GRADING AND STUDENT CHOICE
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I have just read Milton and Edgerly’s timely The Testing and Grading of Students. Given the evidence presented, all one can conclude is that wide-scale changes in both testing and grading at the college level are indeed in order. But I was somewhat surprised that nowhere in the text are alternatives to standard procedure suggested. Milton and Edgerly seem to accept that procedure implicitly, though, to be sure, they would see it applied conscientiously and fairly. For example, they nowhere question across-the-board testing, nor suggest that options might be given to students with respect to grading. That, at any rate, is the point I wish to make here.

But a bit of background first. Recently, I published a piece 2 in which I describe a new method—new, at least, to college-level teaching—of grading poetry to freshmen. The method, which involves having students themselves write poems, need not concern us here. What is to our point is that in devising the method, I realized that I could not use standard grading practices; so I enforced having to work out an alternative. Though I approached the alternative that I struck on with much hesitation, it worked initially and has worked since as well for me that I am amazed that it is neither widely used nor as far as I can determine, widely known.

Almost all college courses, a teacher assigns a given quantity of work to all of his students and then, at the end of the term, assigns a grade as to quality. But why should quantity be a constant, especially in a course required school-wide whose students are of vastly different backgrounds and who have totally different goals? At Manhattan, students in any given section of freshman English come from the schools of Arts and Science, Business, Engineering, and Teacher Preparation. That question led me to set different requirements for each of the three respectable grades (A, B, and C).

Because I have modified slightly my original format, I shall describe what my breakdown as to requirements now is. All of my students have to do a certain minimum of work: specifically, to hand in over the course of the term eight exercises in poetic processes, to write ten critiques by way of answer to questions asked on specified poems (the writing here is not graded, only the content), and to pass ten factual quizzes on poems assigned. Such is the base, and such the requirements for a “C”, requirements that I deliberately keep to a minimum so that any student can obtain a “C” simply by doing the work. That is, for the “C”, a student need only do the exercises and critiques. He must, of course, pass the quizzes, which means that he must do the reading. I assign “D” or “F” only to those students who obviously have not done the basic work. Those who strive for a “B” must do the basic “C” work plus the following: they must write two formal papers (2-3 pages each and acceptable on the score of writing as well as content) and pass a short exam at the end of the semester. For the “A” grade, one has to do everything mentioned thus far plus an acceptable research paper. Let me note, too, that for the “A” and the “B,” the quality of the exercises and critiques is taken into account, as is class work.

It means these specifics only by way of example. What is important is the principle; grades can be structured so as to reflect, in part, student choice. To be sure, one does not assign an “A” or a “B” simply because the work has been handed in. Quality is, finally, the determining factor for a student to achieving either top grade. But in dividing the work in a way like that outlined above, a teacher can take into account that problematic intangible—effort. And students who know that they cannot fall below a “C” as long as they do the minimum amount of work (I.e., because a student who elects to do the work for a “B,” say, also has to work for a “C,” even if his “B” work is poor, he will get his “C”) are more apt to relax and thus to do better work for the higher grades.

But I hear questions and objections. How, the reader asks, does the system I have sketched differ from “contract grading”? The main difference is that under my system a student does not formally contract for anything. He must do the “C” work, but the rest he decides to do or not to do at any point in the term—at least until the last few weeks. It is not pedagogically sound, I think, to limit freshmen early in a semester: they need time to grow and to discover their potentials and inclinations. My method gives them that time. Also, there is the matter of the base. Again, no student can fail below a “C” if the basic work is simply done; such is not the case with strict contracting. And this matter of the base I cannot stress enough. For it is the establishing of a base that makes the system as a whole viable in that it creates an atmosphere congenial to striving and, thus, to learning.

Does that mean that I stress quantity rather than quality? Would I encourage mediocrity? I believe that just the opposite is true. I encourage excellence and allow for mediocrity. To be sure, quantity is the basis of judgment for the “C”—but only for the “C.” And note, no student is locked into a “C” until close to the end of a given semester. During the course of the term, the usual “C” student has every chance to be affected by my encouragement and the striving of his fellows to go beyond the mediocre. There are other things to be mentioned here as well. What point is there in asking everyone in a required class to write a research paper, for example? My system allows a teacher to spend his time where it can do most good, and encourages students to do the same. I do not wish to sound utopian, however. There is always the student who misjudges his abilities and does all of the work, but does it poorly. That is sad. But again, because such a student cannot fall below a “C,” he can be helped to see— as can the class at large—that there are other reasons than simply those of a grade for doing work. And that the student cannot fall below a “C” helps to moderate hard feelings—which can be corrosive to a class—as does the safeguard of the final exam. I have found that students who do the formal writing but do it poorly also fail the final exam and so could not get an “A” or a “B” in any event. That most accept with good grace.

But at this point a cynic objects: “Why, most will opt for a ‘C’ and do only the minimum.” All I can answer is that that has not been my experience. Indeed, I have myself been surprised by the number of students who have elected over the past five semesters (I have used the system thus far in thirteen sections of freshman English) to work for the higher marks. No more than twenty percent of any given class has done the minimum (ten per cent has been the norm), and some of those students would probably not have done even that in a typical freshman class. But some, too, have had special problems, and, thus, have greeted my procedure as a salvation. Only one type of student, I now feel, is potentially ill-served by the procedure: the under-achiever. But at least the method puts the responsibility where it belongs: the under-achiever, that is, cannot rationalize his mark away; thus, the
chances are improved that he will address his problem directly. But for the student who would like a "B," but who was not given the time to do all of the work for an "A," (an engineer, for example, in a required course in English), the system is a boon. It is also a boon for the teacher of any school-wide requirement. For one thing, it allows a teacher to maintain the integrity of the top grades he gives with a minimum of ill-feeling. That is important especially today, when everyone, it seems, clamors for an "A," whether deserved or not, and when simple authoritarianism in marking only breeds an atmosphere hostile to learning. For better or worse, one must soften one's authoritarianism or undermine one's teaching capabilities entirely. My system has allowed me to find a middle ground between the unworkably strict and the merely lax. Then, too, because it gives students choice, it tends to involve them more than they might become involved otherwise. That has been established for me by evaluations: I have not yet had a student who disliked the system, and a great many have stated that it helped to increase their interest in a course that they did not wish to take at the outset. And when the interest of students increases, so, surely, does that of their teacher. Yet another plus for the method is that it carries with it secondary pedagogical benefit: it is, in itself become a vehicle for teaching and learning. Specifically, it dramatically (as opposed to discursively) embodies what choice and adult responsibility mean. Just last term, for example, a student asked me whether a given student who chose to work for a "B" (rather than an "A") but who did exceptionally fine work would still get only a "B," even though others who had done similarly average work would also be getting "B's." The answer, of course, is "Yes, he would get a B." But that is no different from what would happen in any course, whatever the system grading used. No, there is one difference: in most courses students are penalized for not doing all of the work (indeed, a student might be dropped below a "B" if he had not done everything), whereas my method allows marks (over and above the "C," that is) to be put on a positive rather than a negative basis. It also tends to stimulate discussions of marking like that being considered here, and thus to get students to think about the very idea of responsibility. At any rate, in answering the question, I believe, I helped the whole class to grasp more fully what choice means. Finally, the system necessitates a clear spelling out of criteria, goals, and respons-
sibilities. By using it, then, a teacher has an automatic check upon himself. Are there many of us — at least those of those who have taught for a number of years — who do not need such a check?

All in all, the method I have described has proven workable and beneficial. In that it gives choice and helps to structure responsibility without limiting students too early in a semester for their good, it should prove for many undergraduate subjects when modified appropriately, especially for subjects required on a school-wide basis. But there is a further principle here. In re-thinking the matters of testing and grading — a re-thinking sponsored, no doubt, by the back-to-basics movement — we should not return to the rigidity of the past. Certainly, we need to affirm the validity of marking in the first place and to improve standard modes of testing and grading. But we need also to find alternative modes when alternatives will serve good pedagogical practice. Theoretically, at least, the pendulum is swinging. This time, let us try to fill the normally unfilled center.

NOTES

3 The freshman course at Manhattan is divided into a term of poetry and a term of fiction. For the alternate term in fiction, I divide up the basic work in the same manner, with the exercises and critiques (I give fifteen critiques and no quizzes the first term), of course, on fiction and its processes.
4 Does this cheaper the "C"? No doubt it does if one is thinking of marking ten or twenty years ago. But the "C" has been so cheapened of late generally that it is not what it was in any event. One must take cognizance of that fact, as well as of the fact that students who do the basic work in a required course deserve something. But one must guard the higher grades if marking is to mean anything. As I shall point out, my system helps one do just that with a minimum of stress.
5 I should note that rarely has a very bright student not opted to do all of the work for me. But this term I had such a student (one out of eighty-five). He was a classic under-achiever, though with a touch of arrogance about him (the two, perhaps, often go together). Realizing that he had not done the research paper, I saw him in conference and got him, or so he told me, to see his problem for the first time. His "B," in other words, was worth much more than an "A" with respect to learning and development.

