THE 1963 COMPOSITION REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISED, COMPUTED, OR DEMONSTRATED BY ANY OTHER MEANS OF TECHNOLOGY

G rand narratives, Jean-François Lyotard tells us, signify a modernist impulse to compress history into sweeping generalizations. “The grand narrative,” Lyotard proclaims, “has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation” (37). Composition Studies, like all disciplines, suffers from its own grand narratives. Notably, Stephen North’s assertion that 1963 marks the beginning of contemporary Composition Studies signifies one type of grand narrative often trumpeted in Composition circles. “We can therefore date the birth of modern Composition, capital C, to 1963,” North writes. “And what marks its emergence as a nascent academic field more than anything else is this need to replace practice as the field’s dominant mode of inquiry” (North 15). North’s remarks, coupled with similar statements made by Robert Connors, Lester Faigley, and Edward P.J. Corbett, create a mythic historical past, what Lyotard refers to as one “incapable of describing that meaning adequately” (31). In what has become an accepted reading of Composition Studies history, this particular meaning of Composition is traced to the influential 1963 meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, as well as the 1963 publications of Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer’s Research in Written Composition and Albert Kitzhaber’s Themes, Theories, and Therapy. In this narrative, because of these moments, the practice of reporting classroom activities and results (what North calls “lore”) yields to theoretical concerns regarding writing instruction. Prior to 1963, North writes:

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Composition is declared to be essentially virgin territory; little is known, and even that little is of questionable value, the result of blundering or careless work. If old composition is to become new Composition; if the “profession,” as its membership seemed ready to call it, is to take its rightful place in the academy, the dominance of practice and sloppy research would have to end. (North 17)

All emancipation narratives, however, are lacking. Indeed, because of North’s focus on theory as the crux of Composition’s shift in thinking, I am perplexed over the particular absence of Eric Havelock’s breakdown of 1963 as an equally important moment in writing theory. In The Muse Learns to Write, Havelock reflects on the near simultaneous publication of work dealing with writing theory in the disparate fields of media study, rhetoric, and anthropology. Havelock notes that in addition to his Preface to Plato, the time period surrounding 1963 witnessed the publication of Lévi-Strauss’s La Pensé Sauvage, Jack Goody and Ian Watt’s “The Consequences of Literacy,” Ernst Mayr’s Animal Species and Evolution, and Marshall McLuhan’s The Gutenberg Galaxy. For Havelock, 1963 represents a “watershed” moment in the history of writing, a time when various writers simultaneously explored, without knowledge of each other, the connection between writing and culture.

McLuhan’s exclusion is what concerns me most. McLuhan’s The Gutenberg Galaxy complicates Composition Studies’ grand narrative of 1963. This “kaleidoscope” (as McLuhan referred to his text) of references, quotations, puns, and theoretical musings over the state of technology in the 20th century deals specifically with issues relevant to writing. In a direct challenge to print-based thinking regarding writing, McLuhan asks, “What will be the new configurations of mechanisms and of literacy as these older forms of perception and judgment are interpenetrated by the new electric age?” (Gutenberg 330). I’m curious as to why Composition Studies did not pick up McLuhan’s question, for it directly challenges our perceptions of writing in regards to technological innovation. In both his 1962 The Gutenberg Galaxy and 1964 Understanding Media, McLuhan posed technology as an issue of writing; he asked Writing Studies to consider how we must change the ways we produce texts in digital culture. McLuhan recognized the difficulties involved when cultures attempt to work with the new demands technology creates for writing: “We are today as far into the electric age as the Elizabethans had advanced into the typographical and mechanical age. And we are experiencing the same confusions and indecisions which they had felt when living simultaneously in two contrasted forms of society and experience” (Gutenberg 9).

Following McLuhan’s logic, I want to explore 1963 not as a clearly demarcated historical line, but rather as a moment of confusion in Composition Studies, a period in which several thinkers outside the traditional definition
of “compositionist” worked to negotiate technology and writing’s mutual relationship, what Walter Ong calls “a better understanding of what literacy itself has meant in shaping man’s consciousness toward and in high-technology cultures” (*Orality and Literacy* 15). In his 1962 collection of essays *The Barbarian Within*, Ong foregrounds McLuhan’s interests in technology and writing when he notes, “If students are losing their hold on reading and on grammar, this is in part because, in their relationship to the other items involved in communication, reading and grammar are not what they used to be” (“Wired for Sound” 223). Not just reading and grammar, of course, but writing itself is not what it “used to be” when we consider the technological changes underway by the early 1960s. These changes modified the line dividing writing and media.

