Rhetorical Form: A Crockful of Crots
Jane R. Walpole
Piedmont Virginia Community College

Knowledge of and experience with accepted forms liberate the
mind from the trivial and the mundane. Energy can be chan-
nelded into the content rather than the construct. This is as true
for the reader as for the writer.

For the reader, the comfort, the ease of comprehension when
recognizing familiar forms; the surprise, the pleasant shock
when recognizing novel variations in familiar forms; the chal-
lenge, the intellectual illumination when probing the reason for
the variation. But all assumes a basis in the familiar, the known.

Without the known, we can recognize nothing new. Without
restraint, we can feel no freedom. Creativity must have forms to
work within and to fight against. Distortion implies a norm.

In verbal communication, meaning requires form. Form does
not require meaning. The form "NP + VP" articulates a gram-
matical statement but carries no semantic message. "The glo-
my tryphs are bruggling lishfully" is semantically just as empty a
form, yet its effect perplexes. The pseudo-words impose so
strong an implication of meaning that our minds strain to image
a tryph, gloomy or otherwise, and our bodies wonder whether it
is pleasurable or painful to struggle, especially in a lishful man-
ner. Thus the priority and power of form over meaning.

Form is prerequisite to meaning; it does not ensure meaning.
A formless meaning is an impossibility. A meaningless form is
a student theme.

At times, the most effective form is formlessness. But artisti-
cally powerful formlessness requires consummate artistry.

A croc, historically, is a bit or fragment; rhetorically, a brief
"independent and discrete" unit of sentences "characterized by
the absence of any transitional devices that might relate it to pre-
ceding or subsequent crots."* A series of crots offers a new-old
form with an aphoristic tone of disjunctive unity. Blaise Pascal,
Logan Pearsall Smith, Eric Hoffer: all are writers of crots. We
might better set our students to writing crots than individual
paragraphs. But first we should try our own hands at crot cre-
ation. The easy air of apparent formlessness belies the challenge
of the form.

Crot: therapeutic forma rhetoric. Specific antidote for disser-
tationitis. Caution! Prolonged use may be addictive.

Form can profitably be studied in total discourse — the poem,
the play, the novel, the essay — or in small-scale discourse — the
phrase, the clause, the sentence, the sentence sequence. Mid-
range segments of discourse — the paragraph, the stadium —
can be identified typographically; but they are fortuitous,
opportunistic, idiosyncratic, expedient, not formulaic. They
have structure but no form — no rationale, no classifiable, nam-
able, teachable, learnable blueprint.

Form in the sentence is grammar. Form in the text is genre.
Form in the paragraph is serendipity.

Classification, comparison, cause, consequence — these and
their ilk are forms of thought. If we view discourse as thought
clothed in words, they are also forms of discourse. But the locus of
the form is more often within the thought-sentence than
within the full discourse. The classification or the comparison
essay does exist. Assiduous search turns up a handful of models,
though seldom pure and unsullied. As a student writing assign-
ment, the only advantage of the formulaic essay over the for-
mlaic paragraph lies in its relatively lower infrequency. Of
course, the paragraph that adheres to one form also exists, as do
left-handed, one-eyed, albino either players.

Forms of thought, patterns of development, modes of dis-
course (pick a name) are recurring devices applied selectively to
display and clarify ideas. They need not be learned, for they are
the common property of the cognitive human mind. But they
can usefully be taught, for to articulate the obvious is to increase
its accessibility and utility.

Arrangement (explicit or implicit): Beginning, middle, end.
Aristotle articulates the obvious. Have we any other choice?

We choose to employ comparison or to explain origins be-
cause this (or another device) best illuminates our subject. We
do not choose a subject because it best lends itself to a compar-
ative or causal treatment. Form fits content, and not vice versa.
Hence, to ask a student to write a given form, by fitting a sub-
ject to that form, is so to wrench out of sequence both thinking
and writing as to render intelligent prose improbable if not im-
possible. It is to glorify a tool over purpose, process, and prod-
uct. Class themes are inherently artificial, but the artifice should
reflect nature. An assignment can be artificial without being ass-
backward.

PLEASE READ
The Spring 1979 issue of Freshman English News (Vol. 8,
No. 1) was not published. Subscribers for 1978-79 are
receiving this issue in place of the spring number. Those
who have renewed will receive issues through next fall.
The subscription year, in other words, will henceforth run
from winter through fall.
Literature and thought wear their forms with a difference. A
cognitive, non-generic form fits its content — true. But a liter-
ary, generic form might well dictate its content. A sonnet may
sing of love or death or nature. But we cannot (ought not?) son-
netize hamburgers or heuristics. The appropriateness is all.

The English teacher who orders students to write an isolated
paragraph of set form probably cannot write himself. Or if he
can write, he doesn’t — not frequently, nor consciously, nor
effectively.

The student who has consciously learned the common forms
of thought is the most effective self-critic. He can notice, on re-
reading his own prose, that he has indeed used definition here,
analogy there; he may recognize the benefit of an added touch of
repetition. Ex post facto awareness of form sharpens deliberate re-
vision. But proper hoc, post hoc imposition of form is probably as
fallacious as it is academic.

To the good student, form becomes habit. Much prose is pro-
saic; there is neither time nor need for originality. “Give three
causes of X.” “Compare X with Y.” “Define and illustrate Z.”
The writer ready stocked with forms can concentrate on filling
the appropriate form with content.

Writing is a skill. Authoring is a talent. We should be able
to teach the how of writing; the student is responsible for the
what and the why. With a knowledge of how, the effort in writ-
ing focuses on what and why. Conversely, the effort in authoring
focuses on how. No one can teach the how of authoring. But the
author must first be a writer. And learning to write means learn-
ing how, until form becomes second nature, varied by deliberate
choice, not by unthinking chance.

The structural formalists tell us there are only six (or eight, or
three) plots available to authors of narrative fiction. Does the au-
thor decide to use Plot C in his next novel? Or, as the novel
works itself out, does the form of Plot C emerge, in a variant
guise, stealthily, unwillingly by its author and discernible only to
the squatting-eyed critic?

The double helix images the form of all written communication:
what the writer thinks he has written; what the reader
thinks he has read. Groping, complementary, the two coils ap-
proach an approximation.

Riddle: when is a form not a form? Answer: when it is a tapus. Alternate answer: when it is a stylistic option. Where are the
seams in rhetoric?

A CRITICAL POSTSCRIPT

I did not set out to write crots. They just developed from a
series of thoughts I had jotted down while mulling the concept
of rhetorical form. The flitting ideas lacked continuity, but each
of them had a touch of insular integrity. Hence, I decided to
experiment with the crot, a device I'd read of in Weathers but
had never attempted.

The effort, I found, was eminently delightful. Each crot lent
itself to intricate pruning, balancing, polishing. Choosing the
right word, the right placement, became a pleasing puzzle. New
crots sprung mushroom-like into my brain unbidden. And the
burnished results dazzled me with their brilliance and wit.

Then came the cold dawn. Slowly the crots impressed me
more by their air of arrogant sententiousness, by the trivia
beneath their artificial elegance. Though genuine ideas underlay
each crot, their having been cast in the form of WISDOM
seemed somehow to have invalidated rather than elevated their
worth. My first reaction was to scrap them; my second, to ob-
serve the effect of form on style and content; my third, to append
those observations as a postscriptual apologia.

The crot form almost demands precision and concision. It
puts a premium on the weighty word and the neatly-temphed
phrase, on parallelism and the antithetical balance of clause
against clause. Short, simple sentences sound pithier than sub-
ordinated clauses. Transitional devices within crots seem extra-
neous, interfering with the striking juxtaposition of sentence to
sentence. Where coordination is needed, either polysyndeton or
asyndeton often replaces normal coordinating elements. The crot
fosters the unexpected twist, the snapper at the end. So, at least,
my crots can be characterized.

But what the crot form does not allow is a display of the act
of thinking. Each thought must be fully thought out before being
crotted. There is no room for tentativeness, for equivocation, or
for the partially true idea, suitably hedged. Hence, the reader
cannot work through to a discovery with the author, sharing the
perplexities and false leads before catching a glimmer of truth.
All ideas are stripped of uncertainties and announced as barren
statements, to be accepted, not to be argued with. This accounts
for the tone of stuffy certitude that almost led to my trashing the
crots.

I've learned, however, two useful things from this mental ex-
ercise. One, it's fun to write crots. And two, the crot form has
an insidious, independent strength. The form of the crot does
not dictate content in the same sense that the form of the sonnet
does — you can crotize hamburgers or heuristics. But in another
sense, the crot form does dictate content: pre-organized ideas
rather than suggestive probes. And the form also dictates the style
in which these pre-organized ideas are presented. In short,
with the crot, form determines both matter and manner. Fur-
thermore, the form controls not only the product but the pro-
ducer. I soon found that I was not shaping the crot; the crot was
shaping me.

How universal and impelling is this power of form? I wonder.

NOTE

"Winston Weathers, "Grammar of Style: New Options
in Composition," Freethman English News, IV (Winter 1976), 4
and 12.
Faculty Workshops in Writing
Toby Fulwiler and Robert Jones
Michigan Technological University

Too often our students see writing as having no application beyond the English classroom. Students receive the impression from peers, teachers, and advisors that English classes are something to get out of the way so they might be free to take courses that count—the ones needed to get good jobs. At Michigan Technological University, where we teach writing, Humanities classes in general, particularly Freshman English, are barely tolerated by the career-oriented engineering, forestry, and business students. But if it’s true, as John Warnock says, that writing is an “action” which entails “purpose,” why do so many of our students fail to perceive that purpose? To see that writing is an essential career, as well as humanistic skill? In order to make our Michigan Tech students more aware of the role writing may play in their lives, we have begun a series of “Writing across the Curriculum Workshops” for Michigan Tech faculty. Our major premise is the same as Dan Fader voiced a dozen years ago, that only when there is “English in every classroom” and in all four years of the curriculum will students take it seriously.

Three times during the past twelve months we offered formal, intensive, two-day writing workshops for Tech faculty. The first workshop was held on a Tuesday in October, 1977, when two of us from the Humanities Department together with sixteen colleagues from other disciplines drove forty miles to an off-season resort to study writing. We spent the first day exploring the “writing problem,” doing writing exercises, talking about writing over lunch and dinner, and meeting on into the evening exploring theories about the process of writing. The second day was more of the same: breakfast with writing talk followed by writing exercises and coffee and a writing lunch. When we returned to campus late in the afternoon of the second day, we had all become significantly aware of the problems which teaching writing presented in disciplines other than our own. And from that awareness, many of us had new insights into what we could do to enhance the writing awareness of both our students and colleagues. We met in March, and again this past October, with equally gratifying results.