MOTIVATIONS FOR WRITING: THE COMPOSITION CAFETERIA

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We have failed to pay sufficient attention to motivating our students to write, and to motivating faculty members to teach writing. Frequently the composition course is the only "set" course demanded of all students in the university's or college's curriculum. While we have offered increasingly varied required courses in the traditional "distribution" fields, usually the sciences, social sciences and humanities, we have done only a little to vary the kinds of writing courses our students can take. I suggest that greater clarity about the reasons for insisting that students learn how to write expository prose will help our students to be motivated to learn, and teachers to be motivated to teach.

At least three rationales can be discerned for insisting that all college students attain some skill in the writing of exposi-
Motivation for learning to write expository prose is also undermined by fundamental changes in the modes of communication. Though we are more inundated by language than ever in our history, much of that language comes from non-print media. It is hardly necessary to repeat the obvious here in any great detail. TV, the movies and radio all speak to our culture, but they do so in verbal forms which are only peripherally related to writing. Though we all get so much junk mail every day that the postal system is nearly bankrupt, all that writing, and all the other writing we read, is only a small percentage of all the words and sentences that impinge on our consciousness.

A larger student body, more diversified from the point of view of class and culture than any conceived of by an earlier generation of universities and colleges, and a communications system profoundly influenced by non-print media, then, make it necessary to re-examine the motivations of our students and teachers in the writing course. Even if composition teachers can be relied upon to believe almost intuitively in the value of teaching writing, we certainly cannot assume that our students agree with us, or share our instinctive—and perhaps self-protective—feelings. Rather, we have the responsibility of establishing motivations which our students can understand, or at the least, of matching students with rationales appropriate for them.

The three rationales for the composition course I have discussed certainly have validity. The difficulty is, however, that though students may be persuaded that one or another, but not all three, of these rationales are valid, the one they see as real may not be congruent with their teacher’s aims in the classroom. The result is that the course students may actually be taking has little to do with their perceived reasons for taking the course at all, and this disparity is often the result of the student’s experience. Thus, many students will not need to write very much expository prose in order to get “through” school. My science students, my engineering students, and even my business and liberal arts students frequently tell me that they have never had to write a paper in their entire academic careers—and they are telling the truth. They assure me that their teachers never give them anything but short-answer examinations. No writing they have had to do has been as lengthy, as complex, or as demanding as the writing they have to do in a course they are told they need for the rest of their education. They are most likely to have to write extensively in their humanities or social science courses—and in that case, they sometimes feel that they are being made to learn a skill they do not see as particularly valuable in itself, in order to learn subject matter they do not particularly want to learn! Of course, that is by no means true for all students. Many do feel the need for learning how to improve their writing as an aid in their work in other courses. But surely, the service rationale for composition courses does not work for all students, because many do not need that service very much.

The creativity rationale has behind it another premise which many students find questionable. It suggests that everyone can be, and certainly ought to be, creative and, in particular, creative in the use of written language. That premise is frequently a liberal article of faith, one which we should all like to share, I suppose. But it runs smack into the realities of American life, and into the realities of the people who now make up much of our student bodies. Students from non-middle class homes, who have been programmed by 12 years of primary and secondary education to be anything but creative in written language, cannot all suddenly want to be creative in writing compositions. Most people can be creative—but must they be verbally creative? And must they be verbally creative in writing? The person who can take a beat-up old car and turn it into a sleek and colorful dune buggy, the person whose body moves marvelously to a rock rhythm on the dance floor, is creative—why must he or she...
be verbally creative? It is, it seems to me, an entirely middle-class bias which insists that everyone must be "creative" with (often) words. Some people may want to create in other media—in non-language media, or in non-written languages, and that is their privilege. And some people, I think we must acknowledge, may not wish to expend their energies in anything more than what would be considered creative at all. In a society which imposes so much that is joyless and dehumanized on so many of its members, it is a little much to insist that all of them must be "creative." Perhaps that is an agenda for another stage in human history.

When the university and college were exclusively the preserve of a fairly homogeneous middle and upper class, perhaps it made sense to insist on creativity as part of everyone's education. But that is no longer the case. Much that is creative will happen outside the walls of our schools, and some people will not feel any urge for formal creativity. Therefore, it seems to me an imposition on the student's right to determine his or her own destiny when we insist that one of the values in his or her education must lie in being "creative"—and especially in being creative in written language as we, for the most part ourselves from middle-class and well-educated environments, define that creativity. We must, on the other hand, offer students an opportunity to be creative in language, in ways which Macrorie and Miller among others have explored, and many students from all segments of the student body will want to take advantage of that opportunity. But surely, the creativity rationale will not work for all students.

Many students will not think that they will ever need to know how to write in the world outside the schools. They will argue that their planned professions will require very little, if any, writing of expository prose. They will tell us that they never write letters, not with the telephone at their bedside and on their desks. They will argue that they will never want to write a letter to the editor, a PTA or church newsletter, a politician's speech, platforms or leaflets. They are probably right. Many will hardly ever write much more than "Johnny couldn't come to school yesterday because he was sick," or the monosyllabic answers to a job application tailored for those who don't write much very much. Now, some students will surely feel that they are not able to write letters, that they may well want to participate in their community's life as writers of PTA newsletters, political leaflets or letters to the editor and even—my wishful thinking likes to think—as drafters of radical manifestos. Some will understand that their career plans will include the writing of long expository reports to employers, diagnoses of children's learning needs, funding proposals. For these, we must provide courses which will help them to acquire these skills. But surely, the lifelong writing rationale will not work for all students.

Though our rationales for insisting that college graduates have writing skills are valid then, no single rationale for the writing course will work for all students. But one or more of the three rationales suggested here or others which may be suggested will work for most of them. It should be our function, then, and this function should be structured into our course offerings, to satisfy the perceived needs of our students in such a way that most, if not all of them, can find a good reason—perhaps one can even hope for sufficient reason—for taking the writing courses they are made to take. It is important to structure such a reason into the writing course, and even into its title. We can preach to our students in our first day of class lecture all we want about the importance of learning how to write well, but unless the course itself shows that importance in the act of writing, and unless the rationale is congruent with student-perceived needs, we will not be believed. Furthermore, unless faculty itself is convinced that there is sufficient reason for learning how to write—a reason more sufficient, that is, than that we need jobs—our own negative feelings will be transmitted to our students, and they will not be motivated.

Therefore we must offer our students, I believe, a varied cafeteria of composition courses from which they can choose that course which seems to fit their rationale for learning how to write expository prose. Many write workshops already offer courses which move in that direction. Few, I know of, however, have gone far enough, or have based the variety of courses offered on the variety of student motives for learning how to write that I have suggested. The cafeteria in which I envision goes far beyond writing courses organized around a single theme—"war," "love," or "the hero," to use the titles of some volumes in a series of readers published for this purpose—which have become fairly common. The cafeteria approach suggests that our students—not we, but our students, whatever their cultural class, ethnic or professional diversity may be—are best able to judge which rationale fits their needs, and therefore are best able to judge what will motivate them most for learning how to improve their writing. I am aware that the notion that our students can judge, in this sense, what is best for them, is in itself an article of faith, not unlike the articles of faith I have just given to those who insist on the creativity rationale. I do not propose to argue the validity of this article of faith here, though it seems to me to be more in tune with the realities of the kinds of students we serve than any other. Certainly, this article of faith, basic to the cafeteria concept, has been adopted in other disciplines, and by educational institutions which offer a greater variety of courses, majors, and even ways of learning, than any in our previous history.

In the composition program at the institution where I teach, we are beginning to make some efforts in the direction of the composition cafeteria. Since we have a two-course composition requirement for all students who do not place out of composition by a variety of possible methods, we have attempted to institute the beginnings of such an approach in the second course in the sequence, on the assumption that the first course is involved in teaching the most rudimentary of writing skills and ought to be left to that task. In the second course, however, the emphasis is on writing of argumentative prose based in part on the use of secondary sources. One version of this course, which has been taught unchanged for many years now, is organized without any particular designation for the subject matter of the course. It is usually organized around a rhetorical scheme or a sequence of learning steps, enhanced by the use of diverse essays from an anthology. Students who choose to take one of these courses from the many sections of second-quarter composition offered have no way of knowing what they will write about, think about or read about before they register for the course. The motivation for taking this course is either simply that it is required, or that the student wishes to learn how to write for some reason he or she understands, and hopes will be satisfied by the course.

We have recently begun to design a series of variations on this course which attempt to come to grips with the problem of student motivation, on a cafeteria-like base. Grouped together under the general heading of "Topics" courses in composition, these sections have titles designating them in the quarterly timetables in such a fashion that students can know what they will read, write and think about. We also attempt to publish brief blurbs about these courses, which are given to students in the first quarter sections of the course, providing more information than a mere title. Under this general "Topics" rubric, we have attempted to solicit from faculty three kinds of courses, which we have designated variously as instructor-interest based, discipline based, and life-writing based.

