it is only after we have discovered a particular suitable imposture that we can really describe our subject matter or, more importantly, its effect on an audience. For content, as it is perceived by an audience, is really the result of an interaction of self and subject. One has only to glance at the history of prose to see the obviousness of this observation. Had Carlyle’s fervor been applied to the decline of the Roman Empire and Gibbon’s cool disdainful irony to the French Revolution, our perception of those two “contents” would be profoundly altered. Arnold on culture, Russell on the history of philosophy, Orwell on political language, Loren Eiseley on evolution—can anyone maintain that these writers are merely projecting subject matter unaffected by a complex and well-defined self?

Thus a writer actively participates in her choice of role and that chosen role is active in selecting and shaping her subject matter. But active involvement does not end here, for—as Walter Ong has advised us in the title of his extremely significant article—“The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction.” Instead of perceiving the audience as a fixed amalgam of tastes and interests to which she must adapt, a writer should perceive the audience as a malleable mass capable of shaping itself into any number of roles. In Ong’s terms, it is the obligation of the writer to devise a proper role for the audience to play and to signal her choice of role to that audience. “Let Us Pray” as an introduction to discourse does not call upon us to perform the same role as “Are there any corrections to the minutes?”

Booth comments on the problems of catering to an audience whose prejudices have already been determined by a pollster. But even if one were intent upon doing so—as in devising a situation comedy for television—there would still be the necessity of “creating” that audience, of signalling that it is to behave as if in a world where the rules of comedy apply. A writer’s awareness that he can create his own audience, that he does not simply have to accept it as a bundle of unmoveable prejudices can result in powerfully persuasive prose. For example, inMemphis during the early sixties when the schools were being integrated, a local influential and liberal attorney wrote the following public statement:
What is done in Little Rock and Oxford is a blot upon us all, but what we can do here can stand as a beacon throughout the South and indeed the world as an example of how these problems may be solved by men with courage. This is not a statement sanctioned by “audience-research.” (If one wants to see what “audience-research” was doing, simply recall the absence of black actors in either TV commercials or series at that time.) But in this statement, a public heavily composed of segregationists is asked to assume the role of statesmen (men of courage) and to stand with their black brothers in opposition to violence in Little Rock and at the University of Mississippi and to look for solutions that the whole world would find admirable. (The context would make clear that blacks are consciously included under the term “men”—an inclusion one could not take for granted in the South at this time.) Doubtless, many who read this will find it easy to reject the role being thrust upon them, to refuse, in Ong’s term, to fictionalize themselves. Control is not perfect. Nevertheless, as too rarely happened in the South, an audience was given the opportunity to define itself as in terms other than those of racial bigotry. How many responded we will never know, but only the most cynical would doubt that some were allowed to discover their better selves.

From the same period and region an even more impressive example of audience creation exists. Martin Luther King’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail” is a superb example of a sustained effort at audience creation. Written while King was in jail for conducting non-violent protests in Birmingham, the letter is addressed to a group of Christian and Jewish clergymen who had questioned in a public statement the timeliness and wisdom of his actions and referred to him as an “outsider.” From the opening “My Dear Fellow Clergymen” to the conclusion, King forces his auditors to see themselves as clergymen—clergymen whose temporizing attitudes towards racial injustice are contrary to the Judeo-Christian tradition, their American heritage, and any sense of fundamental fair play.

By being temperate and almost dispassionate himself, King helps to assure that his audience will view themselves in the same terms and will then have to employ those same qualities to find their own judgments woefully lacking. By making them better than their collective statements would suggest they are, he also forces them into a harsher judgment of themselves than they doubtless would otherwise make.

And in the penultimate paragraph of the “Letter,” as King once again strives to underline his desire for temperance in discourse, he nevertheless reminds his audience that he would be guilty of offending not them but God if that temperance got in the way of truth:

If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me. (p. 570)

King has, in effect, trapped an audience in a role they would rather not have played, forcing them to see that, by their own principles, it is not he who stands condemned but their own callous indifference to brotherhood.