I want to consider how McLuhan’s focus on media as writing has not been fully understood as relevant to Composition Studies, and I want to question why it hasn’t. In other words, this essay will explore the unmentioned media side of the field’s grand narrative by revisiting those influential moments in 1963 that Composition Studies draws upon for influence and those it doesn’t as well. By juxtaposing these missing media moments with an already accepted, non-media-oriented account, I can foreground what Geoffrey Sirc has called “the ruptures in composition’s history” (*English Composition* 269) in order to rethink how Composition and Media Studies intersect and influence one another. Contextualizing Composition Studies’ “greatest hits” (as Sirc might say) with other temporal moments might yield a better understanding of the field’s general relationship to technology and, hence, media study. I take a chance, then, in promoting an alternate history to Composition’s grand narrative; for this history, I explore challenges those individuals and moments important to a disciplinary identity many of us, including myself, have come to recognize as “Composition.” Yet I feel I must rupture such a history in order to create a better position from which to evaluate this heralded shift as well as to question how 1963 has or hasn’t influenced contemporary writing instruction; how Composition may too narrowly define its practitioners; and how Composition may finally need to accept writing as more than print-based instruction, product, or ideology. Thus, my desire is not to create yet another grand narrative to replace the previous one, but instead to open up the narratives we use to discuss writing instruction so that they will be more inclusive in the long term.

**1963: YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION?**

1963’s importance to Composition Studies is summed up in Edward P. J. Corbett’s remark in the 1987 issue of *College Composition and Communication (CCC)*: “I have always dated the emergence of rhetoric as the rationale for the teaching of composition from the spring of 1963, when the Confer-
ence on College Composition and Communication held its annual convention in Los Angeles” (“Teaching Composition” 445). If there were a revolution in 1963 writing pedagogy, it occurred partly as a response to a general, perceived absence of rhetorical instruction that reduced the teaching of writing to mechanics and practicality. Richard Weaver complains in 1963 that “our age has witnessed the decline of a number of subjects that once enjoyed prestige and general esteem, but no subject, I believe, has suffered more amazingly in this respect than rhetoric” (201). In an essay from the October 1963 issue of CCC, Francis Christensen adds to Weaver’s dismay with writing instruction by declaring, “We do not have, despite several titles, a modern rhetoric” (155). In 1963, rhetoric-styled publications seemed to be on the upswing; texts like George Kennedy’s The Art of Persuasion in Greece, Eric Havelock’s Preface to Plato, or Edward P.J. Corbett’s “The Usefulness of Classical Rhetoric” (from the same CCC issue as Christensen’s article) circulated. These texts sought to return classical rhetorical traditions to academic interest, what Gerald Mulderig calls the “rhetorical revival” of the early ‘60s. They desired a revitalization of the works of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian for contemporary writing instruction, thus prompting what James Berlin names “The Renaissance of Rhetoric” and “the emergence of rhetoric as a discipline in the English department [which] has simultaneously [led to] the complementary professionalization of writing instruction” (Berlin 137).

In 1963, Corbett openly asked, “What does classical rhetoric have to offer composition teachers?” (“The Usefulness of Classical Rhetoric” 162). Seeing classical rhetoric as a handbook which students can draw from in order to perform properly such rhetorical feats as status, dispositio, and imitation, Corbett answered his own question by responding, “a great deal.” “What most of our students need, even the bright ones, is careful, systematized guidance at every step in the writing process. Classical rhetoric can provide that kind of positive guidance” (“The Usefulness of Classical Rhetoric” 164). Alongside Corbett’s essay in the same issue of CCC, Wayne Booth’s “The Rhetorical Stance” probed what rhetoric exactly entails: “Is there such an art? If so, what does it consist of? Does it have a content of its own? Can it be taught? Should it be taught? If it should how do we go about it, head on or obliquely?” (Booth 139). Booth’s self-response is the rhetorical stance, a plea for classical rhetorical instruction: know all available arguments, know one’s audience, construct proper voice, and establish speaker ethos. Booth’s formula is easily recognizable to contemporary writing instructors as the breakdown of invention plus a few added elements.

