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## Writing with a Purpose: Inhibiting Effects of Prescriptive Alternatives

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In "You Write with a Purpose; 'You Breathe' and Other Needless Assertions," which appears in the Winter, 1984, issue of *Freshman English News*, Irvin Hashimoto is highly critical of certain maxims currently popular among college writing instructors. I agree that each of these assertions might indeed seem "needless" when evaluated in isolation. I also believe that each might temporarily disorient students who have been taught to assemble prefabricated essays or who have reached the empirically sound conclusion that English teachers often encourage self-expression but evaluate grammar, spelling, and punctuation. I do not feel, however, that any one of these statements (except "Writing should be done on both sides of the brain," which would probably appear quite bizarre in any context) is totally without value when considered in light of the realities of the freshman classroom. I doubt, furthermore, regardless of the use to which these current dictums may actually have been put, that they were initially intended either to support the inclusion or exclusion of specific types of assignments or to justify non-teaching. Rather, their existence seems to be a direct reaction to certain prescriptive assertions. To verify such a contention, one need only consider the paralyzing effects of the mechanistic "writing rules" that are taught in many high schools and even in

some colleges and that represent the most popular alternatives to the assertions Hashimoto condemns:

*The first step in writing an essay is to make an outline.* That the act of writing consists of a series of steps is acknowledged here. Nevertheless, students are given the disastrous impression that each step is the same for all writers at all times, that the overall process is never recursive, and that all writers work from unalterable formal outlines. Worst of all, by implying that writers arrive at final decisions concerning organization before they have identified content, this directive denies the existence of the analysis and synthesis that usually precede and/or accompany the production of written discourse. As Lindemann emphasizes, students who blindly follow preconceived patterns "prevent themselves from discovering the material's organic unity and finding new implications in the subject" (167).

*The outline must contain Roman numerals I, II, and III.* Students who take such advice at face value are stifled before they have even had a chance to determine the tentative perimeters of their essays, primarily because they must find some way of slicing their topics into three equal parts, whether or not such divisions are feasible or logical. One need look no farther, then, for the origin of such strikingly odd opening sentences as "My past experiences with composition and literature were good, bad, and in high school" or "In evaluating the course outline to be used in freshman English this semester, I think that it is complete, confusing, and handed out on the first day of class."

*For every A in the outline, there must be a B; for every 1, there must be a 2; etc.* The problem here is that students are encouraged to generate odd couplings of incongruent ideas, each pair consisting of an important concept followed by an anticlimactic or nonsensical one: "I had two problems when reading novels in high school. First, I sometimes lost track of what was happening because the writer used flashbacks and other devices. I would get what a character had done mixed up with what his father had done, or I would think he was doing something now when he had really done it as a child. Second, I sometimes could not find any of the required novels in the school library." In fact, I have known students actually to omit from their essays interesting, complex, and original points they had clearly articulated during prewriting discussion periods simply because they didn't, as one student put it, have "a second good idea to go with the first one."

*An essay must have five paragraphs.* In other words, an essay must have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, with the body consisting of the I, II, and III that appear in the outline. But students either follow the five-paragraph scheme so closely that their essays lose all distinguishing characteristics or interpret the rule to mean that their essays must have five indentations and, employing a distorted version of what Stern calls "rhetorical choice" in paragraphing (299), proceed to bisect and consolidate ideas for the sole purpose of creating five groups of sentences shaped like paragraphs. The most interesting fact about this five-paragraph rule, however, (and a very telling one) is that it is not readily accepted by educators outside the field of English. On several recent occasions, for instance, I have found myself, due to the current interest in "writing across the disciplines," sitting among audiences composed of instructors from various departments

while an English instructor explained that all essays must have an introductory paragraph, three middle paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. And every time I have sensed the audience's instinctive dissatisfaction with this scheme as well as their irritation at their own inability to articulate the reasons for their unrest, which seems to mean that the five-paragraph essay does not exist outside the English classroom.

*The first paragraph must tell what the essay is about.* But if students divulge at the outset ideas that (due to the very nature of this prescriptive approach to writing) are most likely flimsy and one-dimensional to begin with, the remaining paragraphs are often rendered superfluous.

*The second, third, and fourth paragraphs must contain one idea each.* Here, again, are Roman numerals I, II, and III; and here, again, they lead to odd attempts to conform to a one-two-three pattern even when a student actually wants to present more than three ideas: "The course outline contains four types of activities—reading assignments, oral presentations, writing assignments and tests. This essay will evaluate three of these activities."