Organizing a Workshop

We started our program of writing workshops by seeking support from several levels: 1) our immediate colleagues and department head, 2) our academic dean and vice president, and 3) chairpersons from other departments. All agreed that the program was worthwhile, thus providing the necessary “administrative endorsement.” Communication skills, it was agreed, were essential for engineers, foresters, businessmen, and students of the liberal arts alike. No one quarreled with the need or the concept.

Talking to department heads from other disciplines gave us the information about specific disciplinary needs which was invaluable in writing up our initial program “syllabus” and in making our ten-minute recruiting pitches at department meetings. While talking with other colleagues, we were prepared and informal; we consciously avoided disciplinary jargon and made it clear that we did not have expertise in their fields. Instead, we were embarking on a mutual discovery expedition. The beginning stages of the faculty workshops were public relations ventures: administrative support gave us legitimacy; a written syllabus demonstrated planning and rigor; our oral presenta-

tions promised “exploration” rather than gospel.

The faculty who attended the workshops were released from two days’ classes. The success of the sessions depended, in part at least, upon the intensity of our investigation of the writing process. If participants left the session and went home to mail, phone calls, papers, tests, or preparations, this intensity would be broken. We enhanced the intensity and attractiveness of the workshops by holding them at an off-season resort; any location which affords an off-campus setting where lodging, meals, and a conference room are available does nicely. The expense of attending the workshop (about $30) was borne by each participant’s department; the administrative endorsement made that possible.

Participating faculty received “professional development credit” for attending, and workshop co-leaders were rewarded with released time. To do a good job requires a substantial amount of planning, recruiting, and organizing time in addition to the two days of leading the workshop. We each received one-quarter released time per term—the equivalent of a one-course reduction.

Workshops

Workshop sessions were organized around two ideas. First, we designed short sessions which would deal with the specific kinds of writing and writing assignments required by the various departments. To plan these we asked participants to provide us with samples of student writing from their departments and to provide us with a list of the types of writing assignments they use. Because participants came from many departments (fourteen at the first workshop), the samples varied from term papers and lab reports to research reviews and test questions. We then designed exercises around representative student writing in order to discuss various approaches to this or that paper.

Second, we devised sessions which provided participants with new insights into writing as a process. Participants read two short articles, “Writing to Learn and Learning to Write” by James Britton and “Writing as a Mode of Learning” by Janet Emig, before the workshop and brought along a piece of serious writing they were working on. As much as possible we wanted these teachers to become involved in writing for themselves, then to critically examine their own experience.

We asked them to participate in activities most often associated with Freshman English classes: freewriting, journal writing, peer group critiquing, and paper reading. Throughout the sessions members participated by “doing” the writing, revising, and discussing; we did no lecturing.

The first meeting was strictly exploratory; participants shared their views about the problems with student writing at Tech. Near the end of that first hour we ranked, collectively, the problems we felt were most serious: first was “organizing ideas,” second was “motivation.” While several faculty members had arrived thinking we would talk about spelling and semi-colors, by the end of that initial session everybody had moved a few levels deeper.

A pivotal session in our workshop occurred in the evening session of the first day, when we talked about the work of James Britton and Janet Emig to introduce writing as an active intellectual process. Participants had written in their journals throughout the day, so Britton’s ideas about expressive (personal) writing and its relation to transactional (expository) writing were approachable. Initially teachers had serious questions about the usefulness of expressive writing at a technological school; however, the three-hour evening discussion focused on the value
of expressive writing as discovery or first-draft writing and as a useful transition to more formal academic prose. At the close of the first day, we asked participants to exchange their own writing with a colleague from another discipline to explore the effects of peer-group criticism first hand.

The second day focused on specific strategies for using writing as a learning activity in all classes, as well as concrete proposals for making more precise assignments and evaluating formal prose. The second day was markedly different from the first day because by now we shared common assumptions. We concluded with a brainstorming session focusing on how we could further implement "writing across the curriculum at Michigan Tech." Following is a copy of the actual two-day schedule of our workshop.

An Outline of the Workshop

**First Day**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:30-10:45</td>
<td>&quot;The Writing Crisis at Michigan Tech&quot; — an open discussion of the writing problems encountered by teachers at M.T.U.; conceptions and misconceptions about academic writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00-12:00</td>
<td>&quot;Evaluating Student Papers&quot; — exercises designed to explore student writing problems, using sample papers submitted by participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30-2:30</td>
<td>&quot;The M.T.U. Language Laboratory: Concept and Use&quot; — presentation on faculty/student use of the Lab, including sample programs and diagnostic procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:45-4:00</td>
<td>&quot;Writing/Revising/Talking&quot; — faculty exercise in composing and critiquing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:00-9:00 p.m.</td>
<td>&quot;Writing across the Curriculum&quot; — a discussion of the ideas of James Britton, Janet Emig as they relate to writing at M.T.U.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Second Day**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:00-10:15</td>
<td>&quot;Expressive Writing in the Classroom&quot; — A survey of classroom techniques for eliciting better student writing: prewriting, freewriting, journal writing, brainstorming, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30-12:00</td>
<td>&quot;Generating Formal Transactional Prose&quot; — a presentation about what goes on in Freshman English classes; a workshop about multiple drafts and peer-group critiques.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30-2:45</td>
<td>&quot;Writing Problems in Specific Disciplines&quot; — small group discussion of guidelines and specific problems related to technical and report writing, term papers, essay tests, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:00-4:00</td>
<td>&quot;Evaluation and Reconsideration&quot; — a discussion of new strategies for incorporating writing across the curriculum at Michigan Tech: conceptions and misconceptions reconsidered.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Directing the Workshop**

The co-directors of the workshop tried to foster discussion and move the sessions in specific directions while using group discussion and writing exercises to elicit the specific concerns of the participants. We kept in mind that the participants represented diverse disciplines and that they were interested in obtaining and sharing ideas about writing. We were also aware that many teachers from technical departments regarded us with some suspicion; we therefore conducted all sessions as crisply and "on task" as possible, religiously avoiding literary materials or humanities jargon of any kind. Numerous sessions were cut short because of our careful timekeeping; we felt it was better to stop sessions with people still actively involved. Scheduled fifteen minute breaks between sessions allowed participants to continue discussions. The talk that went on during "breaks" was among the most intense and important of the whole program; participants used that time to clarify and digest — to make the ideas their own.

**Results**

The workshops were designed as part of an overall strategy to increase communications/skills consciousness at our university; we feel the results so far have done that. Of the forty-two faculty who have participated, only one has given a negative evaluation of the workshop experience, and this professor felt coerced by his department chairman to attend. Several teachers, including those in music, history, and metallurgy now use journal writing in their classes; many now send graduate and undergraduate students to the Writing Lab for assistance; a few now require multiple drafts of writing assignments. And some told us that the workshop helped improve their own writing skills. Perhaps most important, all participants said they gained insights into the writing process. At a follow-up meeting in the spring, to which members from two workshops were invited, former participants from Metallurgy and Mechanical Engineering presented original and sophisticated writing assignment techniques that grew out of their workshop experience. The awareness of the writing process exemplified by these assignments was encouraging. As one participant said on an evaluation, "I came away convinced that we could improve not only the mechanics of our students' writing, whether in large or small sections, but their capacity for meaningful expression through writing."

We do not try to make those faculty who do not teach writing courses directly responsible for the teaching of writing. However, the results of the workshops indicate that, provided with an opportunity to share concerns, attitudes, and ideas about writing, most teachers will stress the importance of good writing to their students. Now in their second year, the Michigan Tech workshops have attained a degree of respect on this campus that has helped enhance the credibility of the Humanities Department — no small task in a university where English teachers were once seen in a strictly service role. Regardless of how these workshops are supported, through grants as at Beaver College or West Chester State, or internally as at Tech, we believe they are a good response to the writing motivation problem. We continue to believe that students will not see the importance of good writing until they see it as important in activities outside, as well as in, the composition classroom. The Writing across the Curriculum Workshops have provided a forum by means of which that importance can be emphasized throughout our school.
Scott, Foresman
Composition Texts...
because good writing skills are so important

Writer's Guide
Sixth Edition
Wilma R. Ebbitt, The Pennsylvania State University / David R. Ebbitt
A complete rhetoric and composition guidebook for today's student. Writer's Guide, Sixth Edition, is packed with the kind of practical instruction and realistic advice that helps student writers develop confidence and competence. August 1979, 400 pages, softbound, with Teacher's Guide

Commanding Composition
Helen Mills, American River College
In this comprehensive program for sentence, paragraph, and essay writing, lessons are carefully sequenced to develop students' skills in a logical step-by-step progression. Students who have experienced little success in writing will find the self-paced, individualized approach encouraging. April 1980, 352 pages, illustrated, softbound, with Instructor's Manual and Unit Tests

Writing Research Papers
A Complete Guide
Third Edition
James D. Lester, Austin Peay State University
The third edition of the most successful and best-selling research paper manual is clearer, more readable, and even more accessible for beginning research paper writers. Features include a new sample research paper and note cards, an updated list of reference works, and additional footnote and bibliography entries. April 1980, 196 pages, softbound, with Instructor's Manual

Writing for the Real World
Robert E. Mehaffy, American River College
Writing for the Real World introduces students to job-related writing tasks. The text covers the most commonly encountered writing assignments in the working world, such as memos, business letters, résumés, standard forms, and reports. A review of sentence structure, sentence types, and sentence improvement techniques is included to help students build a foundation for more effective writing. January 1980, 416 pages, softbound, with Instructor's Manual and Test Items

Contemporary Writing
Process and Practice
Jim W. Corder, Texas Christian University
Available now, 493 pages, hardbound, with Instructor's Manual

Strategies of Rhetoric
Third Edition
A.M. Tibbetts / Charlene Tibbetts, University of Illinois
Available now, 378 pages, softbound, with Instructor's Manual

Strategies of Rhetoric with Handbook
Third Edition
A.M. Tibbetts / Charlene Tibbetts, University of Illinois
Available now, 425 pages, hardbound, with Instructor's Manual

For further information write
Jennifer Toms, Department SA
1900 East Lake Avenue
Glenview, Illinois 60025

Scott, Foresman and Company
Elements of Literature: Essay, Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Film
Edited by ROBERT SCHELÉS, Brown University; CARL H. KLAUS, University of Iowa, and MICHAEL SILVERMAN, Brown University. "The organization and selections are excellent. The explanatory material preceding each unit is well written and very clear. This is an exceptional anthology." — Carol Stridland, Connors State College, Oklahoma. "The selections are judicious in their variety and appropriateness to introductory-level courses....A rich, inclusive text. I find the essay and film sections vital additions to the standard literary genres." — Robert L. Root, Jr., Central Michigan University
1978 1,386 pp. paper $10.00
Complimentary Instructor's Manual