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Discipline-based courses deal, not so much with a specified topic, but with an aspect of the academic curriculum other than writing, around which a student can expect to focus his or her work. Among these being developed or already taught are "Folklore in American Life," "The Language of Legal Writing" (by a faculty member who changed his career from law to poetry), "The Conduct of Science," and "Writing About Urban Blues." It is obvious that the difficulty in arranging such courses lies in finding faculty members who have sufficient expertise in fields other than language and literature to teach them. We have suggested to our staff that a good amateur knowledge in such a field is sufficient, since we will not pose as experts in the discipline but as people who have expertise in writing, with some additional knowledge in a field about which the writing will center. These courses can provide a rationale for those students who have a clear disciplinary goal in mind, or an avocational interest in a discipline, about which they can learn to write. These courses are not necessarily always sharply differentiated from life-writing courses.

The life-writing based courses, which we hope will motivate students who can conceive of some use for writing in their lives as workers or citizens, have so far been the most difficult to solicit from faculty. They require, perhaps, the most extensive use of faculty imagination, and offer the greatest challenge from that point of view. Among those so far developed or in the planning stage are "Writing About the Health Care System," by a faculty member who has been extensively involved in community action around health care issues, "Writing About Sports," by a person with a special interest in that area, and "Writing for Community Action," a course not yet fully developed, being proposed by a faculty member with extensive experience in political and other citizen's actions.

The theory here is simple enough. There are several sound reasons for insisting that our students attempt to improve their writing. Students can be taught more efficiently if they can understand the reasons for learning to write well by choosing from among various rationales that one which they perceive to be valid. They themselves are the best judges of the reasons for learning to write well, provided we offer them a great enough variety of courses from which they can choose those which fit their judgments about the reasons for learning to write. Faculty members will be best motivated to teach if they are convinced that there are values to learning to write well, beyond the student's need to pass the course. The composition cafeteria, if thought through carefully and developed judiciously, can make a significant contribution to increasing motivation for learning how to write well—and a lack of motivation is at the core of much that is so difficult in teaching composition in our changing and changing universities and colleges.

NOTES

1In an examination of recent articles concerning composition in CCC and CE I have not found a single instance in which such a rationale is frankly acknowledged as the major one for requiring composition courses of all students. However, Geneva Smitherman (see n. 5) has discussed this rationale extensively. A recent article by David R. Pichaske (see n. 4, p. 118) cites an instance in which the unnamed reviewer of one of Pichaske's books articulates such a rationale as the only one possible for teaching composition. Glenn Malott, "In Search of a Philosophical Context for Teaching Composition," CCC, 27, No. 1 (Feb. 1976), 25-31, grapples with related questions in interesting and provocative ways.


3James E. Miller, Jr., Word, Self, Reality: The Rhetoric of Imagination (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1972), and "Rediscovering the Rhetoric of Imagination," CCC, 25, No. 5 (Dec. 1974), 360-67. I am grateful to Prof. Miller, who sent me a copy of an earlier version of the article in CCC, which was most useful to me in preparing an earlier version of my article.

4David R. Pichaske, "Freshman Comp: What Is This Shit?" CB, 38, No. 2 (Oct. 1976), 117-24. Pichaske charges that the profession teaches without creativity, and hence badly, in tones strongly reminiscent of widespread and significant student and faculty criticism of the 'sixties and earlier 'seventies. While I welcome Pichaske's tone, which is so much less often heard in the quieter later 'seventies, it seems to me that he ignores significant changes in composition teaching which have taken place in recent years.

5Geneva Smitherman, "Hidden Agendas: The View from Minority Students, or Keep This Nigger Boy Running!" address, 1974 meeting, CCC. I am grateful to Prof. Smitherman for supplying me with a copy of her address which has not, to my knowledge, been printed for publication.

6Committee on CCC Language Statement, "Students' Right to Own Language," CCC, 25, "Special Issue" (Fall, 1974), 1-18.

"CONTENT": ITS USES AND ABUSES

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One of the most frequently abused words in the English composition or literature classroom is "content." The abuse transcends age and educational barriers: teachers abuse it almost as much as students. Regrettably, things have reached a point where some teachers intentionally misuse the word or, to be more precise, use it in a very restricted sense simply to be assured that they are not using it in a sense foreign to most students, much as we use the specific term "Kleenex" to be synonymous with the more generic "tissue" (though of course there is no obscurity about the word "tissue" as there is with "content"). Similarly, we may try to avoid confusion by purposefully mispronouncing Thoreau's name simply as a matter of convention, because many might not know or understand who or what we are talking about if we pronounce it like "thorough," or, if they do know, we run the risk of being relegated to that already long list of pompous English professors.

To insure a little more accuracy of terminology as well as mutual understanding between user and listener, the word "content" should be defined early in the school term. This seems especially true in Freshman comp courses, where we as teachers are frequently confronted with the question, whether plaintive or hostile: "O.K., I do have three subject-verb agreement errors, a comma splice, two fragments, a couple of awkward sentences, and maybe my organization is a little haphazard, but what did you think of my content?" The implied assumption here is that there is a clear demarcation between what the student sees as "content" and all those other bothersome details that got him in trouble. But in fact, there is only a vague distinction, a sort of meshing effect, just as the colors of the spectrum mesh without clear lines of division.

What needs to be made a little more clear is that "content" is not solely synonymous with words like "meaning," "the significant idea(s)," "the thesis," or what a recent CCC
document calls the “deep structure” of a sentence, or in this case, a whole theme. Instead, it makes more sense to let the word stand for most, if not all, of those factors other than grammar, punctuation, and spelling which combine to make effective writing. Surely under the rubric of “content” we mean not only the thesis of the paper, but how well that thesis is defended. And that defense is certainly vitiated if the ideas are not arranged in some logical, i.e., organized fashion. So organization is a factor in content.

And what if the sentences lack coherence from one to the other, or, equally important, what if the ideas do? If such coherence is lacking, is not the thesis and its defense diminished thereby? Is the reader left trying to fill in the gaps, wondering how the writer got from here to there? Coher- ence, then, is a factor.

If there are awkward constructions, then meaning is obscured in those particular sentences, thus weakening the thesis again. So sentence clarity cannot be dismissed as something apart from content.

Indeed, even prose style is an element of content; if all sentences suffer from Dick and Jane’s “See Spot Run” syndrome, the writing becomes soporific, not to mention sophomoric, and thus its dullness and apparent simplemindedness do not commend it to the reader.

One could even go to the extreme of arguing that grammar and punctuation themselves are elements of content: the thesis may well be weakened if numerous mechanical errors are present, on the ground that a person who would make such errors in large numbers probably is only semi-literate and therefore a less-than-marvelous source anyway. One would not have to go too far to find a sentence proving that punctuation can be an element of content, but for the real skeptic, one might offer this (admittedly) extreme example of how a sentence’s meaning may be determined by its punctuation: Bill had had Joe had had had had had. In short, “content” is hardly just the thesis of a paper, but all those factors which combine to effectively convey the thesis.

This idea of conveying the thesis brings us to a related problem — the student who, somewhat disconsolately, protests that he has some good ideas but acknowledges that his ability to express them is limited. This may be because his vocabulary is limited or, more likely, because sometimes his sentence structure, though it seems at the time of writing clear enough to him, is in reality obscure to the point of confusion or even meaningless. Either way, such a protest is probably not entirely legitimate, for one’s expression is a reflection of his thinking, and thus weakness in the former suggests weakness in the latter. Indeed, thought depends for its very existence on a mode of expression, namely language; hence to have a grand thought but to lack the means of expressing it is a bit contradictory. Schopenhauer drives the point home: “... clear thought easily finds words to fit it. If a man is capable of thinking anything at all, he is always able to express it in clear, intelligible, and unambiguous terms.” Of course a teacher should be delicate in using this “expression reflects thinking” concept as a response, perhaps simply by emphasizing the important connection between how something is said and what is said— or, the better it’s expressed, the better the idea.

However, one should not wait for a student’s lament to raise this point. Saying that meaning and method are so intimately related is tantamount to saying that “content,” in its abused sense (i.e., as a synonym for “thesis”), is not divisible from the other factors which make an effective paper. And if thesis and the factors collectively constituting its expression are so inextricably and even symbiotically related, surely, then, we and our students err in using “content” in only one limited aspect of its meaning.

NOTES
1 Though the sentence is not new, I have yet to run across a student who has seen it. The answer (which few students figure out): Bill had had “had”; Joe had had “had had”; “had had” was right.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CLEP SUBJECT EXAMINATIONS IN COMPOSITION

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In our article, “The CLEP General Examination in English Composition: What Does It Really Test?” we conclude that the CLEP General Examination should not be used as a device for granting college credit in composition. We take this position because we feel that the CLEP General does not test enough skills involved in writing and rewriting to be considered a legitimate basis for granting such credit.

But few of us teaching at institutions committed to equivalency testing are going to have the chance simply to throw out the CLEP test. We are going to need something to recommend in its place. The question is — what? Now, the CLEP program has two other tests designed to provide equivalency credit scores for Freshman English — the English Composition and Freshman English Subject Examinations. Presumably, they have been produced to satisfy a demand for a more rigorous, comprehensive test as a basis for granting equivalency credit. The question this article seeks to answer is — whether or not either of them is in fact a satisfactory alternative to the CLEP General.

