Book Reviews


In the “Preface” to The Subject is Writing, Wendy Bishop comments that she has brought the pieces together in this book as an invitation to an “ongoing discussion” about writing and writing classrooms. Many of the authors found in this collection, including Bishop, have had important contributions to make to this conversation, both in this collection and in their other works, and The Subject is Writing itself is surely of value to this conversation. However, along with her invitation to the conversation, Bishop tells us that “this book is for writing students and their teachers.” I am concerned about Bishop’s attention to audience in this collection, and though I address the strengths of the book’s five sections, I feel obligated to point out this weakness.

Bishop begins this collection with three essays collected under the title “Growing into Writing.” Each begins with the authors’ recollections of childhood writing experiences: memories from the ages six, seven, and nine. This section is beneficial for composition students who may have similar memories of writing and may face writing apprehension; however, when these essays are coupled with the “Sharing Ideas” questions that follow each selection, I begin to question the benefit of this chapter for anyone but beginning writers. Bishop has included in this collection a series of questions following each essay that are designed to stimulate thought about our own writing, but questions such as “Do you have written voices you like better than others?” seem to be written more for first-year composition students than for their teachers, and, in fact, are even a bit patronizing of first-year writers.

Bishop’s second section, “Changing the Writing Classroom,” is a much more useful and appropriate beginning point for this text. In this section the authors introduce first-year writing students to some important issues. Donald A. McAndrew points out differences students will encounter between their high-school and college writing experiences. He also introduces students to a particularly useful aspect of composition: composition theory and research. In brief, manageable definitions, McAndrew introduces concepts and defines schools of thought such as the social constructionists, the participationists, and the sociopsycholinguists. Elanor Kutz introduces concepts of linguistics and the work of Noam Chomsky in a provocative essay that I wish my first-year composition teacher had had access to. This section concludes with two other helpful essays: a Kate Ronald piece dealing with style and James Strickland on computers in the writing classroom.
Part three, "Writing in Progress," approaches writing processes in a fresh way that should help students understand their own writing processes more so than traditional composition texts. Each of the nine essays presents a different aspect of process-oriented writing: thinking about writing, planning writing and writing rituals, revising drafts, collaborating in writing, and exercises in journaling. Unlike many composition textbooks that define "the writing process" through rules, these nine essays are effective in explaining why certain practices in writing may work and how to use them productively.

In addition to the useful second section, part four, "To the Writer—Explanations and Advice," is the kind of collection that I would most readily share with my students and that I miss from my own training. Pat Belanoff explains to students the difficult issue of writing assessment and the assignments of letter grades to writing—the ambiguity of which, I'm sure, we'd all like our students to understand. Muriel Harris' "Don't Believe Everything You're Taught: Matching Writing Processes and Personal Preferences" teaches beginning writers how to be comfortable with thinking about writing; she also helps students understand that while the conventions that writing teachers teach are useful, they may be manipulated to meet personal need and preference. Donald Murray concludes this section with a nineteen-step list of ways for students to "get the writing done."

The final part, "Writers, School, and Writing," serves as a comforting conclusion for students in that it suggests that academic writing won't destroy students' own writing. With essays about resisting writing and writing teachers (don't worry, this isn't a "how to" piece), personal changes and growth, the differences between academic writing and other types of writing, the differences between creative writing and student writing as literature, and personal identity, this section offers the kinds of advice that will help students to personalize their writing habits. Thus, this section, offering useful advice to anxious beginning writers, serves as a reassuring pat on the back to first-year composition students.

Bishop has assembled an essay collection that works well as a first-year composition textbook, so long as writing is the subject of the class. Too frequently our first-year composition classrooms rely on literature and non-fiction essays as the core for the course; Bishop offers instead a text that places writing as the course's main topic. Although I felt put off by the "Sharing Ideas" questions that follow each essay because they seem condescending, this book nonetheless is a strong collection that will be of help to beginning writers.

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