The Sense of the Seventies: A Rhetorical Reader
Edited by PAUL J. DOLAN, State University of New York, Stony Brook, and EDWARD QUINN, City College, The City University of New York. More than seventy selections, including pieces by Woody Allen, Alex Haley, Susan Brownmiller, A. Alvarez, Nat Hentoff, Gloria Steinem, Nora Ephron and many others capture the shape and substance of this decade. The articles deal with such themes as spiritual search, powerful personalities, pop culture, working, race, perceptions of sexuality, and terror and violence, and have been chosen for their reading level and usefulness as rhetorical teaching tools. Questions for discussion follow each piece and a Rhetorical Table of Contents facilitates classroom use of the reader. "Excellent collection of contemporary material. Varied and meaty." — Ben Epstein, Monterey Peninsula College
1978 638 pp. paper $6.95
Complimentary Instructor's Manual

Style: Writing and Reading as the Discovery of Outlook, Second Edition
RICHARD M. EASTMAN, North Central College. "The second edition as delightful as the first, and has the added attraction of the timely readings....The playful and widely read imagination which chose the examples or invented the parodies and ironies is rich and original." — Peter Neumeyer, West Virginia University
1978 432 pp. paper $6.50
Complimentary Instructor's Manual

Decisive Writing: An Improvement Program
L.P. DRISKILL, Rice University, and MARGARET SIMPSON, San Jacinto College. "A wonderful text which clearly explains the central thought processes behind forceful and sensitive writing. One of the best texts I've seen for helping the student think. Doesn't just stress mechanics." — Daniel Fineman, Occidental College, California. "An excellent step-by-step introduction to the decisions that need to be made in writing a paper." — Earl B. Brown, Jr., Radford College, Virginia
1978 294 pp. paper $5.00

Writing About Science
Edited by MARY ELIZABETH BOWEN, Tufts University, and JOSEPH A. MAZZEO, Columbia University. Twenty-five essays by eminent scientists on subjects of their expertise serve as models of expository writing in the sciences. Each selection is prefaced by an introduction to the author and his contribution to science, and followed by study questions concerning the author's method of exposition. Contributors include Isaac Asimov, Bertrand Russell, Loren Eiseley, Darwin, Huxley, and Watson and Crick, among others.
1979 352 pp.; 30 illus. paper $6.50

Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing
MINA P. SHAUGHNESSY. "Errors and Expectations can be read with all the 'shock of recognition,' all the delight in insight that we normally expect from first-rate scholarship. Teachers of basic writing — in fact, teachers of writing at every level — will certainly find guidance here." — Chronicle of Higher Education. "The first systematic, thorough and rigorous view of error I know, one which brings us to a definition of basic writing....A volume of ideas, suggestions, pathways to new research." — College English
1977 (paper, 1979) 324 pp. cloth $10.00 paper $5.95

Prices are subject to change.

Oxford University Press 200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016
Coming in 1980

Patterns for College Writing
A Rhetorical Reader and Guide
LAURIE G. KIRSZNER and STEPHEN R. MANDELL

Emphasizing writing across the curriculum, Patterns for College Writing offers a rhetorically arranged selection of high-interest essays from a wide variety of subject areas. An introductory chapter clearly explains the stages of the writing process: invention, arrangement, writing and revision. Substantial introductions to the nine rhetorical sections include annotated student essays and stress the usefulness of each rhetorical pattern for the writing students will do in all of their college courses. Discussion questions and suggestions for student writing follow each essay.

February 400 pp. paper $6.95

Writing Research Papers
STEPHEN WEIDENBORNER and DOMENICK CARUSO

A comprehensive yet compact guide, Writing Research Papers gives special emphasis to the early planning stages of the research process, including selection of a topic and hypothesis, preliminary reading of sources, formulation of a thesis, using the library, and reading and note-taking techniques. Simply but thoroughly it covers every part of the research process, from choice of topic through preparation of the final draft. It provides exercises to sharpen students' research skills and two annotated student research papers.

February 224 pp. paper $3.95

Now available

Contemporary Vocabulary
ELLIOTT L. SMITH

"Combines several excellent features: study of Latin and Greek derivatives, reinforcing exercises, context exercises, puzzles...The inclusion of cognates and foreign expressions is beneficial."—Beverly H. Grey, Orange Coast College

1979 364 pp. paper $6.95

Language Awareness
Second Edition
edited by PAUL ESCHHOLZ, ALFRED ROSA and VIRGINIA CLARK

"An excellent book, one of a kind for making students stand back and look at how they are being manipulated by language, and how important it is to be precise, compact, forceful, and clear in their writing...A book to form a first fascination with language."—Michael McDowell, Portland Community College

1978 312 pp. paper $6.95

Subject and Strategy
A Rhetoric Reader
edited by PAUL ESCHHOLZ and ALFRED ROSA

"The essays clearly illustrate the seven different types of composition which the student most frequently attempts to master. The emphasis on diction and vocabulary is praiseworthy. The suggestions for writing are imaginative and clearly derive from the reading selections."—George Osmon, Western Michigan University

1978 432 pp. paper $6.95

St. Martin's Press

Structuring Paragraphs
A Guide to Effective Writing
A. FRANKLIN PARKS, IDA MASTERS HOLLOWELL and JAMES A. LEVERNER

Structuring Paragraphs offers students a clear, simple, step-by-step procedure for learning about basic structure and the principles of good writing. In a natural progression, the text moves from consideration of the expository paragraph—selecting a topic and writing a topic sentence, maintaining unity, using methods of development, and achieving coherence—to discussion of the short essay. Abundant examples, interesting and varied exercises, and frequent summaries reinforce the principles of good writing that the text so clearly sets out.

February 170 pp. paper $5.95

Writing That Works
How to Write Effectively on the Job
WALTER E. OLSON, CHARLES T. BRUSAW and GERALD J. ALRED

The most comprehensive textbook available for courses in occupational or vocational writing, Writing That Works guides the student from prewriting decisions about purpose, audience, and scope to the selection of rhetorical strategies and then to the execution of specific types of documents people write on the job, including letters and memos, informal and formal reports, proposals, and forms. It also provides chapters on research, oral presentations, using graphic illustrations, and finding a job, as well as self-teaching chapters on spelling and vocabulary building. Each chapter includes abundant exercises and writing assignments. Finally, a brief handbook of grammar, syntax, and mechanics is included.

February 450 pp. paper $7.95

Publication date and price of forthcoming books are tentative.

The Writer's World
Readings for College Composition
edited by GEORGE ARMS, WILLIAM M. GIBSON and LOUIS G. LOCKE

"An exceptional collection of essays for a college writing course. The book is practical, sound, and teachable. The selection of reading offers variation in length, subject matter, time, and technique."—Brad Cherniaw, Holyoke Community College

1978 528 pp. paper $7.95

Literature
The Human Experience
Second Edition
edited by RICHARD ABCARIAN and MARVIN KLOTZ

"Contents satisfy both teacher and student: healthy mix of classic and modern, Categories (format) chosen for universality of theme right on target. Even more illuminating and useful are appendices, particularly "Writing about Literature," a nitty-gritty effort to show the student how to write literary criticism."—Theodore Taub, Middlesex County College

1978 1,216 pp. paper $10.95

The Short Story
25 Masterpieces

"An admirable collection of teachable tales...Moreover, the stories here are wide-ranging and show enough range of difficulty to make the text a fine one for introductory teaching. Finally, the price...I'm delighted to see a substantial text priced intelligently."—Alexander Medcalf, University of Connecticut

1979 446 pp. paper $3.95

St. Martin's Press P.O. Box 5352 New York, N.Y. 10017
NEW AND RECENT FROM SCRIBNERS

REVISING PROSE

Richard A. Lanham, University of California, Los Angeles

The more student papers I read, the more I think that America’s current epidemic verbal ineptitude comes on two levels, rudimentary and stylistic. The rudimentary level is caused by a failure to teach simple functional literacy. Students on this level make mistakes from ignorance. They don’t know the rules. On the stylistic level, though, something different happens. You are not so much making “writing errors” as trying, usually with indifferent success, to imitate a predominant style, one you see all around you. This style, which let’s call “The Official Style,” you’ll find, too, in your textbooks and in the academic bureaucracy’s official pronouncements. Naturally enough, you come to think that’s what is expected of you and try to imitate it.

Revising Prose addresses this second, stylistic level of the verbal epidemic. It is concerned not with inspiration or argumentation but with stylistic revision. Maybe translation would be a better word — translating The Official Style into plain English. Revising Prose tries to make you self-conscious about what The Official Style is, what it means to write it, and how it can — and usually should — be translated into plain English.

1979 126 pages $2.95 paper

From the Preface

THE SCRIBNER QUARTO OF MODERN LITERATURE

Edited by A. Walton Litz, Princeton University

The Scribner Quarto, an anthology of British and American Literature, includes short stories, novels, drama, poetry, and literary criticism. The selections offer both teacher and student comprehensive coverage of the genres and major authors of the modern age.

Included are the complete text of Heart of Darkness, The Great Gatsby and The Old Man and the Sea; 20 short stories, 5 dramas, over 100 poems, and 15 essays. Instructor’s Manual is available.

1978 597 pages $12.95 clothbound

For an examination copy(ies), write, stating course and enrollment, to College Department

CHARLES SCRIBNER’S SONS
597 Fifth Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10017
THE 500 WORD THEME, Third Edition
Lee J. Martin, Harry P. Kroiter, Texas A&M University
1979 279 pp. Paper $6.95

CONTACT: A Textbook in Applied Communications, Third Edition
C. Jeriel Howard, Bishop College, Richard F. Tracz, Oakton Community College, Coramae Thomas
1979 256 pp. Paper $7.95

STEPS IN COMPOSITION, Second Edition
Lynn Quitman Troyka, Jerrold Nudelman, both of Queensborough Community College
1979 432 pp. Paper $6.95

Getting off to the "Write" Start with
Prentice-Hall

CONTENTS FOR COMPOSITION, Fifth Edition
David Spencer, California State University
Martin Stanford, Stanley Clayes
1979 448 pp. Paper $7.95

PROGRAMED COLLEGE VOCABULARY 3600, Second Edition
George W. Feinstein, Pasadena City College
1979 300 pp. Paper $6.95

Now...Some Big 'Best Sellers' for the '79-'80 School Year. Just Published in 1979, These New Editions Are Even Better, More Widely Used!

And New For 1980!