Our method of answering this question has been to look carefully at each of these exams to determine what skills and kinds of knowledge it tests and how these compare to the kinds of skills and knowledge involved in the writing process. In taking this approach, our assumption is that in most Freshman English courses — whatever differences they might otherwise have — the ability to write well is the basis upon which credit is granted. Given this, it follows that an equivalency examination should test important aspects of that ability. If an objective test must be used, it should at least examine skills that are clearly supportive of or analogous to writing skills. It should not allow a student to get college credit for knowing irrelevant things. And the range of skills tested should be broad.

To make our analysis, we tried the tests out on ourselves. For each question we noted what skill or skills we used in finding the right answer. Depending on the difficulty of the particular question or its format, finding the right answer sometimes involved deciding what the correct answer was before looking at the five choices provided and then merely skimming those choices until we found the one we wanted. Take the case where a question about a short reading selection might ask us to identify the function sentence 3 plays in relationship to sentence 2. If the answer was immediately obvious, we would just skim the provided answers for the right one. As we encountered similar questions, we would group them into a single category with a title like “Ability to See the Relationship Between the Parts of a Prose Passage.”

Sometimes the problem of deciding what skills an individual question tested was, however, more complex than in this example. Suppose the question about a passage asked us to tell what contributed most to its unity — sentence structure, a certain kind of diction, references to a particular subject, a pattern of metaphors, or repetition of key words
and phrases. Depending on the difficulty of the passage and its length, we might have to read it as many as five times, each time looking to see whether this or that particular device most contributed to its unity. In such a case, we might decide that the question tested several things at once. Basically, such a question tests your ability to analyze the rhetorical design of a passage (one kind of reading ability). But because of the way this example is set up, you also have to know what "metaphor" and "key words and phrases" are and perhaps how sentence structure can or cannot contribute to paragraph unity. In this type of situation, then, we might have to list the same question under more than one heading since more than one skill is being tested. Listing the same question under more than one category means that the grand totals of questions in all categories for a particular test is larger than the actual number of questions in the test — 126 to 120 for the English Composition exam and 128 to 110 for the Freshman English test.

To come to the Subject Examinations themselves, then. What are they like and what do they test? Several obvious differences between them and the CLEP General stand out. Since they are longer than the CLEP General with its 100 questions, they can — for better or worse — cover more. The CLEP General has three parts, each containing a single type of question. (See our article in the Spring, 1977 issue of Freshman English News for a more detailed description.) The Subject Examinations' coverage runs from questions about the etymology of words, proper research technique, and the rhetorical design of passages to the names of poetical forms and — in the words of the ad — "much more." Unlike the CLEP General, both have questions about brief reading selections, some of which actually ask one to use fairly sophisticated reading skills.

Of the two tests, the English Composition exam seems the less satisfactory in both the objective and the so-called "essay" parts. It emphasizes the picayune and fails to test important writing skills. The objective part emphasizes knowledge of formal grammatical, logical, rhetorical, and literary labels to the extent that one has to know the meanings of these to answer 60 of the 120 questions. In addition, 17 questions focus on the ability to use the dictionary, etymotic facts about the English language, and facts about library research ranging from the details of footnote form to the content of certain reference works. It is doubtful that such questions can tell much about whether you can write, since you can know how to write without knowing such things, and you can know such things and still not be able to write well.

We also regret that the test emphasizes the use of labels because this emphasis wastes chances for testing skills that are important in writing and favors people with a certain kind of training which has nothing to do with writing. Take, for example, the way in which reading ability is tested. Sensitive, critical reading is an integral part of rewriting, and could, therefore, quite legitimately be tested in an exam like what we describe. For example, a question that asks what label one might use for a transition sentence in a paragraph could at least include a sentence or two from a passage to show that the question is really about the content and not simply about finding a label for a transition sentence. A more sophisticated test of this type could develop a facility for analyzing a writer's content. Similarly, an essay on the way a writer uses punctuation could require a reader to judge whether a writer is effective in using punctuation to indicate the writer's meaning, and not simply to label the writer's punctuation.

Having so few "non-labeling questions" about important aspects of writing makes the test a poor substitute for the CLEP General. Doing well on the objective part of the test can show little about what level of writing skill a person has. Rather, doing well shows that a person can identify various linguistic, rhetorical, and logical phenomena and that he/she knows how to handle mechanical aspects of writing like punctuation and footnote and bibliography form.

Unfortunately, the optional "essay" part of the test does not make up for the deficiencies of the objective part for the simple reason that it never asks you to write an essay. Instead, it asks you to paraphrase a passage and to rearrange a series of sentences into a couple of paragraphs. While performing these operations might show whether you can write clear sentences, find an organizational pattern in a series of statements, and make acceptable transitions, it does not show whether you can handle other important aspects of writing — finding a workable subject, generating a meaningful central point and feasible plan for bringing out that point, adapting your writing to an appropriately defined audience, or developing ideas concretely. In short, it does not ask you to show that you can create a whole piece of writing from scratch.

Although the problems with the CLEP English Composition test are too severe to make it worth considering as an
alternative to the CLEP General, the Freshman English exam is worthy of such consideration. It is less oriented to labeling and more oriented to testing a broad range of abilities that are supportive of or analogous to writing skills. It is a good deal more rigorous than the other tests. And its essay section does contain an essay assignment.

In contrast to the English Composition test in which 60 of the questions require knowledge of the meaning of formal labels, the Freshman English test includes only 27. In contrast to the 17 questions on miscellaneous knowledge, this test includes only 10 such questions. So while it is still objectionable that almost one-third of the exam is given over to testing these things, at least it is true that such questions do not—as in the English Composition test—predominate over others testing more important and relevant abilities.

The other most significant way in which the objective part of the Freshman English test differs from and is superior to the English Composition test is in the amount of emphasis given to reading ability. The reading selections challenge you by their difficulty and the variety of forms they take. You have to be able to read poetry, dialogue, and narrative as well as essays to do well on this test.

One test of reading skill hardly ever tested in the English Composition exam—the ability to restate the meaning of a passage—is the skill most frequently tested here. Sometimes you have to tell what a passage implies or choose the best restatement of a metaphor or highly connotative language (What does "Pontiac has that lean look" mean?). Sometimes you have to do things like read a narrative or a poem and pick out the best description of a character's mood or the atmosphere of the place described by the poem. And in about one-fourth of these questions you have to identify the tone of the passage, an activity which—though it is tested in the English Composition exam—is tested more frequently here. All these activities are related to the kind of close reading you have to do in the process of rewriting.

As for the other abilities tested, they are quite similar to those in the English Composition exam. There are thirteen questions on stylistic effect and effectiveness, nine on describing how a passage is organized, seven on diction (asking you to do things like choose the word most used for its denotative rather than connotative force), six on perceiving the main idea of a reading selection or the relationship between a sentence and those around it, and two on judging the degree of generality in statements.

But even in areas where the two tests overlap, some interesting differences appear. Though both test the ability to spot minor errors in grammar, usage, and idiom, the Freshman English exam deemphasizes this to a mere seven questions. On the other hand, the ability to judge the logicality of statements is tested here in four questions which do not involve the use of formal labels, something that never happens in the English Composition test.

And, finally, there is one question that differs from any of the others in either test. This asks you to distinguish between good and bad advice to writers.

Like the objective part, the optional essay section—despite some problems—is an improvement over the English Composition exam. It has three parts. The first—to be finished in 30 minutes—involves writing the opening paragraphs of complaint letters to three different people. (The subject of the complaint and the audience for each letter are prescribed.) The apparent aim is to see how well you can adapt your language and approach to a variety of audiences. The second writing exercise—to be finished in 20 minutes—asks you to write a dialogue on a prescribed subject that will tell something about the personalities and background of two people with different jobs. Possible aims might be to see whether you can create convincingly different personalities through alterations in style, and, hence, to see just how clever you are at handling language.

The third part—with a 40-minute limit—is an essay assignment about a rather dry subject. Here, of course, is where the majority of skills involved in organizing and developing ideas, providing coherence, and using style to enhance emphasis come into play.

The problems with this essay part? While the variety of assignments does give the student a chance to write on more than one subject (as ideally a writing test should), the first two exercises are quite atypical of the kind of writing done in the Freshman English courses we know anything about. It does not seem right to grant credit for Freshman English to students who show they can do kinds of writing they would not be asked to do in the course itself. Also, these exercises take precious time away from the essay. One of the values, after all, of having an essay assignment is to give students a chance to show that they can develop an idea. But allocating only 40 minutes for writing the essay limits this opportunity.

So while considerably better than the English Composition and the CLEP General tests, the Freshman English exam is by no means perfect. Besides the problems with the essay section, there is the fact that 34% of the objective questions have to do with labeling and miscellaneous information. Also, more emphasis could have been given to various aspects of reading for organization and the ability to spot faulty logic (without also having to label the error).

On the other hand, most of the objective questions do test a wide variety of skills related to writing and rewriting. The ability to detect minor errors in grammar, usage, and punctuation is deemphasized. The test is suitably rigorous for college-level students. Hence, we feel it can be recommended as a substitute for the CLEP General exam.

If schools can afford to pay for grading samples of student writing, then by all means students should be required to write at least one essay in addition to taking the objective part of the test. The optional essay section of the Freshman English exam could be used for this purpose. But English departments would be better off making up their own essay assignments since by doing so they could concentrate entirely on testing essay-writing skills.

