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**"YOU MAY HAVE WON THE
CHEVROLET CAMARO":
"JUNK MAIL" AS A RESOURCE FOR
THE TEACHING OF WRITING**

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"Dear Bob J. Frye: This will be our final attempt to notify you that you may have won the Chevrolet Camaro." Sound familiar? Or how about this one: "Dear Gulf Customer: As an American, I recognize your love of country, and why you are proud to be an American. That's why I want you to know about this beautiful item of interest to collectors of Americana — The American Eagle Commemorative Folding Pocket Knife."

Such unsolicited letters, often termed "junk mail," stream into our mailboxes. Most of us routinely toss them. But I want to suggest that these letters may provide us with a useful resource for studying writing with our students. The letters' easy accessibility, their linking us with the "real world" outside the classroom, and, most importantly, the rhetorical choices they illustrate may enable us to use a convention already familiar to our students — letter writing — as a means for them to examine, with us, the process of writing. We know from James J. Murphy and others that instruction in rhetoric by means of letter writing dates from the early Middle Ages.¹ Moreover, that letter writing has immediate practical value for our students is evident not only by the NCTE's publishing jointly with the U.S. Postal Service the revised pamphlet *All About Letters* (1982) but also by Edward P. J. Corbett's observation in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*: "Today we cannot afford to neglect formal training in this form of discourse. Letters — friendly letters, business letters, promotional letters, letters to the editor — are the major form of written discourse that many of us will be called upon to produce after we leave school" (2nd ed., 606).

For the past three years I have been collecting samples of the unsolicited mail sent to my home and to my school office. The extraordinary variety in aims of discourse, modes of expression, rhetorical choices, and imaginative uses of the conventions of the letter form has helped me and my students become more keenly aware of the process of writing. In what follows I wish to comment briefly on some uses of salutations and opening sentences found in "junk mail," suggest how a thorough analysis of one widely distributed unsolicited letter may cause students to think about the writing process, and describe some specific objectives of such study complemented by assignments in letter writing.

Here are representative salutations in unsolicited letters I have received: Dear Composition Instructor, Dear Concerned Citizen, Dear Colleague, Dear Long Distance Caller, Dear NCTE Member, Dear Good Driver, Dear Tennis Enthusiast, Dear Parents of TCU Students, Dear Rhetorician, Dear Fellow Cigar Lover, Dear Friend of Boccaccio, Dear Texan, Dear Former Subscriber, Dear Communicant of St. Stephen, Dear Teacher of Japanese, Dear Fellow Democrat, Dear Republican Primary Voter, Dear Halton's Preferred Customer, Dear [blank]. Although cigars and Japanese are not among my interests, these salutations remind me and my students examining them of the need to consider particular audiences when we write. The salutations suggest the many roles we all play, the many selves we are as Lewis Thomas points out in *The Medusa and the Snail* ("The Selves," 41-44). Writing, we discover upon reflection, becomes a way of knowing our selves and the selves of others. We may begin to see, through this study of salutations, how language enables us to express our various selves into being, that we have many ways of being, and that particular rhetorical choices are appropriate for particular audiences.

The opening sentences of unsolicited letters reveal a wide range of rhetorical choices. Sometimes the opening is formal, ponderous, with Latinate diction: "Dear Fellow Danforth Associate: Endings may be followed by auspicious beginnings." Others are uncommonly direct: "Dear B. J. Frye: Let's skip the sales talk, and get right down to the offer." The first sentence may be long, involved, ingratiating: "Thanks to you and to other participants from across the United States and Canada, the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition has become a major forum for discussions of rhetoric and the teaching of writing"; or it may be short, crisp, assertive: "Dear Educator: The next 'text' is *Newsweek*." The opening sentence may tempt ("\$3,500 is waiting for you at First Texas Savings"), may petition ("The time has come for us to consider the financial needs of our church for 1985"), or may thank ("The Executive Committee appreciates your continued support of the National Council of Teachers of English"). In fact, the opening sentences of unsolicited letters provide a veritable catalog of the aims of discourse.