This return of a once-dominant form of instruction certainly resembles a sort of revolution; it marks an effort to reinstall a specific kind of educational apparatus through the reinstatement of classical rhetoric. This particular effort,
however, more closely resembles Plato’s canonized critique in the *Phaedrus* of the new technology called writing. As Havelock describes Plato’s dismissal, the Greek educational apparatus knew about the new technology of writing, but opted for oral recitation instead: “[In Plato’s day] the educational apparatus, as so often since, lagged behind technological advance, and preferred to adhere to traditional methods of oral instruction when other possibilities were becoming available” (*Preface to Plato* 40-41). Similarly, in their zeal for a classical rhetorical revival, Weaver, Booth, and Corbett ignore what W.T. Lhamon has since called “the deliberate speed” of post-World War II America: the introduction of the transistor, the television, and the computer into American communicative practices. Despite new technologies, these writers opt for the print-based instruction instead.

No doubt, the collagist juxtapositions of McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* seemed anything but compositionist or classical in form to scholars like Corbett or Booth who promoted syllogistic reasoning and Aristotelian argumentation. Echoing what he conceived as the nature of electronic media production, McLuhan chose a different path than these writers; he abandoned traditional scholarly rhetoric as well as Aristotelian logic in favor of a collage of quotations interspersed with commentary, puns, and allusions. Collage, McLuhan argued, reflects the “sudden implosion” of “heightened human awareness” (*Understanding Media* 20). What fixed perspective was to print, collage, McLuhan claimed, is to electronic communication. His texts were meant to be both theoretical and exemplarily of new media’s rhetorical possibility.

McLuhan saw his project as pedagogical: to teach a media-based writing for scholastic purposes. The challenge for writing instruction, McLuhan felt, was the integration of new media into contemporary curricula to better reflect technology’s role in pedagogy. “The young student today grows up in an electronically configured world,” McLuhan wrote, drawing attention to the disparity between media culture and print-based instruction (*Understanding Media* viii). Following his famous dichotomy of media forms into hot and cool, McLuhan conceptualized our time as the move from hot culture (print) to cool culture (media). The basis of this observation stems from cool media’s high participatory nature, which forms an interlinking mosaic of associations among disciplines and areas of study: “There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone . . . hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation” (*Understanding Media* 36). Despite technological changes, the school system, McLuhan argued, remains hot in its support for separate areas of academic study (English, history, science) while the rest of the culture becomes cool through global-information systems that forge high levels of interaction, causing
disciplinary boundaries to collapse. McLuhan felt that although students are raised in a mosaic culture,

at school . . . [they encounter] a situation organized by means of classified information. The subjects are unrelated. They are visually conceived in terms of a blueprint. The student can find no possible means of involvement for himself, nor can he discover how the educational scene relates to the “mythic” world of electronically processed data and experience he takes for granted. (Understanding Media viii-ix)

The gap reflects a lack of attention within school regarding how rhetoric largely functions within an increasingly technologized culture.

Since McLuhan was not an unknown to either academic or popular readers, how could Corbett, Booth, or Weaver not recognize either his position or, at the very least, general technology’s increasing influence in the early 1960s? John Trimbur and Diane George note that the 1962-63 period is a defining moment for our field; it marks the time when Composition abandoned Communication Studies in order to fashion a unique disciplinary identity. Calling Communication the missing “Fourth C,” Trimbur and George quote 1962’s outgoing CCCC chair, Francis Bowman, as saying that Communication Studies had failed to prove itself to Composition. This lack of interest in Communication that Trimbur and George highlight partly explains the field’s declining interest in those elements which comprise Communications Studies, like Media Studies and, thus, technology. This lack of interest also explains the overemphasis on the “written word” over more widespread writing practices that may combine the word with other forms of media.

Keeping composition and communication separate reproduces deeply engrained logocentric allegiances to the verbal over the visual by holding the intellectual authority of written text over the presumably derivative and immature character of visual communication, thereby making the image subservient to the word. (Trimbur and George 697)

Even as composition rejected Communication Studies (and, thus, McLuhan’s work), communication practices did affect education. In 1963, television, represented by the commercial ETV system, maintained a dominant presence in many classrooms and embodied a new kind of teaching methodology. According to the November 7, 1963 issue of Education U.S.A., “All except one of the 17 largest colleges in the country (enrollment over 20,000) have some form of instructional television for credit” (39). One 1963 advertisement for
Jerrold J-Jacks closed-circuit ETV system refers to itself as a “new teaching tool in over 10,000 classrooms.” Wilbur Schramm, Kack Lyle, and Ithiel de Sola Pool’s 1963 study of ETV examined its implementation in curriculum design. The authors noted television’s ability to affect pedagogy:

It has been learned that the medium has a great power to attract and hold attention and interest, that it has an unequaled ability to share good teaching and excellent demonstrations (for example, permitting 100,000 students at the same time to look through a microscope, or into an atomic reaction), that good teaching on television is about as effective as classroom teaching—but that it is more effective in some kinds of teaching than in others. In particular, it is more effective when it is built into a program of class and individual activities than when it is being used to carry the entire burden of a class. (165)

And much of the temporal advertising that appeared in many education journals stressed using media in the classroom. Journals published in 1963 such as American School and University are full of advertisements for media equipment that, one assumes, would be used in various classrooms, including those where composition was taught. These ads include Kodak Pageant Film projectors, Kodak sound recording tapes, the Ampex E-65 tape recorder, 3M tapes, Astatic’s Astatiphone headphones, Sony video recorders, and Magnavox TVs. In fact, one advertisement in American School and University’s March 1964 issue asks: “Will the SONY Videocorder Replace Teachers?” “Of course not,” the ad comforts:

Nothing will ever replace the teacher. But the new SONY Videocorder will go a long way toward alleviating the shortage of good teachers, of multiplying the efficiency of the school teaching staff and making the tax dollar go a lot further in this era of increasing costs. (Sony)

Nothing will replace the teacher, but the heightened awareness of technology reflected in these studies and advertising moments signifies that McLuhan was not alone in his interests. These moments I find within pedagogy suggest that the classical rhetorical approach towards reviving writing instruction is, by itself, insufficient. Following McLuhan’s thinking, the problem, then, with a classically based “rebirth” of Composition Studies is its insistence on remaining hot while the culture becomes cool. In other words, while a logic of electronic culture was gaining influence in communicative practices, the teaching of writing remained dedicated to a print-based logic and oral methods of argumentation fashioned in classical rhetoric reinscribed for print assessment. This dedication indicates an inability to recognize electronic shifts in communication since the
end of World War II. The consequences of this lapse effect how Composition imagined the writers it produced in this period and would continue to produce for years thereafter.

**Empirical Composition**

If technology, then, was making an impact on education, one might wonder how McLuhan’s ideas regarding education and writing instruction go unmentioned in the advice passed down in non-classical rhetoric work like Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer’s *Research in Written Composition*. *Research in Written Composition* holds a particular place in Composition Studies’ history; its influence, as Richard Young writes, challenged the field’s overemphasis on “problems of application, notably with pedagogical practice, rather than with problems of theory” (31). In *Research in Written Composition*‘s well-known introduction, Braddock et al. argue for the scientific study of students and student writing in order to better evaluate how students compose, think, and produce information. Otherwise, the authors write, the discipline is nothing more than “alchemy”:

> Today’s research in composition, taken as a whole, may be compared to chemical research as it emerged from the period of alchemy: some terms are being defined usefully, a number of procedures are being refined, but the field as a whole is laced with dreams, prejudices, and makeshift operations. (5)

What I find notable is the writers’ choice of empirical evaluation of the classroom as a method for eliminating Composition’s “alchemic” nature. Classifying classroom practices as “variables,” *Research in Written Composition* represents a scientific shift in Composition Studies, one emphasizing data analysis, empirical study, and students as numbers to be counted. The writer variable, the assignment variable, the rater variable, and the colleague variable, Braddock et al. argue, contribute to specific conditions from which researchers can study student writing:

> If English teachers are to do more than “speculate about the conditions for teaching composition,” investigators must plan and carry out the rating of compositions so that the major elements are controlled. To do less is to waste one’s research efforts. (15)

*Research in Written Composition* parallels the year’s other influential work on Composition, one often cited as central to the 1963 revolution: Albert Kitzhaber’s *Themes, Theories, and Therapy*. In his empirical study of a Dartmouth class of first-year students and their writing habits, Kitzhaber
thoroughly analyzes student writing “to shed light on a significant philosophy of teaching freshmen English, as well as provide an opportunity to consider problems that are common to all varieties of the course” (Kitzhaber 29). Kitzhaber studies grading principles (the marking of “wrong words” in student writing), the lack of clarity surrounding assignments (the general “theme” paper), and the divorce between writing instruction and other areas of academic interest (notably literature). The Dartmouth students, too, act as variables; they stand for case studies of how writing should or should not be taught.