THE WRITER'S WORK: Guide to Effective Composition
W. Dean Memering, Central Michigan University
Frank O'Hara, Ohio State University
1980 500 pp. (est.) Cloth $9.95

Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Second College Edition, is published by Collins+World Publishing Co., Inc., and is distributed to colleges and universities by Prentice-Hall, Inc.
THREE CHEERS

Little, Brown Is Publishing A Handbook That's Better Than The Others In Three Important Ways

THE LITTLE, BROWN HANDBOOK – available for examination on December 21, 1979 – is designed for the 1980s. It responds, in ways that the other handbooks do not, to the changes that have occurred in how handbooks are used and in the abilities of the students who use them. And we think it's better than the other handbooks in three important ways.

1. IT'S A BETTER REFERENCE GUIDE
   * THE LITTLE, BROWN HANDBOOK makes information extremely accessible with an exhaustive index; with a sensible organization that groups all sentence chapters together and places important glossaries at the back; where they are easy to find; with an uncluttered design; and with helpful endpaper guides and lists. * Each section is self-contained, minimizing the need for cross-checking. * Complete self-teaching guidance is provided on basic grammar, the whole paper, paragraphs, the research paper, the dictionary, vocabulary, spelling, avoiding plagiarism, and improving study skills. * A separate booklet containing answers to the exercises – available to students at an instructor's option – allows the book to be used for self-paced instruction.

2. IT'S A BETTER CLASSROOM TEXT
   * THE LITTLE, BROWN HANDBOOK's complete coverage and thorough explanations make it suitable as a composition text for students who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the fundamentals of writing. * The text begins with full treatment of larger elements – the whole paper, paragraphs, and logic – and then becomes increasingly focused on sentences and words. * Each convention of grammar and usage is thoroughly explained, illustrated with unambiguous examples, and reviewed with abundant exercises. * Comprehensive chapters on sentence rhetoric, diction, and the research paper give essential instruction while providing a basis for classroom discussion.

3. IT'S THE CORE OF A BETTER EDUCATIONAL PACKAGE
   * The succinct explanations in the accompanying workbook exactly parallel those in the handbook in terminology, breadth, and organization. * Both the handbook and the workbook are accompanied by booklets – available to students at an instructor's option – that provide answers to their exercises. * A correction chart includes a handy reference guide to both the correction code and the symbol system used in the handbook and the workbook. * A hand- or machine-readable diagnostic test is keyed to the handbook. * An instructor's manual includes the answers to handbook and workbook exercises, a discussion of every section in the handbook, a selected bibliography, suggestions for using the ancillaries with the handbook, and sample pages from the workbook and the diagnostic test package.

WE PUT MORE INTO THE LITTLE, BROWN HANDBOOK SO STUDENTS COULD GET MORE OUT OF IT. The full package will be available for examination December 21, 1979. Write to Little, Brown today to request your complimentary copy.

THE LITTLE, BROWN HANDBOOK by H. Ramsey Fowler with the Editors of Little, Brown clothbound/approximately 576 pages/$8.95 tentative
THE LITTLE, BROWN WORKBOOK by Quentin L. Gehle with the Editors of Little, Brown paperback/approximately 384 pages/$5.95 tentative

COLLEGE DIVISION
LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
34 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02106
THE WRITER'S OPTIONS
College Sentence Combining
by DONALD A. DAIKER, ANDREW KERK, & MAX MORENBERG

ASSIGNMENTS IN EXPOSITION
Sixth Edition
by LOUISE E. RORABACHER & GEORGIA DUNBAR

A COMPLETE COURSE IN
FRESHMAN ENGLISH
Eighth Edition
by HARRY SHAW

COMPOSING THE ESSAY
Prewriting, Shaping, and Revising
by KEN M. SYMES

THE CHRISTENSEN METHOD
Text and Workbook
by BONNIEJEAN CHRISTENSEN

THE PRACTICAL STYLIST
Fourth Edition
by SHERIDAN BAKER

New...

THE COMPLETE STYLIST AND
HANDBOOK
Second Edition
by SHERIDAN BAKER

New

THE WELL-WRITTEN THEME
by JOAN ROSS WALKSY
A practical composition text that takes a "first things first" approach, showing students how to deal with the major writing elements before focusing on the elements of refinement. The author relates the writing skills learned to the "real world" necessities of getting a job, taking political action, and more. Due November 1979. 256 pages tentative. Paper. ISBN 0-06-046885-8.

New

THE LANGUAGE OF ARGUMENT
Third Edition
by DANIEL McDonald

New

HOW TO WRITE YOUR TERM PAPER
Fourth Edition
by ELINOR YAGGY

To request examination copies, write to Suite 50 (852), Harper & Row, 10 East 53d Street, New York, New York 10022. Please include course title, enrollment, and present text.
WRITING
Elizabeth Cowan &
Gregory Cowan, Texas
A & M Univ.
At last, here is the complete
freshman rhetoric hand-
book package which incor-
porates the freshest, most-
ively approach to teaching
the writing process. With
this text your students
focus on three major
stages of writing: Creating,
Shaping, and Completing.
Carefully placed through-
out these sections are ten
self-contained writing units
which describe the tradi-
tional rhetorical modes
and present purposes for
different types of writing.
Students are led through
the stages of writing
research papers, business
letters, literary criticism,
and essay exams. A supple-
mentary student workbook
reinforces the basic prin-
ciples presented in the text.
The conversational tone
and striking visual appeal
of the book combine to
enforce student learning.
Make learning to write fun
for your students—with
WRITING.
(0 471 01559-8)
Jan. 1980
approx. 450 pp.

READINGS
FOR TODAY'S
WRITERS
Steven H. Gale, Univ. of
Florida, Gainesville
The readings in this new
anthology help students to
understand basic concepts
of the writing process.
Selections are organized by
traditional rhetorical cate-
gories with 70 selections in
each. At least one selection
in every category is drawn
from either the humanities,
science, or the social
sciences, providing stu-
dents with a springboard
for stimulating discussion
and interesting writing
topics. A vocabulary list,
questions on content and
technique, and library
assignments accompany
each selection.
(0 471 05127-6)
Jan. 1980
approx. 475 pp.

THE WRITER'S
PRACTICAL
RHETORIC
Adrienne Robins,
Occidental College
From inventing an idea to
polishing the final draft,
this new book gives stu-
dents the step-by-step pro-
cedures they need to
develop a good piece of
writing. Emphasis is on
practical skills and the
"how-to" of writing.
Includes an excellent
library use chapter written
by a librarian, a special sec-
tion on writing for various
purposes, and discussion
of sentence-combining. In
both number of topics and
depth of treatment, you'll
find this text the most com-
prehensive available.
(0 471 03033-3)
Jan. 1980
approx. 550 pp.

THE WILEY
READER
Brief Edition,
Designs for
Writing
Caroline D. Eckhardt, The
Pennsylvania State Uni.
&
David H. Stewart, Texas
A & M Uni.
The outstanding selection
of essays and a "building
block" approach to writing
distinguish this popular
text. It includes the tradi-
tional rhetorical types of
writing but presents them
in a structure that empha-
sizes the purposes of
writing.
(0 471 03499-1) 1979
334 pp.
Why is this course necessary? We believe it's necessary because when students take our courses in anthropology, business, music, politics, psychology, and sociology, they seem to have considerable difficulty reading the texts we assign. Immediately after reading a passage, for instance, many are unable to satisfactorily restate the main ideas therein; so that far from being able to comment on the ideas in the passage, many cannot even specify its paraphrasable content. Accordingly, they have considerable difficulty forming main ideas in their own writing, based on this reading and on the material presented in class. And since they don't understand the material very well, it's no great surprise that they have trouble organizing their ideas on paper.

Now, we're not so ignorant on the one hand, or so visionary on the other, that we expect you in the English Department to remedy in one year the accumulated mis-education of twelve years. Surely, though, we had a right to expect that you would at least address yourself, in some more or less reasonable manner, to the problems at hand, if not actually to solve them. But we can't, for the life of us, see how what goes on in the typical freshman composition class can be of any use to us (and indeed, it has not been, as we're all aware). On the contrary, the materials, methods and assignments you use seem designed primarily to allow your department to indulge in its own specialized literary and linguistic inclinations, if not actually to proselytize for English and literature majors.

No, we are not specialists in composition. But wouldn't common sense suggest that the material assigned in composition courses, if these courses are to fulfill their service function, should be similar to the material that we assign in our courses? And that the writing assignments should at least remotely resemble the ones that we give? But this is so far from being the case that it almost defies reason. Most freshman anthologies (the basis for class discussions as well as most writing assignments) consist of material that students would never be asked to read outside of a composition course. You require them to study short stories, informal essays on pop culture or on personal experience, or formal essays on language or rhetoric. But since this kind of material — whatever value it may have as part of a liberal arts curriculum (which is another matter entirely, and not to be confused with the freshman composition requirement) — is thoroughly unrepresentative of the kind of material with which they will have to deal in the next few years, we think that freshmen have good reason to wonder why on earth they are being required to read it.

We have examined what English teachers no doubt regard as an "infinite variety" of composition anthologies; some are organized by genre (short story, tragedy, popular writing), some by rhetorical category (comparison-contrast, cause and effect, etc.), and some by subject matter (though the subjects are often rather hazy: "The Inner Person," "Permanence and Change," etc.). Despite this apparent variety, they all look like Tweedledum and Tweedledee to us. Allow us to explain our reaction by citing one of your own most common rhetorical constructs: the so-called "communication triangle." We hope we're not insulting your expertise when we describe this construct as a figure, one of whose corners is labeled "expressive" (writer-oriented), the second of whose corners is labeled "persuasive" (reader-oriented), the third of whose corners is labeled "referential" (reality-oriented), and whose center is labeled "objective" or "literary" (text-oriented). This triangle is a useful concept because it enables us to pinpoint just where you seem to have lost your way in meeting your service responsibilities to us.

Now, what characterizes most freshman composition anthologies, whatever their format, is that they consist largely (not
entirely, we concede, but largely) of statements that could be described as "expressive" and/or "persuasive." These statements are generally written by people who want to convey some more or less personal, or idiosyncratic, if nonetheless mature set of reflections on some topic. (In the case of imaginative literature, a staple of many composition courses, the statements are "literary" ones, which demand not only analysis, but also interpretation of a kind special to students of literature.) These statements (or essays) are, of course, often very interesting, enjoyable, and stimulating. But we seriously question their place and function in a course that purports to be a "service" course.