But having determined the nature of the self and of the audience, the writer must constantly reinforce these “fictions” in his text. Otherwise, since reading takes place in time, readers can easily forget both the role of the writer and of themselves. The best theoretical explanation of the need to control the reader’s response and of the ways one goes about doing it seems to me to be Morse Peckham’s Explanation and Power: The Control of Human Behavior. Peckham begins with the radical assumption that meaning is not immanent in language itself, that any utterance can, under the right (or wrong) circumstances generate any number of responses. Meaning, then, has to be defined as any response to an utterance. And the writer’s task, therefore, is to control the behavior of the audience so as to elicit the proper responses.

Without proper control, the audience’s response will be underdetermined (to use Peckham’s term). That is, the audience will not be able to determine what its proper role should be. Underdetermination can occur for a number of reasons. For example, there can be an insufficient number of signals from the writer that the sentences—even successive sentences—in her discourse are connected. In the absence of any clear signals, the reader cannot be sure that the writer is not rambling or has not changed her focus. Hence the importance of transitions (which are often treated simply as esthetic niceties of a good “style” rather than as crucial signals which allow the social role of the reader to be filled), and hence also Peckham’s insistence on the importance of repetition in discourse—especially the repetition of nouns and pronouns. Thus in “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” King repeatedly refers to “Birmingham,” a reminder that he is still talking about local conditions, still interested in grounding his more abstract moral arguments in the here and now of his audience’s hometown.

Once readers understand that they are dealing with connected discourse and not with mere logorhea, however, the writer must still control their reaction to the thought processes which underlie the prose. Again, to use “Letter From Birmingham Jail” as an example, King, in addressing his fellow men of the cloth, constantly reminds them that he is arguing his case from two basic positions that they cannot reject out of hand—that of Biblical tradition and that of theological reasoning. He is behaving, he reminds them, “just as” specific Old Testament or early Christian figures behaved. He is careful to use the “words of St. Thomas Aquinas” to rephrase his idea of what constitutes an unjust law, to make reference to Martin Buber and Reinhold Niebuhr, and to use verbal signs (“hence” and “thus”) that indicate a logical argument is in process. The effect of all this is to remind the audience that they are being addressed by one of their “brothers in Christ” who is quite capable of proving them wrong or expedient on their own terms. Along with this reinforcement of King’s role, the audience is constantly forced to maintain its identity as men devoted to Christian principles, men who must ultimately decide an issue on the basis of revelation and theology, and not in terms of the “timeliness” of an act.

To sum up, then, what the beginning writer must understand is that her readers are not merely interested in her subject matter but also in her continued personal and procedural appropriateness. (The terms, once again, are Peckham’s.) The reader must be assured that a coherent self has been presented and is maintaining itself throughout the discourse. Loss of tone, wide shifts in point of view, or mere rambling will result in a judgment of personal inappropriateness—i.e., the writer is psychologically incapable of conducting understandable discourse. Since such a conclusion rules out the possibility of communication, the writer has, in effect, lost her audience. If communication is not only to take place, however, but also be effective, the reader must also be assured that the writer is proceeding along acceptable logical, inferential, or associational lines. A judgment of
COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND WRITING: A CRITIQUE

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When the rebirth of composition studies began in earnest a decade ago, we had all hoped to build a truly interdisciplinary community, one able to move beyond the insularity of the English Department. The reason was obvious: writing theory was not considered a serious enterprise. English professors were interested in literary and literary criticism, not writing. That the paradox and irony of this contradiction rarely dawned on literary instructors is a testimony to the myopia of power. Indeed, to be committed to composition was to jeopardize one's intellectual credibility, possibly one's career. As a result, the theory and practice of composition was confused, haphazard, and often mindless.

On occasion the department had listened to non-literary voices. Linguists, for example, promised us that taking sentences apart would help writers put them together again with greater competence. It didn't. As the psycholinguist, Robert Beaugrande, recently noted, there was no compelling reason why it should have.1 But lacking relevant conceptual grounding ourselves, we were easily seduced by the rigor, the logic, the "science" of linguistic analysis. We were passive listeners, hoping for a panacea. George Dillon's comment that "the prestige of modern science and scientific method both attracts and bewilders humanists,"2 goes to the heart of the profession's obsession with a quick fix.