NOTES

1Freshman English News, VI (Spring, 1977), 3-4.
2A simulated example modeled after one in the test.
4Twenty-two questions in the test ask you to rephrase sentences according to certain instructions. Except for one instance, the instructions contain a grammatical or rhetorical label. Hence, all but one were regarded as examples of the testing of labeling ability.
5In "Deficiencies of the CLEP Writing Examinations," CCC, XXVI (December, 1973), 352, Barbara Aptein offers a higher count. She says that "about one-third" of the questions involve labeling.
6Another simulated example on the model of one of the test questions.
"THE THREE LITTLE PIGS" AND HINTERLAND Rhetoric

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Where I teach, most incoming freshmen aren't ready for any kind of sophisticated approach to rhetoric. The handful who are adequately trained don't take freshman composition. They "clep out." Of the non-cleppers, some have never written an essay, a few not even an intelligible sentence. Though no one presumes that such raw troops can be shaped into a crack rhetorical outfit, instructors are nevertheless encouraged to coax from each student about ten essays, preferably lucid and entire.

Some of my colleagues describe the task as "Mission Impossible." They are among the inveterate scrougers of MLA job lists. But for those who like to battle dragons and scale rugged peaks, the challenge is agreeable. This, then, is the thrill-packed saga of how one resourceful instructor recently finessed thirty essays—each with a beginning, a middle, and an end—from thirty callow freshmen.

For the student who has his heart set on constructing a meaningful sentence, an essay looms as a frightening, even petrifying, crucible. The blank sheets of paper are ominous. They won't be satisfied with just any sentences, but only with thirty or forty linked to one terrifyingly solitary idea, perception, or experience. When the student must concentrate on making subjects and verbs agree, how can he dig up the pertinent examples, divine the sort of amplifications needed to erect a 400-word theme? When he has trouble depositing a word in the vicinity of its modifier, how can he lace diverse strands of thought into one smooth fabric? The answer, of course, is he can't—not without help.

To ease the student's load, some of my colleagues use a familiar method. They assign only topics dealing with personal experience. While the student may be foiled by "The Role of the United Nations in Monitoring Unilateral Disarmament," he should find plenty to say about "My Favorite Pastime" or "My Changing Religious Views." So, at least, my colleagues think. Frankly, I've found the personal-experience approach unsatisfactory. For one thing, the kind of freshmen I teach commonly don't know why they like one thing and dislike another. Their efforts to articulate their choices, beliefs, observations, and opinions frequently yield but a pastiche of bromides, a catalogue of banalities plucked from parents, teachers, and television.

Besides, writing about the self in no way dodges the most formidable burden of composition. I mean the job of ordering a chaos of impressions into a cohesive, logical pattern. The writer must sift the essential from the inessential, the relevant from the irrelevant. He has still to select, abridge, balance—in short, structure the elements of his experience. No, freshmen who aren't comfortable with the modest units of expression—the sentence and the paragraph—aren't likely to bring forth, ex nihilo, well-wrought essays. But it's a different matter when they don't have to create the thematic material.

This is where "The Three Little Pigs" comes in. As the first writing assignment of last semester, I had my students recount the well-known fable. There are several reasons why I selected the story. One is that the students were familiar with it; I didn't need to assign it beforehand. Another is that its brevity lends itself to the length restrictions of an in-class theme. Also, the story's plot is both logically ordered and easy to grasp. In making the assignment, I stressed that no attempt should be made to duplicate the wording of the original. The class should try merely to relate events in their proper sequence.

When I first thought of using the story, my intentions were quite modest. By eliminating the need to invent and organize subject matter, I aimed simply to free students to concentrate on writing clear sentences. Strangely enough, it never occurred to me that the exercise would mushroom into a pedagogic device of substantial proportions. This unexpected potential I discovered when I began inviting comments on different versions of the story. One paper I flashed on the board read as follows:

Once there were three little pigs. Two of them built a straw house and a wooden house. The other pig built a brick house. One day a big bad wolf came along. He blew down the straw house. Then he blew down the wooden house. The two pigs ran to the brick house. The wolf followed them there. He tried hard to blow the house down. He couldn't do it though. So he climbed down the chimney. He fell into a pot of hot water. That was the end of the wolf.

The first comment took the form of a question—the one, in fact, I was asking myself. "Is it long enough to be a theme?" What the inquirer expected to hear, I guessed, was something like, "No, you need at least 300 words." But I decided not to make it easy on the class. Too many were already prone to equate thematic completeness with word volume. (This tendency was confirmed by penciled marginalia like "87, 123, 197, 234, 301."). "What's the best way to determine how long is enough?" I asked. At first everyone looked baffled, but at last a girl made a stab. "When the entire story is retold. The class nodded approval of the criterion. I pursued: "Does this paper 'entirely' retell The Three Little Pigs?" The girl said, "Well, I think it has most of the main facts." I detected a note of dubiety, the reason for which I sought to flush out. "Are you suggesting that there's more to the story than facts?" The girl, apparently tired of being grilled, only shrugged.

Luckily, another student now entered the proceedings. "Yeah," he said, "the story has a moral. "I was adamant: "Does the story on the board have one?" The boy started at the paper a minute, shifted in his chair, and drewled, "If it does, I can't find it." "Maybe it's 'When you climb down a chimney, make sure you don't land in hot water.'" popped a youth in the back row. After the guffaws subsided, I remarked, "But that's not the moral of the original tale, is it?" Happily, a serious respondent fielded the query. "No," she said, "the moral mainly relates to the pigs. Two of them were nearly eaten because they were too lazy to build a good house."

Pointing to the board, I said, "Why doesn't this version convey that moral?" The class looked thoughtful. They sensed, I think, that they were inching up on something important. Finally, one ventured, "Well, it doesn't say anything about laziness." My comment on this was, "Would the moral, then, be clear if the writer mentioned that the pigs who built the straw and wooden houses were lazy?" "It might be clear," said the student, "but I think it should say more. Like the real story does. It talks about how the two lazy pigs liked to goof off all day, and how they wouldn't listen to the warnings of the other pig, the one who worked hard to build a brick house. 'Can anything be done to emphasize the moral?' I asked. After a momentary silence, a taker came forward: "I think he needs to say something about the pigs at the end of the paper. The last part is all about the wolf. Somehow it seems like the story is mainly about him."

I gave the evident yet crucial observation a minute to sink in. Then, I tried to sum up for the class the gist of their remarks to that point. They had implied that a convincing thesis requires ample elaboration or illustrative support, and that a theme should have but one focal point. And in the case of the theme being studied, the idea had to be fleshed out and bring it a stride closer to being "long enough." After the summation, I asked whether the inclusion of additional in-
formation about the pigs would of itself make the theme successful.

The students wanted to know what I meant by "successful." Rather than trying to define the complexities of "successful" writing, I altered the question: "Do the sentences sound good?" After a predictable interval of silent squinting and head scratching, a student hazarded, "Well, they're clear. You can understand them." Another, eschewing civility, jumped in with, "I don't like them. They remind me of my first-grade reader." Looking embarrassed, she quickly added, "I mean I know 'The Three Little Pigs' is for children, but I thought you wanted us to rewrite it for adults." I saw what she was driving at. "Do you mean," I asked, "that the sentences are too short?" Even as she nodded, the author of the paper, at last breaking a self-imposed silence, answered, "I made them short so I wouldn't have a lot of grammatical errors." Though I understood his point, I opted not to pursue it. Usage, mechanics, and punctuation would be run through the wringer soon enough.

For the time being, I wanted the freshmen to continue closing in on a different stylistic concern — sentence length. To this end, I said, "I agree that the sentences are clear and without grammatical errors but quite short. But does the series of short sentences produce any other effect?" (I resisted an impulse to say "tacky side effects.") When the author of the theme raised his hand, I braced myself for an apology in behalf of correctness. But I heard, instead, the admission of a penitent sinner. "Yeah," the boy said, "it sounds real jerky. Like 'I have a dog. His name is Spot. See Spot run: It gets monotonous." Not wishing to be party to a flat repudiation of short sentences, I advised that the staccato effect they produce has its place, for example, to convey urgency or lend emphasis. Still, as a general rule, I noted that it's better to offer a judicious mixture of long, short, and "middle-size" sentences.

I next asked whether anything could be done to invigorate the sentences aside from lengthening some of them. Not too surprisingly, the question elicited blank looks. What I wanted the class to mark was the unimaginative syntactical patterning, the deadening recurrence of subject-verb-object. What a student finally said was, "You might use some synonyms for 'pigs' and 'wolf.' " While concern for word variety was sound in principle, I wondered whether diversity was possible in the instances cited. "Hog," "sow," "boar," "swine," "porky," "dingo," "coyote," "wild dog" — these student proposals reinforced my skepticism.

Unable to gauge the class into awareness of syntactical variety, I was forced to temporarily abandon the Socratic format (if I may appropriate the lofty term to mental goings-on) and adopt instead the role of expositor. I asserted that syntactical patterning is at once a good way to accent key sentence elements and to generate interest through diversity. I then proceeded to illustrate a few elementary variations of the subject-verb-object motif. After the demonstration, I invited the students to practice what I had preached. Their object was to modify the sentence patterns and lengths of the theme we had been inspecting. The four beginnings below typify the revisionary trends.