As we've suggested, the most useful training material for college writers is material that most closely resembles the material that we assign in our courses — the kind of material that lines the shelves of the college bookstore. This material, of course, is very diverse, but despite its diversity, it is safe to say that most of the material that is assigned in economics, or education, or politics, or psychology courses is neither "expressive" nor "persuasive" (except insofar as most writing is intended to be persuasive), and it certainly isn't "literary." It is, rather, "referential." In other words, most of the material that we assign our students is not a part of a personal, or highly subjective, or impressionistic nature; it does not depend for its existence or form (as most anthology selections do) on any particular individual; but it is, rather, commonly-held and indeed often basic knowledge that is available to anyone who studies the field. Its purpose is less the communication of another sensibility, another consciousness, than the conveying of facts and ideas. It emphasizes information, not reflection or reminiscence. As do our writing assignments.

In short, the point of the communication triangle that we are most interested in, that most directly concerns the substance of our own disciplines — the "referential" — is exactly the point to which your composition courses devote the least attention.

We ask you to consider a sampling of the readings that we assign (like Presidential Power and Politics, Profiles in Ethnology, The Human Condition in Latin America, Twentieth-Century Britain, Men and Music, Social Psychology, Socialism in Cuba), and then we ask you: what is the relationship between these readings of ours and the kind of readings that you assign? What is the relationship between the kind of writing we assign (which tends to be factual, rather than impressionistic, and which tends to take the form of "reports" rather than "essays"); ask your students to let you see some of their other writing assignments if you're not sure what we mean) and the kind of writing you assign (largely based on your anthology material, and thus likely to be subjective, impressionistic, and idiosyncratic, albeit without the corresponding maturity of insight generally found in your readers)?

If you want to teach such material, then teach it, certainly, but teach it to students who sign up for your courses voluntarily. Why should we, the rest of the faculty, require students to deal with such material? How will the study and analysis of such essays help students improve their own writing? And let there be no fudging, please, about that word, "essay." When we give "essay" exams, we mean simply that the student is to provide us with information and ideas at some length, rather than in brief, "objective" form. But your department seems determined to literally teach students how to write "essays" — that is (to cite a dictionary definition), "short composition(s) dealing with a single topic and typically personal in approach" (emphasis ours). Surely, assigning "essays" of this type is an unnecessarily oblique way of preparing students for our requirements.

We have already talked with some of you about these things, of course, and we have found you with no shortage of pieties and rationalizations about why literature and essays are good for students. Teaching students to analyze and write such essays, you claim, trains them in a general way to apply basic writing techniques to many other forms of writing. With all due respect, allow us to say, first, that we don't believe it, and second, that we could, with equal plausibility, argue for making any or all of our basic courses required. Since all our students will be living and working in the modern world, and most of them in the U.S. (we could argue), shouldn't we require them to take our basic "Modern American Civilization" course? By a similar train of reasoning we could argue for a universally required "Introduction to Psychology" course (we all have minds that we need to understand, don't we?). What makes writing a special subject (we thought) was that writing skills were practical skills that can be used — that have to be used — in almost every other college course. Unhappily, the present design of the composition curriculum makes this basic function difficult or impossible to fulfill. Your students are being trained to write "English compositions," but not much else, in our view. And "English compositions," unfortunately, have little or no market outside the English composition class itself.

But you will offer other reasons why you must continue to deal with "literary" essays. This material, you claim, is what you feel most "comfortable" with; and besides, what do you know about teaching other subjects? The "comfort" argument recalls the not-quite-so-cynical charge sometimes leveled at us that our courses (especially graduate ones) are designed more in line with our own interests than those of our students. And as for the we-can't-deal-with-other-subjects protestation, we find this line of argument especially ironic in light of the fact that having accepted the responsibility (to say nothing of the associated enrollment benefits) of teaching this "service" course, you subsequently retreat into your own specialized literary and linguistic shells, and say, in effect: since we're not experts in other subjects, we can't really help you with them; but we will teach you literature and language, and the kind of skills you learn from this study will serve you well in other disciplines — a specious, self-serving argument if we ever heard one.

But beyond that, the point is not whether you are specialists in fields other than English, and so qualified to teach them. Of course we don't want you teaching anthropology. You are English teachers, after all. But you're also intelligent, educated human beings, aren't you? If we expect our freshmen to read and understand anthropology texts, why shouldn't we expect the same of you? And why can't you use your superior skills to help your students read and understand this material, and then write coherently about it? It isn't necessary, for this limited purpose, that your expertise extend beyond the boundary of the text. We'll take care of the expertise. It's enough that you be able to read and understand better than your composition students what is on the printed page, that you help your students grasp the main ideas and make sense of them, and that you give your students writing assignments that will allow them to express these ideas with clarity and coherence. The content itself is less important (in your composition classes) than the ability to deal with the content.

Now, perhaps our special point-of-view makes us a little overzealous, perhaps even simplistic. We certainly don't mean to imply that you've been purposely delinquent in discharging your obligations to us, or that, as individual teachers, you are not competent. On the contrary, we know that most of you are dedicated and hard-working in your performance of this thankless...
task. But the kind of serious, scholarly thought that you devote to literary matters seems to vanish when you turn to composition (which we, from our admittedly biased viewpoint, consider your most important function — not that we don’t love Chaucer or Milton); and you seem, by your own admission, to rely on little more than tradition or instinct when you design and teach your writing courses.

Of course, you’re hamstrung, to no small degree, by the lack of adequate texts. If we had to design an anthology for you (and ultimately, of course, for ourselves), we would devise one that would serve as a sampler of academic work to come, much as a “survey” course in any discipline attempts to define the boundaries and, to some extent, the nature of the discipline itself. Our ideal text would be a compact, but systematic introduction to the academic demands of college-level work; it would consist of excerpts from some of the actual college texts that we regularly assign (arranged by discipline); and its writing assignments would be just the kind of writing assignments that we regularly assign, only perhaps shorter. We frankly found it baffling that amidst your “infinite variety” of composition anthologies, not a single one seemed to resemble this imaginary text that made so much sense to us. (The closest one was a book called *How to Read the Social Sciences* by Charles M. Brown and W. Royce Adams [Scott Foresman, 1968]; other volumes in this series deal with the Humanities and the Sciences); and this was not really designed for a composition course, but rather for a study-skills course. Still, despite its limitations, particularly its scant attention to expository writing, we recommend it to your attention as the kind of text that we would prefer our students to have carefully studied and worked with in their composition courses.

At any rate, we hope that we’ve conveyed our concern to you, as well as our earnest hope that you seriously re-evaluate the assumptions under which your composition program operates, since these assumptions have such important consequences for the level of skills that students are equipped with when they take our courses. We might offer one additional thought: if you feel that you really can’t devote any more of your efforts and resources to composition, or if — to put the matter bluntly — you aren’t willing to devote the kind of attention to composition that *we* think it deserves, we’d be willing to consider taking the responsibility off your hands and giving it to others who are.

[The editor invites replies from anyone belonging to the English Department described in this memo from the Faculty Senate.]

Fragments of a Composition Course

Timothy R. Donovan
Northeastern University

Recently, in a workshop on the teaching of writing, one of the teachers (who had evidently been listening but not participating actively) finally could refrain no longer. While she “appreciated” our idealism and expertise, she sensed a great distance between herself and the rest of us. She recalled the day when, after a particularly exasperating session in her composition course, she rushed from the classroom and broke down in tears. She said that her students weren’t responding and that they were writing terribly and that she didn’t know how to respond to them and that she was teaching terribly. Everything she had been doing as a writing teacher was called into question. I asked her if things had changed at all since that day, and she replied, “Not much.” Oh, she didn’t really think she was such a terrible teacher, just that she didn’t honestly know why she was teaching writing or what she was working toward. At that moment in the workshop, all the clamor, the charges, the recriminations, and certainly the doubts whirled up by the so-called “literacy crisis” seemed to descend around her and around us.

In describing his graduate seminar in the teaching of writing (CCC, Oct. 1977), William E. Coles, Jr. says that, above all, he works toward having his teachers believe in their assumptions about writing and their methods for teaching it. Now one can hardly quarrel with this goal, and to some it might seem a trifle naive or simply too obvious to have as a guiding principle in the training of composition teachers, particularly when there are laudable efforts on every front to “professionalize” instruction in writing and to develop a more scientific body of research which teachers may use in planning their courses. But after that workshop with that teacher, and after rummaging through my own difficulties, both getting started as a teacher of writing and keeping myself going, I saw how very central — and sophisticated — Coles’ goal is. The matter of belief is paramount in the teaching of writing for at least three reasons: 1) many teachers don’t know what to believe; 2) a commitment to one’s methods is essential in developing a style of teaching; and 3) a coherent style of teaching, perhaps more than any specific pedagogical practice, affects the level of achievement in a writing course.

Ironically, the first and most obvious fact about the teaching of writing as a profession is that it suffers an embarrassment of riches in the number of “approaches” available to teachers. Among the various approaches, not to mention the wealth of writing texts, we count those of the “new” and classical rhetoricians, the self-expressionists, the traditionalists, the tutorialists, the language-users, and other less definable or more eclectic approaches. This diversity suggests exciting options for discerning and dedicated teachers. At the same time, it can be the source of much confusion and anxiety. Teachers are often baffled by the egalitarianism of such concessions as, “... but whatever works for you.” On the other hand, they are irked by the illiberal-approaches which claim, in Arnold’s phrase, the neecessarum, or the “one thing needful.” The existence of approaches which admit of no equal or which bestow equality on everything can indeed be puzzling, and sometimes distressing.

Unsettling, too, is the attempt by teachers to direct student writing when writing means many different things to many people. We describe writing variously (and when convenient to do so) as our most precise means of communication; the process of discovery; the emulation of prose masters; a vehicle for self-expression; the enactment of a rhetorical purpose; a means of intellectual liberation; and so on. It should not surprise us, then, that writing courses are so various, or resilient. But there remain only ways of describing, and not very helpful ways at that for a teacher who wants to know what to do in class Monday morning or for students looking to justify the ways of their teachers.

The existence of multiple approaches also tells us that writing itself is not a simple, uniform activity and that it has a variety of semantic directions that each approach does not always accommodate. We may talk about the artistic uses of language and the everyday uses, of expressive language and referential language, of ornate style and plain style. We may also talk about and teach the need not only for writing to communicate, but also of the writer’s need to discover what is peculiarly his own. No limited approach can achieve most of, let alone all, the purposes of writing.
Finally, there is the pedagogical question of how the teacher should intervene in the writing processes of students. The more directed approaches tend, in Adler's terms, to be oriented to the "order of knowledge" in their assumption that the student must know certain principles or characteristics of good writing in order to reproduce them in his own writing. With the emphasis clearly on a subject which the student must learn, the teacher tends to be a dominant figure: illuminating modes of development; providing models of good prose for illustration, stimulation, or imitation; closely controlling assignments; evaluating thoroughly and at regular intervals; directing activity generally with clearly visible control. The strength of such an approach is that it gives students specific "tools" for generating a piece of writing in an organized, seemingly systematic fashion. But its weakness is that it may disregard the creative needs of the student and yield wooden, even vacuous prose.