I could argue that the scientific emphasis these publications stress is the result of the overall national interest in science and technology created after the Russian launch of Sputnik in 1957. I could argue that point, but the science these texts emphasize is limited in that it does not reflect technological influence on writing, stressing assessment over student rhetorical production. What makes McLuhan’s presence in 1963 writing theory relevant is precisely his lack of interest in technology as pure science (or for assessment purposes) and his promotion of technology as rhetoric. McLuhan identifies Sputnik as a moment best understood as a new era of knowledge construction, in which individuals must reconcile new ways of producing information with old ways:

When Sputnik had first gone into orbit a schoolteacher asked her second-graders to write some verse on the subject. One child wrote:

The stars are so big,
The earth is so small,
Stay as you are

With man his knowledge and the process of obtaining knowledge are of equal magnitude. Our ability to apprehend galaxies and subatomic structures, as well, is a movement of faculties that includes and transcends them. The second-grader who wrote the words above lives in a world much vaster than any which a scientist today has instruments to measure, or concepts to describe. (Understanding Media 46)

What we see is a contrast between the rational reasoning of Braddock et al. and Kitzhaber and the more abstract question of knowledge acquisition favored by McLuhan. McLuhan’s position is that the linear, hierarchal methods which are conducive to print and which support rational, ordered thinking must yield to an electronic world where ordered thought no longer plays the same role in communication. The implications extend beyond writing itself, for the institutions which support writing are, in turn, structured on either print or electronic models. Despite technological advancements in communication, school, McLuhan contended, still bases itself ideologically and pedagogically
on print. McLuhan’s contribution to rhetorical thought is the recognition that writing influences and shapes the apparatus within which we work, study, think, and live. When writing changes, the apparatus also needs to change:

It is a matter of the greatest urgency that our educational institutions realize that we now have civil war among these environments created by media other than the printed word. The classroom is now in a vital struggle for survival with the immensely persuasive “outside” world created by new informational media. Education must shift from instruction, from imposing of stencils, to discovery—to probing and exploration and to the recognition of the language of forms. (Massage 100)

McLuhan pleads for the teaching of invention over analysis because “exploration” is more conducive to electronic rhetoric than traditional argumentation — what Gregory Ulmer has since called a hyper-rhetorical practice of “conduction” (as opposed to Aristotelian “deduction”). McLuhan provides a theory of invention for writing instruction which differs from the typical print-based prompts often associated with first-year writing or triumphed by Kitzhaber as “based directly on the reading done in the course . . . analysis or criticism” (Themes, Theories, and Therapy 134). McLuhan, in essence, introduces electronic rhetoric in 1963 while others continue to stress the rhetorical conventions of print, whether those conventions are based in the reproduction of classical rhetoric or linear reasoning.

MEDIA STUDENTS

I make these comparisons in order to highlight the ideological position Composition’s grand narrative creates when it speaks of a “revolution” yet fails to be more inclusive (as Havelock’s observation suggests such moments should be). Neither Braddock et al., Kitzhaber, nor the various “types” of composition practices North identifies as originating in 1963 include media as writing. They thus exclude the student as someone who works with media and instead focus solely on the student as a creation of print culture. James McRimmon, in his important 1963 textbook Writing with a Purpose, calls this print-oriented 1963 student writer one who works with “purpose.” Purpose, probably the most identifiable method of print-based pedagogies, directs linear progression from idea to idea by situating writers and their work within pre-established narrative goals:

Once a writer has defined his purpose, he has so concentrated his thinking that the needed facts and illustrations come readily to
mind. By clarifying his purpose he creates a channel through which his thoughts will flow easily, and he thus makes his thinking more efficient. (McCrimmon 12)

McCrimmon’s logic is a case for linear order. Remembering Louis Althusser’s well-known theory of interpellation, the idea that circulated meanings “hail” us into identifying with them, I can imagine student writers using McCrimmon’s advice to see their thinking processes, too, as linear progressions which always reflect purpose. The student writer who defines work as a linear move through various stages of purpose also sees herself as a purposeful being whose work must always be predetermined by purpose-oriented goals, be they academic (a grade) or vocational (a job). This kind of purpose reflects print’s emphasis on order and standardization — what McLuhan calls “centuries of specialist stress in pedagogy” (Understanding Media 300). Consider the McCrimmon, print-oriented student “hailed” in 1963 with McLuhan’s temporal thoughts about individuals and expression:

In this electric age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of our consciousness. That is what is meant when we say that we daily know more and more about man. We mean that we can translate more and more of ourselves into other forms of expression that exceed ourselves. (Understanding Media 65)

The McCrimmon student is hailed into having purpose; McLuhan’s writer is hailed as engaged with discovery. McLuhan is describing heuristics, invention practices unlimited by media restrictions and not necessarily preempted by feelings of purpose or direction. McLuhan’s point is a far cry from McCrimmon’s limited advice that “a good thesis is restricted, unified, precise” (McCrimmon 40). The McLuhan model is not about establishing a precise identity nor a precise piece of writing. In fact, McLuhan’s pedagogy of heuristics argues that students raised in the electronic age must see themselves as more than the restricted definition of “student.” Instead, students play “mythic” roles as they create knowledge for various work, study, and personal situations. In school, the methods of categorization print creates from its principles of standardization lead to the specific category of “student writer.” Students are categorized as only being students. In the electronic space, categorization gives way to pattern formation so that students (and all writers) find themselves occupying shifting identities (i.e., mythic, patterned roles) as they compose. “The young today,” McLuhan notes, “reject goals. They want roles— R-O-L-E-S” (Massage 100). These roles, however, reflect something beyond traditional notions of literacy.
since literacy and education still define writers as students engaged with school work. “It is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner” (Understanding Media 20). Discursive roles are mythic, cultural extensions of ourselves that we create through various methods of communication, writing among them. “We actually live mythically and integrally, as it were, but we continue to think in the old, fragmented space and time patterns of the pre-electric age” (Understanding Media 20). The digital writer cannot separate her identity(ies) from her writing.

And neither, no doubt, could 1963 students separate themselves from their classroom writing. How can students feel that they are more than student writers when they and their work are reduced to “variables” like those used by Braddock et al.?

If an investigator wishes to measure individual students’ improvement in writing, he should provide for at least two writing occasions as a pretest, at least two as a posttest, and count the rating only of the better composition on each occasion. If three writing occasions are used for each test, it may be wisest to average the ratings of the two best papers, but more research needs to be done on this possibility. (7)

This kind of ideology produces a culture of testing, not one of thinking — and not one interested in rhetoric. Writing that can be tested not once, but repeatedly for variation or difference, is writing that is asked to conform and to adapt to a preselected and preapproved method of expression. The Research in Written Composition contribution to 1963 writing instruction, then, is as revolutionary as Taylorist assumptions about work and efficiency; it produces test subjects who move through the system as competently as possible. But what, on the other hand, would it have meant to teach “other forms of expression that exceed ourselves,” as McLuhan writes, in 1963 writing classrooms, and what does it mean today? It means shifting the focus from writing that can be tested or measured to writing that explores new media — among them, hypertext.

The Hypertextual Move

I find McLuhan’s theory to be an explicit rejection of 1963 writing instruction centered on empirical study such as that which focuses on “precise” or “restricted” models like the thesis statement or tested writing, which I draw attention to above. But I find McLuhan even more compelling when I discover that at the same time Composition is experiencing its supposed rebirth and that McLuhan is theorizing an alternative, media-based method for writing, Douglas Engelbart and Ted Nelson are imagining the electronic systems of writing we have since come to call hypertext. In his 1963 “A Conceptual
Framework for Augmenting Man’s Intellect,” Engelbart proposed a computer-based writing system that would allow users simultaneously to interlink and juxtapose multiple drafts of a text. Outlining a vision not unlike contemporary Windows-like operating systems, word processing functions, or web browser displays, Engelbart, like McLuhan, theorized writing as collage. Under Engelbart’s system, writers could work with multiple versions of one text and interlink the texts in a variety of ways. And like McLuhan, Engelbart saw in new technologies great pedagogical potential. “It would seem unlikely that the language we now use provides the best possible service to our minds in pursuing comprehension and solving problems,” Engelbart wrote. “It seems very likely that a more useful language can be devised” (13). For Engelbart, that language should be computer-based because computer languages offer an appropriate medium for manipulation. “In the limit of what we might now imagine,” he wrote,

this [symbol manipulator] could be a computer, with which individuals could communicate rapidly and easily, coupled to a three-dimensional color display within which extremely sophisticated images could be constructed, the computer being able to execute a wide variety of processes on parts or all of these images in automatic response to human direction. (14)

The nature of juxtaposed writing that Engelbart associates with personal computing rejects the uniformity that preciseness encourages.