1. Of three little pigs which once were, two built houses of straw and wood, while a house of bricks was built by the third. One day along came a big bad wolf who blew down the houses of straw and wood.

2. From straw and wood were made the three pigs' houses. But brick was the house of the third pig, who worked hard while his good-for-nothing brothers did the jill all day. The big bad wolf was going to keep from his door.

3. The three little pigs built three different kinds of houses: straw, wood, and brick. Why of different mate-

rial was the three houses built? Well, I can tell you, not because all the pigs couldn't afford bricks. It was just that two of the pig's were too lazy to build a house of bricks. Hard work that is.

4. Pigs three there once were. Laziness caused two of them to build a home of straw and wood. While the lazy pigs were at the movie or playing ball, the other pig was working away on a brick house. He knew that old wolf would soon come huffing and puffing. Big, bad, and ugly this wolf was.

When the freshmen had completed the exercise I flashed several revisions on the board and held a brief forum on each. Some revisions were less than charitably received. They were deemed worse than the malign original — and not because of mechanical errors alone. Actually, I was pleased to learn that many students could intuit the point where variety and taste diverged. They understood that absurdity was a poor substitute for monotony. Still, the exercise had served its purpose. If all hadn't enriched their model, everyone had at least moved in the right direction. I had reason to suspect that the class would henceforth experiment with new modes of developing sentences.

When I had completed the forum on the revisions of the theme, the period was at an end. But the next time the class met, I showed other versions of "The Three Little Pigs." In examining these, the students were to check mostly for the things we had been discussing: thematic elaboration and focusing, syntactical patterning, and sentence length. The strategies of elaboration proved singularly intriguing. One left the class buzzing. The initial paragraphs of the 300-word theme were representative of the whole:

One upon a time there lived three pigs. Mama Pig, Papa Pig, and Baby Pig. These dudes spent most of the day in a straw-house eating curds and whey. About the only time they went outside was late in the afternoon when they took their after-dinner stroll through the forest. One day while they were bee-bopping along they spotted a big bad wolf. The wolf said to himself, "I wonder which of these pigs would taste best. They all smell good. Probably baby pig though, she looks finger-licking chewy." The sneaky old wolf stood on his hind legs and ambled over to the piggies.

"Hi," he said. "Have any of you seen a gal with a red nose and cape on? She's my niece and I've been looking everywhere for her. I've got to give her a silver slipper.

The pigs shook their head and Papa Pig whispered to Mama Pig, "He don't look like no uncle I ever saw. I betcha he's the notorious wolf of these parts, Mama. Let's split."

The writer's inaccuracies of fact at first evoked tolerant chuckles. The class assumed that the author was merely the victim of a bad memory. But when they learned that he had purposely confounded tales, the chuckles turned to peevish indignation. "If I had known we could use more than one story, my theme would have been funny too," complained one student. "Yeah, and longer," added a second. Impulsively, I announced that everyone would have the chance to confuse tales. That would be the matter of their next theme. Having said this, I awaited the customary groans — but, wondrously, the class applauded.

Thus mollified, the class was now willing to examine the style of the heterodox theme. Their comments were mostly about usage and mechanics. After answering a few questions, I decided to conduct a minor experiment. I asked each student to list the "errors" in the theme. When asked out, the lists were astonishingly dissimilar. Some students sniffed out more than fifty errors, others fewer than ten. The disparity resulted in part from disagreement about the dialogue. Some students opined that both the pigs and the wolf were obliged
to speak "good" English. Others, including the author of the theme, insisted that animals could speak any way they wanted. When the class appealed to my expertise, I observed that dialogue does frequently entail such a prerogative. Then, uneasy about the implications of my statement, I cautioned that the writer wasn't at liberty to transfer his own ignorance to his characters.

Authorial privilege was unfortunately not the only source of perplexity. For judging by the kind of entries the lists contained, I deduced that many of the freshmen appreciated the need for correctness better than they recognized examples of it. Among the more puzzling entries relevant to the portion of the theme quoted above were "The names of the pigs should not be capitalized," "A comma should go between bad and 'wolf,'" "'Smell good' should be 'smell well,'" "'Hind' is misspelled," "Are you allowed to say 'ya'll'?" "There should be a dash after 'niece,'" "'Shook' should be 'shaked,'" "'Uncle' should be capitalized," "'Let's' should be 'let us,'" and "'All the commas should be colons' (?). Such notations confirmed a prior suspicion: I would have to devote several days to a review of basic usage, mechanics, and punctuation.

Oddly enough, the prospect seemed almost a beneficence. For a week earlier—that is, before the semester began—I had feared that the entire term would be consumed by reviews of the basics. But now, courtesy of "The Three Little Pigs," I realized that study of the fundamentals could be allied with instruction of other compositional matters.

In fact, I was so smitten with the response to "The Three Little Pigs" that I had the class rewrite other children's stories. In successive weeks, they rewrote "Little Red Riding Hood," "Cinderella," "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Goldilocks," and "Hansel and Gretel." A colleague told me that I should entitle my course, "The Children's Story Hour." I remain undaunted. For, from their rewritings and the subsequent discussions, the freshmen learned much about the art of composition. By the end of the semester, I felt they were at last ready to write of their own experience. And in my second-semester composition course, many are now doing just that. Perhaps next year the students will even be ready to tackle "Monitoring Unilateral Disarmament."
NOTES TOWARD A THEORY TO UNDERLIE THE TEACHING OF WRITING

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These are notes toward a theory to underlie the teaching of writing. This is not a piece of research or of scholarship. It is more a recognition of scholarship underway and of that yet to be done.

These notes posit that we have not had for some time a paradigm sufficient to our needs for the teaching of writing but that such a paradigm is now being formulated. They posit that we have not had a theory of learning adequate to our needs for the teaching of writing but that the elements of such a theory are at hand. They posit the view that no new and sound theory will emerge to underlie the teaching of writing which is not also a theory of mind, of language, and of society.

Such theory has been advanced by useful pieces in Freshman English News, especially the piece by Richard Coe, which dealt with scientific models for composition and a more recent piece by John Warnock, which argues for the recovery of rhetoric. It has also been advanced by pieces such as the two by Janet Emig and Myra J. Smith in the spring 1977 issue of College Composition and Communication, the one arguing for writing as a kind of learning and the other for writing as related to the views of Jerome S. Bruner. Such theory is especially being formulated by psycholinguists and linguists, by psychologists, by philosophers, and by biologists and biochemists. Such theory, articulated and implemented in the teaching of reading, especially in the work of Kenneth and Yetta Goodman as lately recognized by the International Reading Association, should also be considered as related to the teaching of writing.

I will attempt three positions:

1. That we have had in this century no common approach to the teaching of writing based on adequate learning theory.

2. That there has been for the last seventy years a growing body of research and theorizing about mind and learning which denies empiricism as an approach to learning—which assumes the mind to be the originator of perceptions—but which is also suited to acknowledging a duality by which both object and awareness may exist, which is appropriate to the understanding of writing, and which is already reflected in recent approaches to the teaching of reading.

3. That this work provides a base for the consideration of writing which recognizes a dual nature for writing: (a) writing as an integrative physical manifestation of the theorizing mind; (b) writing as that which readers recognize without regard for writers.

I

That we have had in this century no common approach to the teaching of writing based on adequate learning theory.

Rather than being based on a theory of learning, our teaching of writing has been based on the assumption that writing is an activity to be directed by a teacher, directed especially in response to pressure somehow to change or improve the writer but the written product delivered to sets of evaluators. Generally we teach writing not because of its importance in the development of knowledge—the best reason for education—but because parents or employers or alumni or a testing service or a full professor in engineering who has somehow had to grade some lab reports tell us that we must improve the spelling, punctuation, and sentence-writing of our students. In this activity, we are not engaged in education at all but in writing repair, for which we are generally paid less than for car repair or plumbing repair.

II

There has been for the last seventy years a growing body of research and theorizing about mind and learning which denies empiricism as an approach to learning—which assumes the mind to be the originator of perceptions—but which is also suited to acknowledging a duality by which both object and awareness may exist, which is appropriate to the understanding of writing, and which is already reflected in some recent approaches to the teaching of reading.

A theory to underlie the teaching of writing should be developed from theories which provide for the writer as a creative mind and also from theories which recognize the obligations and impact of the surrounding world on the writer.

In writing we value creativity as an aspect of language which lies within the generative capabilities of the writer. We do not describe creativity in writing as the cumulative result of a learning process or as discovery which comes at the end of a path of the teacher's direction. Instead we expect the writer to be able to suspend judgment, to overcome con-
ditioned or dominant responses, and to express original perceptions. We expect that such accomplishment will be hard to achieve and will be predicated on rules, forms, and capabilities in part found to be intrinsically human. We expect that writers will be able to generate hypotheses based not on what the writer has been taught to expect to find but upon the writer's recognition of the possibility of what has not before been seen—at least by that writer—and which will hence be an original insight, one which is a product of the writer's inherent capacity of mind to generate such insight. The mind directs perceptions always along the line of expectations. When individual awareness grows that separate expectations are not consistent with greater perceptual patterns, then a new set of perceptual expectations—and new patterns—are constructed and, for the writer, expressed in writing.