Other, less directed approaches assume that there can be no straight line to good writing, that writing is essentially an art which can't be taught. So they rely on and engender a need on the part of the student to write, to express himself creatively when motivated to do so. Clearly the student has more control in this approach. He will usually choose his own subjects, develop his own forms appropriate to the subject, and may even hold off "mechanics," either in the essay or the course itself, until he has found himself as a writer. The teacher, on the other hand, is more a listener and reader, telling him what he can about what has been said or written. The advantage of this approach lies in its contention that writing can be important for its own sake and that students can be induced to improve when they experience this kind of satisfaction for themselves. The liability is that they may waste time in a trial-and-error process or that writing itself may be reduced to a neurotic activity.

What this brief and incomplete survey of writing and the teaching of writing demonstrates is that in the field of composition there is much to know, much to modify, and, indeed, much that may have to be ignored. There simply are no models, no approaches, or even patterns of proceeding to which one can point and say with perfect confidence, "That's the best way to teach writing." There are only choices, with some more appropriate than others, depending upon the instructor, his students, and his teaching circumstances. What is certain is that all three will indeed be present on that Monday morning and that the task of making the course responsible and responsive remains with the teacher of writing. So however one chooses to regard the flux of ideas about the teaching of writing, the key variable in the success or failure of the composition course remains the teacher himself. What is wanted then is a better understanding and appreciation of how the individual teacher, by evolving a commitment and an approach uniquely his own, influences the quality of student writing.

The text of a composition course is, finally, what a student writes, but teachers create the volume he writes in: the course itself. They guide and edit the volume by assignments, classroom practices, discussion and evaluation of writing by almost everything they do. And teachers are individually different. They bring to the writing course understandings, skills, appreciations, attitudes, and feelings that constitute their reaction to previous information and experience. Like the writers they guide, they have developed concepts of self. And again like writers, they are constantly trying on roles, both in their motivation for teaching composition and in the approaches they utilize. What both are striving for is style, a pattern of choices that make sense and resolve conflicts. Ultimately an individual's methods of conducting a writing course should modify all he knows in such a way that it becomes his own, so that style and substance, like form and content, become one. Why a teaching style is so important cannot always be discerned by looking at the writing course in traditional ways, such as the prewriting/writing/revising paradigm. I suggest we look at it as a process of involvement by teacher in a number of ways:

1. Stating and initiating the goals and tasks of a writing course; organizing teacher and student time in the service of those goals and tasks.
2. Supplying appropriate information about the composing process, rhetorical modes, stylistic modification, matters of usage, spelling, punctuation, syntax.
3. Requesting information from the student about what he knows or expects to do in the course, how he writes, how he reads, what inspires him, what motivates him.
4. Providing opinions on the quality of student ideas or student responses; suggesting alternative methods of development.
5. Eliciting opinion from students about their writing, its strengths and weaknesses, and how they might further proceed with it.
6. Building on the ideas and capabilities of students toward a more developed, complex awareness of good writing and their relationship to it.
7. Refocusing on pertinent points of information or past discussion about writing, clarifying ideas or calling for conclusions.

Emerging from this dissection is a sense of the tremendous scope of activities the writing teacher engages in and of the various ways she can attempt to inspire student initiative and writing. The composition course can have her own imprint. The fragments can be assembled and fashioned into her own course, no matter what the text.

But to design a course one believes in, one must know who one is and what one is about. And now I think about the distraught teacher in the workshop. Clearly she feels powerless, and no teacher who feels powerless can remain an effective teacher for very long. Yet, as I have tried to show, she has significant powers to apply. However, they bear closely on her expectations, and a classroom is a place of shared expectations, with those of the students' deriving, in part, from those she sees for herself. No one can tell her what those expectations should be, nor how they should be fulfilled. To specify what and how she should teach her students would be as wrongheaded as suggesting it really didn't matter much what she did in her writing course.

So I have no answers for her, only more questions. How do you conceptualize a writing course? Where do you start and why? How is what you start with better than something else? What do you move toward and why? Why do you not move to something else? What is it that you want to come out of the course, and why? How is what you start with useful to what you end up with? Once we rid ourselves of stock responses to these questions (and perhaps she had), we see not only the important choices we have in the teaching of writing but the importance of the question themselves, and the profound necessity of continually asking them. That she was present at the workshop encourages me to believe that she understands this and that she may also find the answers that will allow her, once again, to believe in what she does.
The Odds Are Great, But...

Stephen P. Witte
The University of Texas at Austin

As a sometime teacher of writing, I try to remain attentive to the ways various writers handle the same subject matters; but however similar the subject matter, the details a writer includes in an essay nearly always turn out so distinctly different from those in every other essay that sentence-by-sentence comparisons of syntactic or stylistic choices evident in different essays are all but impossible. Yet from time to time, when the finite number of possible details for a particular subject matter is exhausted or when the laws of probability decree a second chance combination of nearly identical details in relatively the same order in two different paragraphs, we English teachers who delight in discussing stylistic choices with our students rejoice. The remote possibility notwithstanding, such a chance combination and ordering of details has very nearly occurred.

Because a discussion of stylistic choices lies quite outside the scope of this brief note, I shall simply present the passages and allow each teacher to make his or her own comparisons. The first passage is from a student essay, "The Downfall of Christmas" by William Kirchoff, printed in Louise E. Ronacher's Assignments in Exposition, 5th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), which originally appeared in the Green Caldron, a magazine of student writing published by the University of Illinois.

A noticeable change has taken place in the tree. As I remember our trees, they were green, a green that could not only be seen, but smelled. The ornaments were bright, but not gaudy. The lights were few and plain. I remember I used to have a favorite light each year, one that was just in the right place, and just the right color. All this sentiment was old-fashioned, though, and America was progressive. Manufacturers told us that we must always keep ahead of the Joneses and that we must always be new and unique. It is now no longer fashionable to have a green tree. One must have a silver one, a white one, a pink one, or a blue one. One must have a tree with music tinkling from a hidden music box. The ornaments are no longer simple. They are now all hideous sizes and shapes, splashed with color, signifying nothing. They are all silver and sparkly, and no sentiment. The lights must bubble, flash, blink, glimmer, and do a million other things. The Christmas tree is now an over-glorified monstrosity that smells suspiciously like machine oil. (pp. 91-92)


As I remember the Christmas trees of my childhood, they were green, a green that could be smelled as well as seen. The lights were few and simple. And I remember that each year I had a favorite ornament that was hung in just the right place on the tree. Most of the ornaments we made ourselves from popcorn, cookie dough, macaroni, and construction paper. All this sentiment, however, became old-fashioned, because America was a progressive country. . . . [According to Graham, the two sentences omitted here have no business in the paragraph.] Manufacturers have convinced us that we must have new-fangled, unusual trees. Thus it is no longer fashionable to have a naturally green tree. One must have a white one, a silver one, or an artificial green one. One must have a tree with bird chirps issuing from a hidden music box. The lights on the tree must bubble, flash, blink, glimmer, or perform some other special trick. To me, today's Christmas tree is a manufactured monstrosity that lacks the sentiment and natural beauty of the trees of my youth. (p. xviii)

Book Review


"I would like to see teachers treat the teaching of writing with a professional attitude," William F. Irmischer writes in the first paragraph of Teaching Expository Writing. And this compact, easy-to-read text by a veteran teacher of writing and of future composition teachers seems designed to raise the professionalism of its readers. In the Introduction, for example, Irmischer writes of his own experiences in a way that helps define the professional attitude toward composition teaching: "I find that I must constantly reexamine my approaches and, if necessary, alter my perceptions and conclusions about writing as time passes and conditions change" (4). And he notes that new teachers need such flexibility to keep from being "swirled about by conflicting currents" in our field: "The single most important thing each of them has to learn is what concessions to make to freedom and what concessions to make to discipline, depending upon their temperaments" (27).

Such concessions, of course, should not be made mindlessly. Professional writing teachers should adjust approach and method in light of reliable information and in terms of a personal perspective on composition instruction. Perhaps this is why Irmischer writes that "both inexperienced and experienced teachers need to organize the things they know into a coherent scheme. Call it a theory or philosophy. Obviously, we all need to learn new things as they become available" (2). In this quotation, Irmischer highlights knowledge but also the personal philosophy that makes sense of the ever-increasing bulk of articles and studies on writing. And the Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication has a lot to offer on both of these topics.

The information level in all fourteen chapters is high. Much of the information is Irmscher's sane, practical, balanced advice, frequently illustrated with personal anecdotes. Woven through the book, too, is a network of brief summaries, allusions, and footnotes to a wide range of concepts and studies, including Kenneth Burke's dramaticistic method, Walker Gibson on style, Kellogg Hunt on syntactic maturity, Frank O'Hara on sentence combining, Robert Ornstein on the operations of the brain, Kenneth Pike's particle-wave-field theory, Paul Rodgers on the paragraph, Mina Shaughnessy on error, Irving Taylor on the creative process, and the Students' Right to Their Own Language. Because Irmscher knows his subject well and writes clearly, these references do not dominate the book or lead to obscurity or choppiness. Instead, they enhance the book's value by introducing names, titles, and ideas to which new teaching assistants and students preparing to teach high school English can turn later in their training and careers. They also provide teachers with a ready-made group of supplementary readings for use in Teaching of Writing classes.

Through the book, too, runs a number of integrating theoretical or philosophical threads which, implicitly at least, Irmscher suggests should be adopted by professional writing teachers. The first thread is that writing is a dynamic, holistic process involving emotions as well as logic, freedom as well as control:

The basic premise of this book is that writing is a complex form of behavior. It is a way of acting with language that involves the total being — our thoughts and feelings and attitudes and tastes and verbal responses.

When we think of writing as a form of behavior, we emphasize the psychology of the total act from beginning to end. Writing is overcoming inhibitions. Writing is getting started. Writing is opening up. Writing is controlling. Writing is matching words to thoughts. Writing is feeling as well as thinking. The process is actually a series of spontaneous acts involving choices and commitments more than it is a continuous, deliberative act. There are mental bursts, starts, and stops. . . . (28-29)

This balanced view informs Teaching Expository Writing. It leads Irmscher to criticize mandated formal outlines and other "attempts to codify the process" or to deny "the fundamental and important notion of writing as discovery" (29); to support required writing, clear teacher-expectations, and grades that meaningfully reflect the quality of papers, and to argue that many students never reach the "flexibility and confidence" characteristic of real creativity because of their failure "to gain proficiency in the productive skills of language" (25-26).