Juxtaposition assumes that difference cannot be repeated easily because the bringing together of unlike texts, ideas, or images produces different results depending on the material used. Such is the basis of Ted Nelson’s notion of hypertext, an idea he, too, devised in 1963. Engelbart’s Windows-like system is, in effect, a “lighter” version of Nelson’s interconnecting world of information where quotations, images, new writing, cartoons, anecdotes, graphs, ads, puns all come together in interlinking ways. Nelson’s hypertext was meant to move writing outside of the dominant print culture’s restrictions, beyond both the practical and the ideological structures governing expression—what Nelson terms the “paperdigm.” “The notion of paper,” Nelson writes, “a two dimensional, sequential relation of facts and ideas—is one of the things most holding back software design and human progress” (Dream Machines 27). The paperdigm limits technological integration into writing, for writers working according to the paperdigm are accustomed to print expectations. Educators, too, come to depend on the paperdigm, and thus, as I contend for 1963 Composition Studies, become too used to print culture’s familiar and ubiquitous writing practices.
My point is not that 1963 educators failed to see what should have been obvious. Such a critique is too easy to make. What writing instructors failed to understand, I contend, was that the overall relationship between technology and writing resides in changes within rhetorical production—what Walter Ong has called “the technologizing of the word.” In other words, one cannot understand writing, as many of the theorists in the 1963 grand narrative do, without understanding technology in terms outside of print. Even while Kitzhaber acknowledges technology as something writing pedagogy might utilize for classroom practice, he still is guilty of adhering to the paperdigm so that he, and students, can measure standardized responses. Consider his own brief interest in technology in *Themes, Theories, Therapy*:

A teaching machine or a programmed text is a device that presents one item or frame at a time; that is, it allows students to see one sentence with a critical word left out or one statement followed by a question. The student writes the required answer on the program itself or on an answer tape or booklet. If he has been using a typical teaching machine, it then activates a mechanism that moves his answer under a clear plastic window (where he cannot change it) at the same time that it reveals the correct answer. (85)

This hypothetical teaching machine merely upholds a practice conducive to print: grading papers for uniformity and precision (the correct, fill-in-the-blank answer). To make the leap in reasoning—to reject the paperdigm—is to realize that new models of composition must be built in order to accommodate technological changes in rhetorical production (what hypertext offers through interlinking, interactivity, and non-linearity) and the educational apparatus (what McLuhan theorizes).

**The 1963 Cut-Up Machine Writer**

Did there exist, then, a writer in 1963 actually engaging with any of these theories or ideas, implicitly or explicitly? One of the best examples of a writer putting into practice the principles laid down elsewhere by McLuhan, Engelbart, and Nelson is William S. Burroughs. Burroughs does not represent the traditional Compositionist, either as teacher or as student. Yet his principles of writing, exemplified in his 1962-64 trilogy of *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*, construct a rhetoric for dealing with the basic tenets of technological influence. Burroughs teaches a rhetoric of disruption, one meant to challenge media control and influence while working within the language of media itself. “Listen to my last words anywhere,” *Nova Express* begins, foretelling the end of print’s domination in favor of an
emerging electronic rhetoric (3). “Cut all tape. Shift cut tangle magpie voice lines of the earth” (Nova Express 15). In this new rhetoric, Burroughs argues for an electronic writing practice of cut-ups; media construction produces a rhetoric of cutting and rearranging advertisements, political speeches, newspaper stories, literature, and other forms of expression because the language of new media is itself a cut-up constructed through editing and juxtaposition. Burroughs imagined writing as the overall process of achieving the cut-up in complex ways. His writing/teaching machine contrasts significantly with that proposed by Kitzhaber:

A writing machine that shifts one half one text and half the other through, a page frame on conveyor belts—(The proportion of half one text half the other is important corresponding as it does to the two halves of the human organism). Shakespeare, Rimbaud, etc. permutating through page frames in constantly changing juxtaposition the machine spits out books and plays and poems—The spectators are invited to feed into the machine any pages of their own text in fifty-fifty juxtaposition with any author of their choice any pages of their choice and provided with the result in a few minutes. (Ticket 65)