This is a description associated with Gestalt theory and with contemporary rejections of empiricism. Such a description recognizes the ability and responsibility of writer and scientist as capable of asserting the nature of their own minds. Such a description provides a base for theorizing that a teacher of writing must work with the writer as a cognitive learner and as a problem solver.

Yet writing is also behavior. In her article in *College Composition and Communication*, which I cited earlier, Janet Emig described writing as a technological device. As researchers expect it to be learned and controlled first by the processes of consciousness, exactly as are other technological devices. The automobile, for example, is approached by driver-training instructors as a device to be learned and consciously manipulated. Writing when viewed in this fashion is consistently measured as a cultural representation—is the spelling "proper," does usage conform to "standards" of usage, and even does its content properly reflect the nature of the culture?

We will not do well to go at the reaching of writing with a theory which is narrow and exclusive.

I would argue, as I should by now have clearly given away, or contemporary denial of empiricism as articulated especially by Chomsky and Kuhn as one good starting point. What follows will be a summary of my own interpretation of such reading, intended as an indication of one direction such theories may take us as teachers of writing.

The chief characteristic of mind for the theories I am following is three-fold:

a) mind is organic in nature and may be regarded as an aspect of brain
b) language is a manifestation of this organic nature of the brain or mind and thus organic mind is the base of the social characteristics of human relationships of which language is the determinant

c) consciousness is intrinsic in the human.

Here is a brief elaboration:

a) Mind is organic in nature and may be regarded as an aspect of brain. The brain is the organ by which that which we know is known—that that which we know is that which the brain is organically fitted to know. The brain is thus an organ of selectivity and theorizing which constructs out of its organic capabilities a theory of actuality according to which perception occurs and that which is new is related to that which is known.

This argument integrates the rationalist point of view with conviction of the certainty of data. The brain is described as the seat of learning and learning as an activity by which gaps in perception are filled in accordance with the pattern of order established by the brain. New knowledge is that which is knowable to that brain.

By this capability we read words in which some letters are omitted, we perceive sentences in which we omit the specific articulation of all words, and we compose by a process of trial and error, dragging together pieces to conform to the shape of directed perceptions. We even read aloud with what seem skills in phonetic deciphering of words which must be perceived backwards before they are pronounced: the silent e at the end affects what came before—the n in knee must be detected before the k is dropped.

At the same time we assume that an organic capability of the brain is the recognition of the possibility of anomaly and that discovery occurs not as a result of some cumulative acquisition of empirical data but because of the capacity for adjusting to anomaly without articulation so that the accumulation of data becomes not a cause but a symptom. The brain first formulates concepts and only then does it announce discoveries. Discovery may thus be at times a seemingly accidental happening.

b) Language is a manifestation of this organic nature of the brain or mind and thus organic mind is the base of the social characteristics of human relationships of which language is the determinant.

There are many manifestations of the organic nature of brain or mind, so many that language may be broadly defined to include even scientific investigation. The most common language of a common expression as opposed to an acquired skill is simply the case and consistency with which children develop language uses. Most people can speak two languages before the age of four and display most of the rules of the language by three or four. My concern here, however, is in expressing the recognition that the social capacity of the human is characterized by the human quality of communication, including the capability of recording and storing information and perception. If language is an organic mind activity, if human society is in large part a manifestation of the language ability, then society is also a manifestation of the organic brain quality.

Human society is social. Humans are characterized by their societies and by their societies as a means of changing relationships with the material world. It is, for example, most conspicuously human wants and the articulation of those wants in language and in related social structures which have led to permanent change in the shape of the North American continent, including even the construction of the Panama Canal. Writing is technological just as are the pick and shovel. Language is characterized as an intrinsic and organic mind quality by the manifestation of basic mind qualities. We write not what we think but what we are. Language is the basic and essential tool of the development of the human as social. Our societies are a product of our language ability, especially of our ability to store language apart from ourselves. Our societies are what we are. They are as healthy or unhealthy as we are as minds. We shape our environment as further sign of our need for expression.

c) Consciousness is intrinsic in the human. Consciousness is an expression of comprehensive brain activity, at some point during the development of the individual to the present instant in interaction with that individual's environment. It is also an imperfect and belated state of mind activity which is already manifest in language and societal environment.

We may thus have change in conscious formulation which is wholly consistent with regularity in mind pattern—Whitman's "Do I contradict myself? Very well then...I contradict myself; I am large...I contain multitudes..." The individual is both in an and of interaction with society as a necessary part of his environment—remember the social quality is here being defined as an intrinsic quality—the individual is in interaction with his environment and may thus bring into that environment bonds consciousness and articulation. He may assume a dualistic role, that of the mind knowing but not fully articulating itself in language—that of the mind manifesting itself in singular fashion through the construction of an environment—and also that of the conscious individual being articulating the consciously discerned qualities of that environment after the fact of their manifestation
and arguing for further direction according to what are consciously found to be that which the beholder yearns to know—beauty, harmony, peace...

Thus it is that theories which are partly rationalistic and not empirical are suited to acknowledging a duality of both object and mind—organic mind is made manifest in the structure of social orders and environments as well as in languages.

III

That these theories of mind and learning provide a base for consideration of writing which recognizes the dual nature of writing: (a) writing is an integrative physical manifestation of the theorizing mind; (b) writing is that which readers recognize without regard for writers.

(a) Writing is an integrative physical manifestation of the theorizing mind. The obligation of the mind is not only to discern itself in that which is around it but also to express itself and thus to manifest in its own image that which is around it. Thus I have described society as an extension of mind. Writing is a similar manifestation by which the mind becomes itself. "Thanks to the. dare say my art I am able to become myself," wrote E. E. Cummings in the preface to The Enormous Room.

This effort is qualitative (as opposed to representational). Consider some of that which we seek to encourage in student writers—the recognition in writing of analogical devices and the employment in their own writing of such devices. Consider metaphor. For some years in working with metaphor, I have used an approach I took from I. A. Richards—the essence of metaphor is that it depends on difference or distinction, not that it is a representation of likeness. If I refer to John as a pig, my reader had better be aware that John is not a four-footed, tusked and bristled creature in a pen behind my house. John is not a pig. Instead I intend to make known some quality of John's nature—previously unknown—and especially recognizable because of some pig-qualities discernible in it.

My metaphor is thus dependent on distinctions. But its purpose is evaluation. It is an evaluative tool by which I will fit to my understanding that which is strange and unknown—John's nature. Suzanne Langer some years ago defined metaphor as the only means of approaching a previously unsolved problem. It is a means of approaching the unfamiliar through that which is familiar.

Remember the little flurry which was occasioned by strange markings on the rocks and boulders on Mars. They looked like letters of the alphabet, we were first told. Whatever they were, what we could first say was that which they resembled—and were not.

Or consider another example of the use of metaphor. This passage introduces William Bradford's Of Plymouth Plantation: "And first of the occasion and inducements thereunto; the which, that I may truly unfold, I must begin at the very root and rise of the same. The which I shall endeavour to manifest in a plain style, with singular regard unto the simple truth in all things; at least as near as my slender judgment can attain the same," There Bradford provided a description of the kind of writing which characterized his culture: "a plain style, with singular regard unto the simple truth..." We define this style as not rhetorical, as free from ornamentation— and as suited to grappling with the abstractions of the Puritan mind. Here is the first part of the sentence which follows the introduction of the plain style: "It is well known unto the godly and judicious, how ever since the first breaking out of the light of the gospel in our honorable nations of England..." The light of the gospel—metaphor is inherent to the understanding of difficult truth. One characteristic of the plain style is its dependence on metaphor as means of investigation and recording—as extension of the truth of the mind.

Such definition has long been common by writers writing about their writing and by others of us writing about poetry. It is as accessible as the current edition of Britannica, where poetry is defined in part as the asking and answering of questions to which the poet already knows the answer; it is in a flyer which the American Poetry Review has recently circulated to win subscribers and in which Richard Hugo defines poetry as the finding out of what is in the mind; it came in my mail this week in a copy of Newsweek in which Harold Pinter is quoted as not knowing what he will write until he sees it written out before him.

Thus is writing an integrative physical manifestation of the theorizing mind. Its chief accomplishment may be synthesis by which the intuitive or creative leap becomes the writer's understanding and is given substantial form as an aspect of that understanding.

The teaching of writing which takes into account such theory must reckon as important the understanding of the nature of the mind, of the nature and source of synthesis, and of the history and accomplishments of the mind as locus of concept.

The teaching of writing which takes into account such theories of mind must also recognize the individuality and eccentricity of the mind of the writer. Recall the first of the theories I summarized: the nature of the brain and mind is organic and language is one manifestation of this organic nature. We do not need composition teachers to produce writers. There have been far more writers not instructed by composition teachers than there have been writers instructed by composition teachers. The composition teacher is a recent innovation. Franklin's composition teacher was the book and the print shop. The most prolific American writer of this century, Louie L'Amour, is a school dropout who managed without the composition teacher. We need composition teachers who contribute to the learning of students.

(b) Writing is also that which readers recognize without regard for writers.