Linking creativity to skills of "basic utilitarian prose" is likely to irritate some readers, just as Irmscher's insistence that writing must take precedence over review of the "basics" will irk others. But that is precisely why Irmscher's first underlying concept is so crucial. Urging a professional rather than an extremist attitude, Irmscher insists that teachers be aware of the balance of thought, feeling, discipline, and intuition upon which good writing depends.

That word, "intuition," is a second thread running through the book. As Irmscher says at the end of Chapter 3, the teaching of writing is "dependent upon some understanding of the role that intuition plays in composition" (30). In the next chapter, "Acknowledging Intuition," Irmscher considers four intuitive senses upon which he says people depend as they write: senses of the normative, simplicity, rhythm, and order. These senses, writes Irmscher, guide writers during the "series of spontaneous acts involving choices and commitments" that is the writing process, and one or more of the senses is connected with what writers do — and so with what writing teachers should do — in dealing with invention, structure, diction, and style. In fact, Irmscher sees intuition as significant in the teacher's selection of teaching methods, differences between "talented writers" and "strugglers," student-modifications in writing assignments, the writer's perception of overall structure, and decisions about paragraphing.

A third thread that runs through Teaching Expository Writing is the need for positive instruction. For Irmscher, "the single most important factor that affects improvement in the composition class is the teacher-student relationship" (49). In marking and grading papers, he feels that the psychology of reinforcement "should be the major resource of every writing teacher," and that "encouragement must come first as a way of gaining the confidence of students and giving them confidence in what they are doing" (150). In writing instruction as a whole, Irmscher thinks that "the crucial question is not 'What works?' but 'What helps?'" and that every statement of what helps "needs to be tested by one other question, 'What harms?'"

The answers are many. Whatever intervenes between teacher and student. Whatever creates fear. Whatever inhibits openness. Whatever discourages positive motivation. Whatever demands too little or too much. . . . A little humanity and sensitivity on the part of the teacher will go far to assure students that they have as much freedom of expression in the classroom as they do outside the classroom. (54)

Such sentiments will attract many readers to Teaching Expository Writing, as they have to two of its competitors, Donald Murray's A Writer Teaches Writing (Houghton Mifflin, 1968) and William Coles' The Plural I: The Teaching of Writing (Holt, 1978). All three texts urge humane instruction which respects students, even as it respects the value of effective communication and the craft of writing. But Teaching Expository Writing, like Coles' book, seems more useful for preparing college writing teachers than does Murray's; it is more explicitly a book on how to teach writing than is Coles'; and it is much more a summarizer and organizer of composition theory and research than are either of the others. So I would expect Teaching Expository Writing to become a popular book, not only with those who train new teaching assistants, but also with established faculty members who are looking for help in the teaching of writing.

One thinness that I notice in Teaching Expository Writing, though, is its treatment of revision. The spirit of the book's advice is sound: "Revising and rewriting are as much a part of the writing process as preparing and shaping and editing" (177); and "The teacher can begin to point out weaknesses, not ten or fifteen flaws at once, but one or two, because, psychologically, we cannot cope with a deluge of our deficiencies" (150-151). But these statements come in Chapter 13, "Evaluation," in connection with advice about making marginal and end comments on papers. And though Irmscher states that students resist revision and do not know how to revise, he follows those warnings with just a page of general comments on group-work and student-teacher conferences. The absence of more information about these ways to help students learn to revise is especially unfortunate, since there are no footnotes to help new teachers find articles by Lou Kelly or Rosemarie Arbur (CCG, Oct. 1974 and Dec. 1977), by Kenneth Bruffee or Thom Hawkins (CE, Feb.
1973 and March 1976), or by others who have written about personal and group approaches to composition. Unfortunately, too, new teachers may infer from Chapter 13 that revision is a discrete activity at the end of a writing project—an adjunct to marked and graded papers—rather than the recurring, pervasive dimension of composing it has been shown to be in a number of recent studies such as the chapters by Gabriel Della-Piana and Donald Murray in Research on Composing: Points of Departure, and the articles by Nancy Sommers in the Feb. 1979 CCC and Sharon Pianko in the Feb. 1979 RTE).

Richard Gebhardt
Findlay College

**Book Review**


This collection of brief essays by 18 directors of composition is professional reading in the most direct sense: its real audience is all the other directors of composition whose programs aren’t represented here, and its content has less to do with specific techniques for teaching writing than with the ways composition programs have responded during the last ten years to pressures both from inside and outside academia. The essays bear witness to the impact of open admissions on the urban colleges, for instance, and the rapid and bewildering changes that resulted from these and other demands, but they show too that composition teachers have learned a good deal from the struggle, and are more than ready to be regarded as professionals, highly trained specialists who practice an art based on a complex body of theory. As a group, the essays provide evidence that composition has in fact become a profession, and in their variety, they give us a clear outline of the major influences, shifts of power, trends and enduring values which define this profession of composition teaching at the present time.

The task of selecting and editing these representative statements fell to Jasper Neel, editor of the ADE Bulletin, and his choices are a silent commentary on the hierarchy which now applies in composition circles. In a sense the 18 programs are fairly evenly divided. Ten might be described as traditional—designed for freshmen and offered, at least indirectly, by the English department—while the remaining eight are hybrid programs separate from English that reach out to students by such methods as senior-level comp. requirements, T.V. broadcasts, and interdepartmental team teaching. On the other hand, those who have read the earlier surveys of composition programs by Kitzhaber (1963) and Wilcox (1973) may wonder why Neel ignores Dartmouth and the Ivy League, not to mention Cornell, Stanford and the smaller high-prestige colleges like Amherst, Lawrence, Mills and Earlham. Neel favors the big state universities in mid-country: Ohio, Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, Michigan State, Arizona, Texas, Wyoming, Washington. When he does pick an east or west coast college, it is almost always an urban university like City College in New York, or a small school like the California State College at Dominguez Hills.

But if we consider the effects of the early 70’s on composition programs, Neel’s choices are anything but capricious. Students were then demanding changes that included “relevance” and an end to the composition requirement, while relaxed admission standards produced an immediate need for intensive remedial instruction. These problems were most severe in the big state universities and urban colleges, and so it was there and not at the smaller, more selective schools that the new techniques and theories developed fastest. As a result, composition is emerging as a sort of populist movement, responsive to the needs of the average student and rooted most firmly where many of these students are to be found. It is a discipline self-confident in providing a necessary service to a vast public, yet at the same time defensive about being called a “service program,” and eager above all for theory and theorists native to composition.

Composition looks less like a movement when we examine the essays themselves and rediscover the “enormous variety” of theories, aims and methods that Kitzhaber found when he surveyed freshman English in the early 60’s. As Wilcox points out, the chief embarrassment of composition is that it “has no necessary substance: there is no body of materials that must be studied to achieve its purposes, no single teaching method that must be practiced” (89). Still, diversity is not necessarily a flaw: Elizabeth McPherson, supporting the open classroom approach, has argued that variation in writing teachers, methods and courses is both inevitable and desirable, given the variability of students and of writing situations. The directors at Michigan State and the University of Iowa agree with this view, describing programs where students are taught to read and edit each other’s prose and to regard writing as an interactive process of discovery. In contrast, the programs at Brown University and the University of Arizona are designed around particular theories evolved by their directors, and seem relatively unresponsive to the diversity of students and writing situations. If Neel’s book is any indication, the variety of approaches to teaching writing is unlikely to diminish.

More fundamental to the teaching of writing even than theory is the relationship between the teacher and his or her students. William Irmscher (University of Washington) expresses this nicely:

After years of experience with two essentially different approaches to writing (in the name of jargon, characterize them as product-centered and process-centered), there is little point in trying to assess which is better. Both help students become better writers, but we should quickly note that success with students is more dependent upon a good working relation between teacher and student than any structure, syllabus, or textbook. We are therefore concerned about the training of those who teach in the program, whatever the course may be (68).

It is encouraging that most of these programs devote considerable time to preparing young teachers (usually T.A.’s) for their first composition course, supervising them as they work through it, and supplementing their training afterward by advanced courses in theory and pedagogy. Worthy of special note are the training programs at the universities of Washington and Texas, the undergraduate tutoring system at Central College (Iowa), and the undergraduate team teaching program at Queens College in New York.

Aside from their intentions to continue with staff training,
these directors say little about the future. Several, indeed, are
still experimenting with the curriculum, still trying to find a
balance between "diversity" and "structure." Yet composition is
changing, and taken as a whole, these essays do highlight some
current trends. To begin with, the effort in remedial writ-
ing has only just begun. According to Blanche Skurnick, 90 per-
cent of the incoming freshmen at City College need some kind
of remedial instruction (12), and Donald McQuade reports that
the remedial course at Queens College has, since its inception in
1970, formed the "philosophical" basis of our entire writing pro-
gram (19). Almost without exception, the programs described
in this book have made special provisions to teach what Mina
Shaughnessy called "basic writing." Future experimentation and
research in this area, which includes the evaluation of writing,
error analysis, and reading theory and pedagogy will certainly
have its effect on the curriculum and our methods of teaching
it.

Another influence will come from the opposite end of the cur-
riculum: the upper-division or graduate courses which have
started to branch out from these programs. One reason for this
change is that enrollments in language and literature courses
are dropping steadily, and the English faculty, thrown back on the
composition curriculum, would rather teach advanced composi-
tion or rhetorical theory than struggle with English 101. In
addition, the job market has tightened so much that not even
prospective high school teachers are being hired unless they have
had course work in the theory and practice of teaching writing.
Despite its grimmer aspects, however, this struggle for the high
ground of advanced courses may be good for composition as a
profession. First, it will probably create a number of M.A. pro-
grams in rhetoric and composition, which will in turn provide
a broader base for the serious study of these subjects by both stu-
dents and faculty. Second, as high school and even grade school
teachers pass out of these courses and begin their careers, a better
understanding may form between the universities and the
schools because the professors and the schoolmasters will have
studied many of the same subjects, sometimes at equivalent
levels.

Neel's book offers fragmentary evidence for many such visions
as these, but finally, as he himself reminds us, the book is still an
"overview," leaving many blank spaces to be filled in. What,
for instance, of the program at Amherst, made famous by
Charles Baird, Walker Gibson, and most recently, William
Coles? What happened to Louis Milic's language-based program
at Cleveland State? And for the record, what have the years done
to the freshman seminars at Dartmouth College, praised by Al-
bert Kitzhaber as composition's brightest hope? To be sure,
there are gaps. But as a guide to what matters and what's hap-
pening in composition at the end of the '70's, Options is a good
book to read and keep at hand during the crucial years ahead.