In the past few years another questionable relationship has developed with cognitive psychologists. It is true that as writing teachers we have consistently tried to broaden our conceptual base, to bring in other perspectives; nevertheless, the wide-ranging impact of these social scientists is distressing many who would otherwise welcome new voices. Perhaps they are remembering earlier encounters with psychologists. Zoellner's long article in *College English* (50, 1969), for example, angered many because he seemed to revel in the ponderous language and obsessive methodology of behaviorists. But contemporary cognitivists are, in many ways, quite different. Unlike their predecessors, they do believe in mind, in process, and the complexity of the rhetorical situation. And from a humanist's perspective, they do have an impressive history. Vygotsky, for example, has given us provocative insights into concept formation and inner speech. Piaget has also been influential, illuminating for us the value of de-centering, for getting outside our own frame of reference. And one of the beacons of light in the sixties, James Moffett, synthesized many ideas from Piaget and Bruner to develop a student and meaning-centered approach to writing that still has credibility and strength.

But a distinction needs to be made between scholars concerned with thought and mind and psychologists using objectivist models of the mind. Most cognitive psychologists work with an information processing model that divides the writer's world into three parts: a task environment, long-term memory, and writing processes, which in turn consist of three sub-processes: planning, translating and reviewing. From the cognitive worldview, planning is crucial; it is the meat and potatoes of their model. Here writers retrieve information from memory, thereby triggering "associative chains" from which appropriate information is selected in order to organize the data into a writing plan. "Idea generation" is a sub-process of planning, as is orga-

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Notes


5Quoted in *Memphis Magazine* (April, 1982), 60.


nizing and goal setting. All work toward the "act of building an internal representation" of an abstract idea in the writer's mind. Goals are created by the same processes "that generate and organize new ideas." Later, in the translating process, writers transform all this into "visible language."3

Since writing is described as "the act of juggling a number of simultaneous constraints," planning is a critical heuristic that can reduce "cognitive strain." This is consistent with their view of writers as "serial processors" with limited attention spans. Planning diminishes the chaos caused by the excessive number of concurrent demands that a writing task creates.

Using this construct, cognitivists try to map the elusive mental processes of writers. To guide them on this empirical voyage their favorite instrument is the protocol, a verbal "thinking aloud" where "subjects are asked to say... everything they think and everything that occurs to them while performing the task." The writing task is seen here as the solving of a problem, a term used to describe how writers move toward a goal. The results of these protocols are then analyzed for clues to the "subject's solution process." To test hypotheses, this evidence is then compared to the information processing model.

In one of their studies, Flower and Hayes found that writers generated, organized and translated in sequence.4 They are quick to note, however, that these stages are interactive and recursive since editing, for example, often interrupts other stages. In finding that writers are goal-directed, they also discovered characteristic ways writers juggle the many constraints vying for attention. In adapting these ideas for classroom use, they suggest "problem-solving" techniques for dealing with multiple constraints; for example, throw a constraint away, partition the problem, set priorities, be satisfied with early, incomplete attempts. For the cognitivists, mature writing is only possible when skills are tacit and fully coordinated by an "executive scheme" that directs levels of memory and "time sharing."

As is probably obvious, these terms and the conceptual notions behind them come from cybernetics and digital computing. These are, in fact, the same models and empirical methods cognitivists have used so successfully in "mapping" thinking in such diverse fields as chess and symbolic logic. And with even more sophisticated technology and experimental savvy, they have been equally adept at uncovering elaborate sub-processes in discourse comprehension. Kintsch and van Dijk's explication of prose macro-structures, for example, have given us perspectives that were unavailable to humanistic inquiry.5 In studies of reading and writing, their tools are used to gauge, segment and quantify. These are scientists, not humanists. They want to measure, not interpret; they want to quantify, not judge. And invited or not, they have moved into our neighborhood, intent on extensive remodeling.