In my understanding here, I am especially obliged to a paper by Walter Ong which I heard presented at a conference on modern literature at Michigan State University, October, 1926. Father Ong made the general point that as readers we tend to regard all writers as dead. As readers we make what we read our own without regard for the writer. We are not interested in the writer. We are interested in that which we find and make our own, that which we read. (See also Father Ong's piece in PMLA, Jan., 1925.)

Such a view is understandable in several ways. As readers we are singular minds exactly as we are as writers. As readers we predict what we will read. We assume that we will generally deal with subject, verb, object as word order in sentences, that a beginning will be consistent with an end, that a point of view will be representative of a single same inquiry and not a disordered mind. We thus insist that a writer create consistency suited to the patterns we expect to find, that he thus facilitate our reading. This assumption forms the basis for all those red marks—agreement, tense, person, dng mod—with which we fill margins.

We are probably obliged to make clear to the writer the kind of role which we as readers demand of writers—a role which offers the writer little room except as one of us. We are probably obliged ourselves to understand that our demand is inconsistent and subject to change just as scientific conclusions are dependent upon contextual perception and are subject to change. For one thing, we change our ideas of what our best writing is. The writing does not change. We change as a body of readers. A woman joined me in a conversation last week beginning with the statement that her family formed an evening reading group and read aloud some of the classics. "We have been trying DeQuincy," she said, "and find him unreadable." Yet everyone in her circle was well edu-
icated and a good reader. His death was not his own, but was at the hands of his readers. So, too, we rescued Melville from obscurity and reelegated Timrod to it. More recently we have celebrated Faulkner and dropped the name T. S. Eliot. Yet Farrell is alive and writing and last year published his twenty-fifth volume of fiction, *The Dunne Family*.

We also bring our social nature to bear on writers in another way. We compel changes in the very form of writing. At the time the epic was being celebrated in the eighteenth century as the highest form of poetry, it was also being embalmed. It was no longer being written and read — and has not been since. Instead we first let writers conceive and have since institutionalized the well-made novel, a far more appropriate form of expression for the well-made society of print in the nineteenth century. We do indeed regard writing as a technology to be kept up to date.

As readers we also ask representational modeling, and not qualitative manifestation, from writing. Writers are expected to be subject to the manipulations of consciousness in the society as mind. We ask of writers that their works display or represent what we believe to be not only form which suits our predictive natures, but we ask also that writers model the substance of beauty, of proportion, of orderliness. Einstein described his motivation to science as motivation to discern the rationality and comprehensibility of the world. We ask that writers display our concept of the rationality and comprehensibility of the world. We do it when we teach penmanship and ask that papers be neatly typed. We do it when we give a better mark to the paper which is properly documented than to a similar paper in which footnote form is a mess. We make thus a self-conscious and societal demand and in so doing we reveal not a truth of written form but a quality of the shared mind which is the society: the brain — through organically originated language — is the seat of the social characteristics of human relationships, and consciousness is an intrinsic human quality.

I will conclude with what seem to me to be some implications for teachers. At the start I wrote that I had only notes toward a theory to underlie the teaching of writing. That theory stands on other theories about the nature of language and the mind and is plainly incomplete, but implicit in the theory is the recognition of the duality of writing. On the one hand, writing is a physical manifestation of the writer's theorizing mind; on the other hand it is that which readers recognize without regard for writers, a basic element in the composition of human society, and a societal manifestation regardless of the writer.

One clear implication of such a theory is that writing cannot be taught in isolation, that change in writing is probably a product of complex change in the writer and may as well — perhaps most often — occur without any writing teacher at all.

What, then, can a writing teacher do? Writing is a physical manifestation. Early on we should work at writing as physical, taking a lead from Maria Montessori, and develop the skills of hand and eye. Later on we should encourage writers to indulge their physical skills in order to get to writing by means of any hand activity which will help to know the mind. We should encourage list making, free writing, journals, notes, outlines — any physical activities which can begin writing.

At the same time, teachers of writing should contribute to the learning of writers. We should contribute to the understanding of what writing is so that the physical activity may be recognized and understood. This probably means that writing teachers should be prepared in philosophy, psycholinguistics, and the history or philosophy of science, as well as some science, and should be prepared to bring some learning to the classroom as knowledge important to an understanding of writing. Such a teacher should probably expect to read written work of students written for other teachers because in such work the student should be working as writer. This same teacher should probably expect that the student should write for an audience other than any teacher — most often as writer the student writer should write for himself as audience, and the teacher should seek to share the writer's point of view. The teacher of writing must be able to deal with a writer, otherwise there can be no writing.

Following another track, the teacher of writing should also be a reader and should make it clear to the writer what are the demands of readers — consistency, harmony, beauty, and subject-verb agreement — recognizing, however, that such demands represent only part of that which is writing, the part that is the reader's point of view. The teacher of writing should instruct the writer in that which the mind of the reader needs — a written form suited to scrutiny by a theorizing and conceptualizing mind and also a written form which manifests qualities of the society itself. Writing teachers should teach the democratic concept that the writer and reader together represent both separate minds committed to themselves and also societal manifestations committed inherently through language to dependency each on the other.

The teacher of writing should respond to the variety which is in every classroom. On the one hand the classroom is itself a manifestation in the environment of language and the communicative and collective or societal mind. On the other hand it is the place in which writers are asked to meet and work, some of whom are writer centered and will not attend to the wants of readers — may even be impeded by such wants — others of whom are reader and society inclined and plastic in their utterances. This is the democratic difficulty: the teacher must respond to both individual needs and also to the social manifestation. The two need to be understood by the teacher and supported evenly.

That seems fit place to conclude. There is now developing a theory of mind on which to base the theories of writing and learning noted here.

**NOTES**

1. An acknowledgment. My thanks to William Sewell especially and to all other members of an interdisciplinary reading group, the TOADS, who assisted with much of the preparation for this piece.


3. Despite all the attention to a "return to basics," we do not even know where to apply the patches on our leaky composition pipes. Richard Ohmann argued a year ago that the much publicized decline in test scores is meaningless: "The Decline in Literacy Is a Fiction, if Not a Hoax," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 25, 1976), p. 32.

4. I find T. S. Kuhn especially helpful in recognizing the change in thought which should underlie the teaching of writing: "Today research in parts of philosophy, psychology, linguistics, and even art history, all converge to suggest that the traditional paradigm is somehow askew... But is sensory experience fixed and neutral? Are theories simply man-made interpretations of given data? The epistemological viewpoint that has most often guided Western philosophy for three centuries dictates an immediate and unequivocal, Yes! In the absence of a developed alternative, I find it impossible to relinquish entirely that viewpoint. Yet it no longer functions effectively, and the attempts to make it do so through the introduction of a neutral language of observation now seems to me hopeless." *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 121 and 126. The inadequacy of empiricism has been argued steadily through the century but has only lately begun to be generally attended, most recently since views
like those of Kuhn have been articulated: Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, clearly argued for the duality; Noam Chomsky has well demolished empiricism as a base for the study of language; the failure of empiricism is implicit to popular studies of creativity such as Arthur Koestler’s *Act of Creation* and to my mind accounts for the popular recognition of Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

3I refer particularly to the work of Kennent and Yetta Goodman and to *Miscue Analysis*. See *Linguistics, Psycholinguistics, and the Teaching of Reading*, International Reading Association, 1971. This approach depends on the recognition that reading is an inherent capability, that it is sometimes self-taught, that readers know more than they can pronounce — no matter how they are drilled in rote phonics — and that reading is thus a conceptual activity in which the predictive nature of the mind is revealed as patterns of understanding are anticipated and constructed. See also Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) and *Comprehension and Learning* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975).

4Here is Kuhn’s description of discovery in science: “In science . . . novelty emerges only with difficulty, manifested by resistance, against a background provided by expectation. Initially, only the anticipated and usual are experienced even under circumstances where anomaly is later to be observed. Further acquaintance, however, does result in awareness of something wrong or does relate the effect to something that has gone wrong before. That awareness of anomaly opens a period in which conceptual categories are adjusted until the initially anomalous has become the anticipated. At this point the discovery has been completed.” *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 64.

5I am here paraphrasing Chomsky: “Creativity is predicated on a system of rules and forms, in part determined by intrinsic human capacities. Without such constraints, we have arbitrary and random behavior, not creative acts. The productions of common sense and scientific inquiry derive no ..ss from principles grounded in the structure of the human mind.” *Reflections on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p. 133.

6The scientist can have no recourse above what he sees with his eyes and instruments. If there were some higher authority by recourse to which his vision might be shown to have shifted, then that authority would itself become a source of problems,” and again, “The very ease and rapidity with which astronomers saw new things when looking at old objects with old instruments may make us wish to say that, after Copernicus, astronomers lived in a different world. In any case, their research responded as though that were the case.” Kuhn, pp. 114 and 117.


The direction of such thinking for research was summarized by Kenneth Goodman in a position statement submitted in support of his candidacy as trustee of the NCTE Research Foundation this past spring: “I believe research in language must break out of the statistical-experimental mold. It must be free to use linguistic, psycholinguistic, anthropological and other methodology. It must be free to focus on single subjects in depth and over time. It must be free to explore, model, theorize, describe, and innovate.”