*The last paragraph must be a summary of the paper.* Thus, students are led to believe that they are never to do anything more than repeat the opening paragraph. It is rare, in fact, for a novice writer versed in the mechanical approach to composing even to consider that a concluding paragraph might actually contain a previously undisclosed *conclusion*.

*An essay must be descriptive OR narrative OR expository OR persuasive OR it must be a process paper OR a definition paper OR a comparison/contrast paper OR . . .* In theory, such rhetorical segregation represents, as Harned points out, "a reductive discourse classification" (49). In practice, a maxim based upon such a system inevitably leads students to believe that each essay they write must contain only one kind of information or pattern of development. When applied in conjunction with the five-paragraph rule discussed above, the situation becomes even more absurd as students struggle to confine descriptions to three items, narratives to three actions, processes to three steps, and so on. And, once again, it seems that English teachers are promoting written forms that do not exist outside their own classrooms.

*In an essay you must never use the pronouns "you," "we," or "I."* A freshman honors student was completely taken aback when I commented that the point of view he adopted in his essay, which began "One has had many experiences with composition and literature that he would like to relate here," was confusing throughout. And such misunderstandings illustrate one of the more unfortunate results of the continuing existence of this entire list of prescriptive assertions. It is often the conscientious, academic high achiever who is most inhibited in the production of written language, simply because he has diligently committed to memory everything English teachers have taught. Thus, the less able student (in the traditional academic sense of the term), who never quite remembers what previous teachers said or who wasn't listening in the first place, often produces more salvageable content in a college-level writing course than do his seemingly more promising peers.

It is obvious, then, when one examines the above assertions, that each is far more likely—than is each item in Hashimoto's list—to prevent the formulation of composing strategies that will benefit students outside the English classroom. Why this is so becomes clear when one compares the two lists in their entirety.

The prescriptive assertions place ultimate importance on the mechanical appearance of the finished product, thereby creating the impression among novice writers that the production of written discourse involves nothing more than the insertion of one-dimensional ideas into a pre-existent pattern provided for the writer by the intended audience. In fact, students are led to believe that bringing a piece of writing into existence is somewhat akin to completing a logical (illogical?) syllogism or a mathematical formula. But the maxims that comprise Hashimoto's list, which, in Hirsh's terminology, are "more general and fundamental" (167), seem to foster a more productive approach to the generation of written discourse, both because they encourage students to examine their own attitudes toward composing and because they emphasize the mental activity that often must precede the written presentation of complex, or even not so complex, ideas. They also contain nothing to contradict D'Angelo's contention that students should play an active role in learning to write: "Students can write meaningful prose only if they are allowed complete freedom to assert *their* selves, *their* world views. Writing should not be the imposing of form upon content but rather the adapting of the form to the expression" (161). And if it is true, as Moffett says, that "preteaching the problems of writing causes students to adopt the strategy of error-avoidance" (201), the assertions Hashimoto questions have an additional advantage. Since writing instructors are not led to believe that they are obligated to provide comprehensive specifics concerning the structure of final products, students themselves are more likely to be given the opportunity to resolve such matters in relations to the particular writing task at hand. And the ability to confront one's own dilemmas is, after all, the only fundamental composing (or reasoning) skill that can possibly be of use to anyone outside the composition classroom and beyond the freshman year of college.

Therefore, it would seem that the assertions Hashimoto condemns, taken either individually or collectively, are hardly "simple-minded" when compared to the misleading but still vibrant assertions they were intended to supplant or counteract. Nor do they seem "needless" to the college writing instructor who, on a practical, day-to-day basis, encounters large numbers of freshman whose growth as writers is hindered by their dogged adherence to the prescriptive alternatives to writing with a purpose.

But there is one final point that needs to be emphasized. All assertions concerning the nature of written language or its production, no matter how insightful, inspiring, or thought-provoking, are indeed "needless," perhaps even harmful, if the writing instructor permits them to remain merely assertions—if, in other words, he *asserts* a particular theory but totally ignores it when conducting class meetings, structuring writing assignments, and evaluating student essays. Take, for example, the instructor who constantly recites "You write best from experience" or "Writing has deep psychological roots" while rejecting all student responses that do not conform precisely to his own background and experiences or coincide with the conclusions he himself has reached. Or consider the instructor who insists that "Writing is to be read" or "Writing is communication" but makes it obvious, by returning student essays with only a vague comment or two appended and by providing no

opportunity for students to read one another's writing, that he spends very little time reading what students write and certainly does not take very seriously their attempts to communicate on paper. But most insidious of all is the instructor who labels "disorganized" and "rambling" all essays that do not conform to a particular pattern, be it the traditional five-paragraph structure or some other idiosyncratic design, even as he is in the very act of insisting that "Good writing is creative." On the other hand, the instructor who does in truth make an honest attempt to respect all outlooks, interact with all texts, and view all form as unique to content, who, in short, allows students to discover and actualize their own purposes, does not really need openly to assert anything at all, since his actions and attitudes alone will, for most students, bring about positive changes in composing behavior.