The cognitive model is the most ambitious one we have. And since it offers composition researchers "a theoretical basis, a research direction, and a methodology"6 there is no doubt that it will become even more elaborate and comprehensive. Using their framework, it is easy to imagine scores of dissertations studying error, audience awareness, egocentrism and innumerable sub-processes of the mind at work. One has only to look at the impact cognitive psychology has had on reading to realize that the problems to be explored are endless. Research in writing could explode a thousand-fold. All this is probably inevitable. But beyond providing workable topics for researchers, is there real significance in all this for the theory and practice of writing?

In thinking about the effectiveness of cognitive psychology, I can't help noticing that their stunning work in reading has had little impact on classroom pedagogy. Perhaps, as Robert Connors suggests, the problem lies in the "appalling complexity of the phenomena."7 And clues to the nature of composing are even more intricate and elusive. In practical terms, the cumulative effect of their previous empirical research is not encouraging. Protocols certainly tell us something, but their web has not been precise enough to catch the important ingredients that go into cognition, memory, perception and attention, to say nothing of intuition, desire, self-esteem and all the other variables of the rhetorical situation. From the oceanic depths of the mind, these psychologists have not been able to tease to the surface the salient mental processes. What we do have may be just bits and pieces, irrelevant jetsam from an insignificant current.

The use of protocols is indeed problematic. If writers are forced to order their responses so systematically, isn't their composing behavior significantly changed? Is the context of these experiments relevant to the psychological and social morass of the classroom? The "context-stripping" that their empirical scrutinizing demands casts serious doubts on how closely protocols mirror real classrooms with all their peer pressures, grades, authority figures and motivational nuances, plus the stylistic and rhetorical idiosyncrasies of individual instructors. Since we know that mature writers compose automatically, intuitively, the very nature of protocols is suspect. And when we are forced to articulate what we are doing, we tend to be overly analytical, distorting processes we are not even conscious of during composing. Years ago, J. A. Richards said that protocols were "distant and distracted rumors." That still seems a trenchant caveat. Drawing inferences from protocols is still risky.

Supporters, however, contend that even if the cognitive tools are faulty, the model being constructed is much more accurate than the fix-order, stage model of the past. That is certainly true. Flower and Hayes have uncovered a number of "typical" processes and none of them resemble the process found in traditional texts. But didn't we know that already from our own circuitous backtracking, our own redrafting, editing, generating and revising? The "stage-model-school" is a red herring; it came about by default. Its defenders used it mostly for sequential clarity and regularity in large-group instruction, not because they believed it mirrored the actual practice of writers. The breakthrough that the cognitive psychologists claim here is positive but undramatic.

More promising is the resulting shift of focus away from finished product to mental processes. But even here our previous obsession with examining texts was on the wane ever since Emig's composing study more than ten years ago. It appears that, except for research potential, most cognitive insights are available in humanistic sources. Their elaborate model is an anchor that stabilizes researchers who want to compare and contrast the processes of various writers; it provides a segmented, measurable construct, an analyzable metaphor of the mind. And for the social scientist that is one of their "idols of the laboratory." For us, however, the need for such a model seems less compelling, more problematic. Patricia Bizzell's comment on the cognitivists' search for certainty reflects the current emphasis on discourse communities and provisional knowledge: "We cannot formulate universal rules for context-bound activities."8

Unlike cognitivists, English professors have traditionally been committed to the study of meaning and the important role language plays in how meaning gets made. Cognitive psychologists have not. Striving for the apparent neutrality and objectivity of natural scientists, they view meaning as tangential. Cognitive psychologists, do not have a theory of meaning, nor
are they in search of one. Instead, they emphasize organizing schema, planning, goal setting and hierarchical composing processes. And although we do not have one theory of meaning we could all agree upon, we have long been exploring possibilities. For the New Critic it resides in the text; for Hirsch, in the writer; and as Emig has highlighted recently, there is a growing allegiance to the idea that meaning is created through the interaction of text and reader, that it is a consequence of being in a certain context. In fact, in *Constructing Texts*, Dillon argues that even in expository essays readers actively construct texts. Like a musical score that each reader performs, the text suggests and constrains, but it does not predict. Plurality of interpretation follows inevitably from our own uniqueness. Psycholinguists and cognitivists tell us very little about this individual making of meaning since they rarely venture beyond formal operations and quantifiable processes. Apparatus for measuring affect is, for them, irrelevant.