Where the aim of the discourse is clearly persuasion, as it typically is in "direct mail marketing," we may learn how various modes, such as narrative, effectively open these letters. Consider this beginning of a letter from a Public Broadcasting System television channel: "You're at a theater, absorbed in the eternal poetry of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Every ten minutes, the lights go on, the stage is cleared and an announcer delivers a variety of commercial messages." This argument for commercial-free television begins dramatically with a narration. In a letter from *Writer's Digest* the speaker starts by narrating: "I don't have the Great American Novel in me. I flunked poetry 102 in college. My first, last and only short story was rejected by 14 magazines." Here the narrative is in first-person, informal (*don't, flunked*), and highly specific.

We and our students may learn, too, from the wide variety of appeals used in the openings of unsolicited mail. M. D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute employs this initial stark and sobering declaration: "It is an unfortunate fact that one out of every four Americans now living will have cancer." The plain, unadorned style and the periodic position of *cancer* help to create the sentence's effectiveness. Students will not likely miss the emotional appeal in this beginning from Protective Technology Inc.: "Dear Parent: My name is Clarence Law and I am writing you this brief cover letter to help you to understand that our children are walking or driving around every day in a world full of deadly violent crime." Fear, it seems, has its uses, and so does Clarence's last name. An American publisher opens familiarly with this encompassing appeal: "Dear Language Buff: If you use English at work or play . . ." Yet this seemingly all-inclusive opening must rank second to the letter from the furniture company inviting me to a special sale limited to only "Southwest's regular customers and prospective customers." The first sentence in a marketing missive from *The Atlantic* combines intellectual appeal with a rhetorical question: "Where can your students read the best new fiction, poetry and short stories available today?" And the Saturday Evening Post Society commingles patriotism, religion, family, and bandwagon appeals with definition in this beginning: "Dear Fellow American, If you love your family, your home, God and your country — you are not alone. You're in the mainstream of life in America today." The comma after *American* and the contraction *you're* lend informality to this blatantly slanted letter, points not missed by students scrutinizing these unsolicited letters' openings.

I have found it useful and instructive sometimes to examine in detail with students one piece of "junk mail" that has been sent to virtually every American household, such as Lee Iacocca's effective letter requesting contributions for the restoration of the Statue of Liberty in time for the Statue of Liberty Centennial in July, 1986. The close study of this recent American folk hero's persuasive letter readily connects the students with the "real life" of the world of business and encourages careful attention to how language may be used. Iacocca's letter is dated simply "Wednesday," is addressed to the recipient personally, and asks for money to help save the Statue of Liberty. Iacocca describes the alarming condition of this national symbol, recalls his immigrant parents' experience with it, offers a unique certificate and other recognition for a contribution, describes an upcoming patriotic celebration, argues for voluntary instead of government help, defines liberty, and notes in a postscript that this contribution is tax deductible.

Iacocca's letter generates several questions pertinent to the process of writing. Why is Iacocca an especially appropriate sender of this appeal? How does the letter itself create his credibility, his *ethos*? Why are the paragraphs so short? What sorts of supporting arguments does Iacocca use? What kinds of evidence do the two enclosed photographs of the statue provide? Other questions come to mind, but as you can see, students may learn a good deal about persuasive discourse by scrutinizing this personalized letter that is clearly a product of our technological revolution. It is, it turns out, "junk mail" that is not junk.

Making use of unsolicited mail to focus attention on language and the process of writing may help students see how letters, even mechanically produced "personalized" ones, give form and shape to ideas. It may help them to raise questions about language itself, about its manipulation and abuses and possible tyranny, and help them discover their need to find and claim a humane language appropriate for themselves. By collecting their

own samples of "junk mail," analyzing them, and then using the convention of letter writing itself to share with their classmates and teacher their discoveries, students may teach themselves about writing. For as Ann Berthoff points out in *Forming, Thinking, Writing: The Composing Imagination*, "Whatever you really learn, you teach yourself. . . . What you really learn is what you discover—and you learn to discover by questioning" (9). Study of unsolicited letters collected by students and teachers may naturally lead to students' composing still other letters. For example, Mimi Schwartz has developed an excellent sequence of letter writing assignments that enable students to define their voices effectively, and some teachers may find the ungraded weekly letter assignment I describe in *Rhetoric Review* to be of use.²