In Burroughs’s writing machine, dominant ideologies become subjected to newly created writerly control. The language of new media (to use a phrase recently coined by theorist Lev Manovich) becomes a critical tool as power shifts back and forth between those who create discourse and those who receive it. Even more so, those who use this language become, in McLuhan’s words, mythic beings. Indeed, the practitioners of the cut-up, exemplified in the very medium of the cut-up Burroughs fashions, are themselves mythic; they are constructions emerging out of the specific kinds of discourse they produce. Note Burroughs’s creation of The Subliminal Kid, one of many Burroughs collagist characters who either search out modes of resistance to technology or succumb to technology. These characters formulate rhetorical responses by using technology in media-intensive ways. The Subliminal Kid “had recorder in tracks and moving film mixing arbitrary intervals and agents moving with the word and image of tape recorders” (Nova Express 148):

“The Subliminal Kid” moved in and took over bars cafés and juke boxes of the world cities and installed radio transmitters and microphones in each bar so that the music and talk of any bar could be heard in all his bars and he had tape recorders in each bar that played and recorded at arbitrary intervals and his agents moved back and forth with portable tape recorders and brought back street sound and talk and music and poured it into his recorder array so he set waves and
eddies and tornadoes of sound down all your streets and by the river of all language. (*Nova Express* 147)

Burroughs produces a lesson not just for how to write (gather various influences, juxtapose them, play them back), but for how media-based writing transforms writers into media beings. The Burroughs writer is not a student writer nor is she a placement test taker nor is she a variable to be studied. She is a writer, and the connotation of that word suggests one who engages with rhetoric in order to enact, counter, uphold, or resist social change and policy. It’s not hard to imagine this writer today working with an iPod, a browser, a digital mixer, a word processing program, a video recorder, an HTML editor, or any other new media tool for discursive purposes.

It is not hard for us as well, contemporary writing instructors, to imagine this kind of writer, and yet we mostly do not. Even though the initial theoretical questions regarding media-based writing were raised in 1963, theoretically and practically, Composition Studies still clings to the models produced elsewhere in that year. Those models, in fact, more strongly reflect an already established tradition of writing instruction. As revolutionary as they were for their inception of empirical study or resurgence of classical rhetoric, these studies differ little from a tradition dating back to Harvard’s creation of the freshmen writing exam in the late 1800s, itself a transitory moment which, in turn, led to the invention of first-year writing.

Likewise, it’s not hard for us to imagine today a writer who, like Burroughs’s Subliminal Kid, produces media-based text outside of the classroom at work, at home, or at play. Yet because our grand narrative is based on a print model, we do not actualize that imaginary figure in current curricular decisions within Composition Studies nor in pedagogy itself. Instead of teaching an electronic rhetoric derived from the theories of McLuhan or Engelbart, Nelson or Burroughs, we cling to *Research in Written Composition*—esque notions of assessment and accountability. Therein lies our current dilemma. To truly explore a technology-rich curriculum, we must break out of 1963’s grand narrative and the paperdigm it continues to disseminate as pedagogical practice. In 1963, Albert Kitzhaber wrote in *CCC*, “The English curriculum must be thought through afresh in the light of present conditions in our society and the present state of knowledge about the matters that we teach, or ought to teach, in the English classroom” (“4C” 131). And while he didn’t include the innovations in technology and media theory occurring as he penned this plea, we, today, can better understand the opportunity missed. 1963 is an important moment for Composition Studies. Its importance today, however, can be amplified if we begin to consider those other 1963 developments in media theory and production left outside of our historical narratives. In effect, what
I ask for is a closer correlation between writing and media in our pedagogy and in our theorizing.

Detroit, MI

Notes

1 In his 1967 Medium is the Massage, McLuhan works with images, alternative layout, backwards text, and repetition to further his claim that electronic writing creates a shift in how we conceive communicative practices.


3 See Robert Connors’s Thirty Years of Writing with a Purpose and Lester Faigley’s Fragments of Rationality for discussion of why this textbook is influential.

4 Contemporary digital culture best reflects how roles are played out through writing: hip hop and DJ culture’s insistence on alter egos, represented by the monikers 50 Cent, Ghost Face Killah, Madlib, or DJ Shadow among others, are as much a part of discourse as the discourse itself.

5 My claim is not that we do not teach HTML, weblogs, or other new media-based assignments. Instead, I am talking about the much larger issues of curriculum and pedagogical practice.

6 Kathleen Blake Yancey presented her Chair’s address at the 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication as a highly visual, non-linear, media text. The lesson her presentation should have for Composition Studies is that this kind of writing belongs in the classroom as well and that many of the 1963 theorists I draw attention to in this essay can teach us how to teach and perform such writing.

Works Cited