As a discipline that has long had competing, even contradictory theories of meaning, multiple truths, and plural perspectives, I think we are able to function without the illusion of certainty. We seem more philosophically sophisticated about the fallibility and relativity of scholarly consensus. This tolerance for ambiguity is one of our strengths. Our intellectual maturity is threatened by adopting a world view and a methodology that wants phenomena to be rule-governed, controllable, repeatable and predictable. If we believe that reality is knowable in an infinite number of ways, why would we choose a perspective at odds with our traditional vision of a fluid, dynamic reality?

Cognitivists consistently down-play the potential of language. Flower and Hayes, for example, in their problem-solving strategies rely on a mimetic conception of language, one in which words are the cloth of thought, where a writer first knows the subject and then searches for appropriate language. This is inevitable, since their information model treats language as a signal code, ignoring its symbolic and interactive nature. But as Paul Kameen suggests, "meaning arises from language, not vice-versa. Language is not cloth for intentions abstractly conceived. . . . It conceives intentions and nurtures them into texts." In this way language itself is heuristic, writing is invention. Discourse does not merely reflect reality, it creates it.

These are the insights of humanists as varied as Heidegger, Lacan, I. A. Richards and Kenneth Burke. They are important underpinnings of our tradition. We cannot give them up for the information processing model without consequences. Ann Berthoff reminds us that what we are looking for determines how we seek and our way of searching will control what we find. In a scrutiny of the impact of cognitive psychology we should remember hermeneutics' powerful insight about the mutual dependence of ends and means. One's method is not neutral. By relying on problem-solving techniques and an information process model, we run the risk of being channelled away from humanistic concerns.

This is not to say that cognitive psychologists do not say things we should pay attention to. They are not irrelevant. They know how to get things done. And many of their findings corroborate the best of our intuitive feelings about composing. But somehow, after all their models and sub-processes, we have learned surprisingly little that we did not already know. Composition theorists are hoping to build a comprehensive framework that tries to relate reader, writer and text within the social, philosophical and psychological matrix of the classroom. For that effort, cognitive psychology appears ready to make but a minor contribution.

The psychologists' presence, however, does help us avoid the insularity that plagued composition studies for decades. Their work is intriguing, complex and serious. But I don't think it is our work. Impressive models can offer some an antidote to uneasiness and solace for insecurity, but we should realize by now that technique is often fool's gold. Yet, I am glad that they decided to study writing processes; they will force us to be more explicit about our purposes and our methods than we otherwise would have been. In that sense they can be valuable. Given the humanities' present state of confusion and uncertainty, there is a pressing need for us to be clear about our philosophy and method. Positivist models can prod us into creating strong humanistic theories that not only explain but also enrich our students' encounters with writing and reading.

Notes
4"Identifying the Organization of Writing Processes," in *Cognitive Processes in Writing*; see also "The Dynamics of Composing: Making Plans and Juggling Constraints," also in *Cognitive Processes*.
7"Composition Studies and Science," *CE* 45 (January 1983), 12.
8Patricia Bizzell, "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing," *PreText* 3:3 (Fall 1982), 234.
9"Inquiry Paradigms and Writing," *CCC* 33 (February 1982), 64-75.
10"Rewording the Rhetoric of Composing," *PreText* 1:1-2 (Spring-Fall 1983), 82-3.
11Ann Berthoff's seminal essay, "Toward a Pedagogy of Knowing," *FEN* 7 (Spring 1978), cogently develops many of these ideas.
NEH SUMMER SEMINARS IN COMPOSITION AND RHETORIC

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Ciceronian Rhetoric and its Influence on Modern Writing
June 18-August 10, 1984
This seminar will investigate the influence of Ciceronian rhetoric on Western culture, especially in relation to the teaching of writing. Just as Cicero's influence has been both immense and pervasive, so the issues confronted have been, and are, wide-ranging and important: the role of the writer/speaker in society, the relation of rhetoric to logic and grammar, the effectiveness of style versus content, and problems of formalism versus creativity, among others. The basic method of the seminar will be first to examine such primary issues through an analysis of Cicero's writings and career, then to trace these ideas in historical and recurrent examples of Ciceronian influence, and finally through discussion to consider their relevance to contemporary concerns. The culminating sessions will include close analysis of contemporary writing textbooks to determine the extent of current (if unacknowledged) Ciceronian influence in American writing training. The seminar is intended to appeal to teachers across a spread of humanistic disciplines — such as literature, speech or rhetoric, history, philosophy, political science, psychology — especially those dealing with language use.