Certainly paying mind to "junk mail" may make us, students and teachers alike, more keenly aware of the multitude of letters all around us, from those mechanical ones on milk cartons and grocery sacks to Andrei Sakharov's thoughtful "open letter" concerning the danger of thermonuclear war, from those succinct, incisive letters on "60 Minutes" to those powerfully evocative ones comprising Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Moreover, the obviousness of this resource for teaching writing should not deter us, for poet Howard Nemerov has imaginatively suggested that "a part of teaching ought to consist in making the familiar strange," and Annie Dillard, in her chapter "Seeing" in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, recommends our creating the "artificial obvious" so that we may see, really see.³ Coming to see more clearly, to understand more fully, the process of writing through study of unsolicited mail may lead us toward that sense of genuine discovery that Nobel Laureate Albert Szent-Györgyi defines as "seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought."⁴ And that goal, many of us would argue, we may prize more than the new Chevrolet Camaro which, in our case, we have not got.

Notes

¹James J. Murphy, "The Art of Letter Writing (*Ars Dictaminis*)," in *Medieval Rhetoric: A Select Bibliography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 55-70.

²Mimi Schwartz, "Defining Voice Through Letter Writing," *The English Record* (First Quarter, 1984), 10-14; Bob J. Frye, "A Habit of Being: Some Uses of Personal Letters in Freshman Composition," *Rhetoric Review*, 1, No. 2 (January 1983), 89-119.

³Howard Nemerov, *Figures of Thought: Speculation on the Meaning of Poetry and Other Essays* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1978), p. 106; Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (London: Pan Books, 1976), p. 29.

⁴*Search and Discovery: A Tribute to Albert Szent-Györgyi*, ed. Benjamin Kaminer (New York: Academic Press, 1977), inscription opposite the back of the title page.

COMPOSITION AND LANGUAGE SCIENCE

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I. Rhetoric and Grammar

The teaching of English as part of a university education is a relatively recent practice. With the general acceptance of the scientific method and the establishment of practical courses in the curriculum, the structure of higher education in America had drastically changed by the end of the nineteenth century. America was changing from an oral to a print culture and by the beginning of the twentieth century classical languages were no longer required in universities. With the necessity of teaching the print code conventions of the native language, the focus of rhetoric shifted from oratory to composition (Berlin, 1984: 34). By 1924, with increasing specialization of knowledge, English teachers and linguists were recognized as members of separate communities (Parker, 1981: 14).

Since English has become part of a university education, rhetorical approaches have dominated the teaching of writing. Even today, many teachers and researchers in the field of composition offer the western rhetorical tradition as their heritage (Lunsford, 1984; Berlin, 1984; Herrington, 1983). This tradition dates back to the Greeks, who viewed language from the practical standpoint of its use in oratory and verbal art. The rhetoric of Aristotle, which was designed for public speaking situations involving small groups of the ruling elite, remained the most influential throughout the Middle Ages (Berlin, 1984; Pearson, 1977: 15).

A rhetoric is defined as "a social invention arising out of a particular time and place, a peculiar social context, establishing . . . the conditions that make a peculiar kind of communication possible . . ." (Berlin, 1984: 1). This "peculiar social context," otherwise known as a rhetorical context, is defined by four basic elements that are thought to constitute the communication process in any given circumstance: reality, interlocuter, audience and language. Rhetorical theories are thought to differ in their basic definitions of reality, human nature and language, thereby lending a different significance to the rhetorical elements defined in each theory (Berlin, 1984: 1-10). Seen in this light, rhetoric seems to emphasize the belief system of the community more than the verbal behavior in the practice of communication.

The traditional grammar model can also be traced back to Greek culture. In principle, this grammar was designed as a descriptive science, though it was a static model. Such concepts as "parts of speech, subject, predicate, etc.," along with the basic technique of "paradigm analysis," began with Greek and Roman scholars. The scholars of the Middle Ages followed the Roman tradition, except that they added the notion of a "universal grammar"—a grammar inherent to all languages, one that was based on logic. Believing Latin to be best suited for expressing abstract, logical thought, they took the grammar of Latin as representative of this universal language pattern. Throughout the Middle Ages, Latin continued to be used as the language of educated Europe. The traditional grammar model, which continues to influence the teaching of language skills in today's schools, is based on a model that was developed for Greek, adapted to Latin, and later imposed on European national languages (Pearson, 1977: 1-15).