And, I think, despite his title and opening paragraph, insincerity and misapplication are really what Hashimoto has in mind when he labels certain assertions "needless." For it seems that all pedagogically oriented statements *are* needless, not to mention pointless, useless, and counterproductive, if they are not reflected in practice. But to discard the assertions themselves while suggesting no suitable alternatives, especially in view of the fact that the "writing rules" discussed above would like as not move in to fill the resultant vacancy, also seems needless, pointless, useless, and counterproductive. For if these are, as Hashimoto says, assertions "that everyone would agree with but no one knows what to do with after they agree" (19), it appears that we would be moving backward were we to allow such beliefs simply to vanish permanently beneath a tangled mass of unproductive definitions. We could instead move forward by attempting, through trial, error and re-trial, to determine how we can best put these generalizations to use in the freshman classroom.

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## Essay Evaluation as a Framework for Teaching Assistant Training

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Essay evaluation appears in virtually all agendas for teaching assistant training, and it generally is cited in critiques of the workshop as, in retrospect, one of the most valuable activities. Yet its place in agendas, like those of the other events, varies

widely from *in medias res* to a grand conclusion. Rarely does the evaluation of essays begin the workshop (after the obligatory welcomes of course). In such an initial position, however, it can provide a sequence for activities that stresses the ultimate goal of any freshman-writing workshop.

Essay evaluation can organize the workshop when it occurs in conjunction with relatively detailed profiles of the "A," "B," "C," "D," and "F" freshman essays. The faculty members of a departmental freshman English committee can most effectively create these profiles in the months prior to the workshop. The following process has proved to be efficient. Each committee member composes a two-hundred-word paragraph describing the traits of the "A" freshman essay; members compare and discuss respective paragraphs in the group meeting; a designated individual, who has taken notes during the meeting, writes a synthesized paragraph, reflecting the agreed-upon qualities of the "A" paper. This three-step process is repeated for each of the other four kinds of essays. Finally, a stylist within the committee casts the synthesized paragraphs into a consistent style, comprehensible to students as well as useful to professors. Ultimately, these profiles might compose part of a bulletin for freshman composition, purchased by students and serving as a point of reference for them and teachers alike. But initially the director of composition might present the profiles to the teaching assistants in the workshop, explain the process by which they were created, and clarify their individual details. As the first learning event of the workshop, this presentation might take a half-an-hour to an hour, depending upon the degree of detail that the presenter wishes to achieve.

The graduate students then evaluate two anonymous freshman essays in light of the profiles. (Ideally, each teaching assistant should have his or her own set of profiles.) A letter grade is then assigned to the essay, presumably the one from the profile that most closely describes the essay under scrutiny. Naturally, new teaching assistants will be hesitant and generally unskilled in this exercise. Consequently, they will profit from the leadership of two faculty members — who have also used the profiles to evaluate the essay — during a general discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the essay, of the reasons for matching a specific profile and grade with the essay in question, and of the merits (and demerits) of the profiles. During this forty-five-minute to one-hour discussion, the coordinator of the workshop should assure participants that, at this point, the use of the profiles is not intended to develop a regimented standard for grading freshman essays (although the profiles of course can be employed toward that end at another time). On the contrary, he or she should stress that the evaluation exercises are mainly designed to introduce the teaching assistants to "the language of evaluation" via the profiles, and to concepts that will recur during the workshop.

The remainder of this essay describes several TA workshop topics that the process of evaluation just portrayed can invest with meaning. The topics include essay assignments, patterns of essay development, paragraphing, diction and style, revision, pre-writing, and the syllabus for the freshman composition course. While these topics might be addressed in this order in the workshop, the teaching assistant should be encouraged to devise a different sequence for the classroom (pre-writing, paragraphing, revising, and creating appropriate diction and style would be a sequence more meaningful to the freshman writer). Directly after sessions of essay evaluation in the workshop, however, stimulating essay assignments as well as the patterns of