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The Writing Process: A Humanistic View
June 18-August 10, 1984
This seminar aims to teach the writing process as a part of the humanities. To this end, participants will consider three different perspectives: (1) one's own and others' writing processes as these are reflected in writing performed in the seminar; (2) the scholarly and empirical research bearing on the writing process; and (3) the contexts for writing, that is, the implications of this study on one's practice as a humanist. Reflecting this threefold scheme, selected readings will be drawn from accounts by writers about how they work and by scientific and literary observers of writers (Emig, Elbow, Stafford, Flower and Hayes, Vygotsky, I. A. Richards, N. Holland); from accounts of text by text linguists, discourse theorists, and literary theorists (Moffett, Britton, Kneen, Fish, Derrida, Barthes, Ong); and from studies of contexts for the writing process (Burke, Goffman, Scribner and Cole, Pattison, Ohmann). The seminar is intended for teachers of composition and rhetoric, English and American literature, and literary criticism.

ADE Regional Seminars

The Association of Departments of English, which is part of the Modern Language Association, was established in 1963 to serve the needs of those who administer writing programs and those who chair departments of English or divisions of humanities and communications in two- and four-year colleges and universities. Each summer, ADE holds regional seminars that bring together small numbers of department and program administrators to exchange ideas on their academic and professional concerns.

The 1984 Midwestern ADE seminar will be hosted by Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan, June 21-24, under the direction of Robert T. Eberwein and Donald E. Morse. Accommodations will be available to a limited number of participants in the Anderson Hall, the mansion donated to Oakland University by the heirs of Mabel Dodge Wilson. Among the topics scheduled for discussion are coherence in literary study, creative writing, and microcomputers in the classroom. Brigham Young University, Utah State University, and the University of Utah will jointly host the Western seminar, 12-15 July, under the direction of John B. Harris, Kenneth B. Hunzaker, and Michael Rudick. The seminar will be held at the Prospector Square Hotel, Park City, Utah. Topics scheduled for discussion include evaluating writing programs, technical writing, academic freedom, and new issues in the teaching of literature.

From 19 to 22 July, Yale University will host the Eastern seminar, under the direction of Thomas R. Whitaker. The seminar, which will be held on the old campus in New Haven, Connecticut, will feature discussions of the aims and methods of literary study in general education and advanced courses, curricular strategies in the two-year college, and collaborative programs with the schools. The seminars will also include special sessions for new chairs and discussions of ADE's draft checklist for department evaluation. Local excursions and private film screenings will be included on the seminar program.

For additional information on the seminars and to obtain registration materials, please write to Carl R. Lovitt, Assistant Director, ADE, 62 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011.

PROFESSIONAL WRITING PROGRAM

Beginning in the fall of 1984, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA, will offer a new Professional Writing Concentration to its undergraduate English majors. The program has been designed to prepare English majors to serve organizations in the public and private sectors as professional writers. At the same time, the courses in the program will be available to majors of all disciplines in which a high level of competency in writing is desirable. The program comprises twenty-one credit hours of literature and twenty-four credit hours of writing. Students may take specialized courses in such things as technical writing, managerial communications, advanced composition and editing, and creative writing. They may also take such pre-professional offerings as Writing for Science and Technology and Writing for Government and the Judicial System. The program includes internship experience in corporate and government communications.

For more information and application forms, write or phone Dr. Carole Huber, Professional Writing Program Director, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA 17022, (717) 367-1151.
NINTH ANNUAL
RHETORIC SEMINAR
Current Theories
Of
Teaching Composition
PURDUE UNIVERSITY
May 28–June 8, 1984

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT
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