NOTES

1. Albert R. Kitzhaber, Themes, Theories and Therapy: The Teach-
2. Thomas E. Wilcox, The Anatomy of College English (San Fran-
3. Elisabeth McPherson, "Changing Content in the English
James R. Squire (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Edu-

William F. Woods
Wichita State University
WHEN IS A DETAIL NOT A DETAIL?

David Gasvoda
University of Pittsburgh

Roger Sale, in his book On Writing, speaks cuttingly of something called “the English paper.” “English papers,” he says, “are written for teachers, for classrooms, for adults, to fulfill assignments.” They are “formal, impersonal, organized, careful about matters of technique; and, one hardly need add, quite quite dead.”¹ The phenomenon is familiar to anyone who has ever taught in a composition classroom; it is what William Coles calls “Themewriting,” Ken Macrorie’s “Engfish,” and Jacques Barzun’s “The Black Rot.”² The writing sounds something like this:

A VERY SPECIAL COACH

A good coach can be a determining factor in an athlete’s life. One coach in particular has made a strong impression on me. His name is Mr. Best, and his sport — well, that’s a tough question to answer because he is knowledgeable in so many.

I met Mr. Best at a track meet two years ago and knew right away he wasn’t an ordinary coach. The interest and compassion he has for his athletes is obvious from their praise for him, not to mention their excellent performances. The key to his success is his wonderful ability of motivation, which I have had the good fortune to experience.

Interesting is an understatement when talking about Mr. Best. Fascinating is a much better way to describe him. Coaches are a dime a dozen but good coaches are hard to find, which is why Mr. Best is in a class by himself.

At one time I would have described what was going wrong in such a paper by saying that the student needed to “go into more detail,” that he hadn’t “backed up his generalizations.” “Words like ‘interesting’ and ‘fascinating’ are vague,” I would have said, “You haven’t shown why Mr. Best is so good, or told how a good coach can be a determining factor in an athlete’s life.” I suppose I picked up such English-teacher-talk about English-papers from English textbooks: “Supply relevant specific details to develop the controlling idea.” (That’s Hodges and Whitren in the Harebrance College Handbook). “A common kind of vagueness is that

which gives the answer at a general or abstract level and leaves it there without explanatory or illustrative detail.” (McCrimmon in Writing with a Purpose). “Most effective writing . . . is made up largely of details, with occasional general statements to hold them together and show their meaning, and occasional specific statements to direct the reader’s attention” (Perrin, Smith, and Corder in the Handbook of Current English). “Paragraphs, like whole essays, should back up their main assertions with detail” (Crews in The Random House Handbook).

It’s not very hard to see the reason for such advice. After a few thousand papers about “fascinating” personalities like Mr. Best, teachers begin to see a pattern. Whereas a character like Mr. Jagger’s can be referred to as “knowledgeable” after Dickens supplies enough details about him to allow such a generalization to mean something, beginning writers will often relate to someone as “knowledgeable” without showing any awareness of where the generalization comes from, or any sense that it need come from anything at all. So it is tempting to want to say to a student, “Look, it’s not that I don’t believe Mr. Best might be described as ‘knowledgeable’ — but you haven’t put down enough here to let anyone see why you think so.”

But the danger of such a comment is that a student is liable not to hear it, or rather that he will hear it wrongly. The call to look more questioningly at experience is likely to be understood as a call to exclude all experience that doesn’t fit the original generalization. In putting the “how to?” before the “why bother?” such advice subordinates experience to words and thus is likely to result only in a different kind of over-simplification. Here, for example, is a revision of “Special Coach” made on no more than the basis of the kind of help outlined earlier:

A VERY SPECIAL COACH

When I say that Mr. Best is a good coach, I mean that he is good everywhere, not just when he is showing me what to do on the football field or the rifle range. Before he comes to put in a grueling day at the gym (he never misses a day), he stops at the church to hear Mass and pray for the orphan children whom he likes to read to when he gets an evening free. And being religious is unusual for a coach as good as Mr. Best; it tells you a lot about his character. Sometimes I meet his wife at a game and everyone always says that they are the perfect couple. They have two children and Mr. Best always
tries to make time for them, even if he's busy coaching or writing up a speech to give before the Kiwanis Club or the Junior Chamber of Commerce, both of which he belongs to. Mr. Best is very community minded and is an example for me and all the other people who have ever had the pleasure of having him as a coach.

Now there is a point of view from which the writing here may be said to have improved. We learn many more specific things about Mr. Best — that he coaches the football and rifle teams, never misses a day of work, bears mass every morning, reads to orphan children, and so on. Further, the topic has been narrowed — the author is not going to talk about Mr. Best as a good coach, but specifically about the goodness of Mr. Best as a person off the playing field. He "backs up" his topic sentence with specific facts, has reduced the paper's vagueness, shows us his reasons for thinking Mr. Best good instead of merely telling us, and even lets us know Mr. Best's coaching specialty. In short, he's dealt with all the objections the generalization-support rule seems to raise.

But from another point of view, this second version is almost as silly as the first — mainly, I suppose, because as readers we know that whatever kind of person Mr. Best might be, he can't be what such language says he is. We know because we know. We do not live on a planet where being married, going to church, reading to orphans, and so on, automatically makes one upright. Neither do our students. That they think it's necessary to pretend they do in order to come up with a paper for English class is an indication of what's wrong with offering the concept of "detail" as "support." It encourages students to ask themselves questions like, "What kind of good things can I say about Mr. Best?" rather than questions like, "How does Mr. Best square with my notion of goodness?"

The difference makes a difference. To ask students to ask only, "What kind of good things can I say about Mr. Best?" is to ask only for stupidity. It translates into, or gets translated into, "Ignore every observation you've made which might complicate your thesis." But to ask students to ask, "How does Mr. Best square with my notion of goodness?" is to encourage the fruitful confusion which leads to growth. The question becomes its own heuristic: "Who is Mr. Best? In what ways can he be called good? In what ways can't he? What do I mean by 'good' anyway? How do I know about goodness? How does anyone ever know about a concept like goodness?"

Our problem then as teachers is to find a way of talking about details that encourages, rather than discourages, the coming to grips with complex experience.

Consider for a moment this student's approaching the problem of writing about his coach. He knows literally thousands of things about his subject: Mr. Best's marital status, the color of the shoes he wore one Friday, the tone of voice in which he likes to address the team. Trying to make sense from this non-sense, the student legitimately asks himself, "How do I go about choosing things to say about Mr. Best from all the observations I've made?" The answer the writer is likely to have picked up in his English classes is: "Make a generalization and then choose observations (i.e. 'details') that would seem to indicate its validity." Consequently, all of the details in both these versions work in unison to create a certain kind of Mr. Best, a Mr. Best perfect in every way, a stereotype of whoever Mr. Best really is. And not only has this method of hushing up life created a phoney Mr. Best, it's created a phoney narrator, too; for if we ask ourselves what kind of person would talk in such a manner about his coach, we would have to conclude that it could be only a doting, emotional admirer.

Students can be invited to an understanding of this phoniness in a number of ways. One place to start is by having the class discuss exactly what they see as the problem with a paper like that of the first "Special Coach." One might begin by asking a class, "What kind of a person is Mr. Best?" in order to raise the question of whether words like "interesting" and "fascinating" are descriptions at all. Most students are more than prepared to spot the enemy here as vagueness, and thus to see the cure as "more details." At this point the second version of "Special Coach," can profitably be introduced. "What is the author's thesis and what are his details here?" one can start by asking.

"What is the relationship between the thesis and the details? Why doesn't it make any difference whether a detail or two is removed, or all of them rearranged? Why wouldn't it be very hard to add a few details, or a few thousand?" These kinds of questions can lead the class to see that, by considering "detail" as synonymous with "reasons for believing my generalization," the author has built up a very lopsided, inflated picture of Mr. Best.

But how else may a writer proceed? How can details be viewed as elements of a paper leading in a direction worth going? To consider that question, let us look at yet a third version of "Special Coach," less a revision of the first two versions than a resecuing of both the subject and what it means to make one:

The evening after we lost the championship I decided to take a long walk around the campus, trying to cool down and figure out what went wrong. I tried not to blame myself but all I could think of was the crowd booing and the way Mr. Best looked at me as I walked past him — as though I were his son and had got up before the Kiwanis Club to belong to and called him a dirty name. The laughter from the bars along Forbes Avenue seemed muted, as if I were hearing it from under a blanket. Someone was playing a jazz record and the long low sound of the trumpet seemed to follow me.

When I got to the chapel I paused, staring at the big red door, trying to decide whether I should go in or not. The moonlight was shining off its grey facade and I felt like everything, the building and myself, were standing in the glare of some huge spotlight.

It occurred to me that this was the reason I had come out in the first place, to come to the chapel and find Mr. Best. But now I didn't know whether I could face him.

Then the door swung open and there he was, wearing the same blue jacket he had worn into the locker room before the game. When he saw me, he hesitated for the smallest fraction of a second, as if surprised; then he came down the stairs toward me.

"Hello Bob," he said. "Everything okay?"

I wanted to tell him no, everything wasn't okay, that I was sorry that I'd let him down, but when I looked up at his face I noticed he was smiling, a sort of half smile that seemed flat on the edges. I thought again of the look he had given me after the game and suddenly I was very mad. I had done what he told me. Everything wasn't my fault.

Some of this must of shown on my face in the moonlight because as I watched him watching me his smile suddenly dissolved. "Listen," he said, as if beginning to explain something, but then he stopped. "I'm sorry," he said. He patted me on the shoulder and began to walk away.

I'm sorry too, I thought, and let him go.

If might, of course, be said that the author here has gone off onto a different subject, that he's done a character sketch instead of an analysis and that the switch accounts for the difference in
the way we respond to the piece. But in another sense what the author has done is not written about something different, but written about the same thing differently — found a way of proceeding that has enabled him to find his subject. What we respond to here, I would argue, is the author’s apprehension of a complexity, that of his own life, lived on this planet. Contrast the Mr. Best of the first two versions with that of the last; here Mr. Best ceases to be simply good: he embodies all sorts of character traits, ranging from an impulse to turn the narrator into a scapegoat for his own faults to a desire to apologize (and an inability to do so). The narrator, too, and as a consequence, is more complex, at first blaming himself for what has happened, then blaming Mr. Best, and finally realizing that both he and his coach are equally to blame, or equally blameless, not only for what happened during the game but for what happens between them as people. We perceive these complexities entirely by what the author has chosen to present to us; not, that is, by a choice of “details” where details are conceived of as proofs, but by an orchestration of symbols that do not belie a life. The “details” seem more incisive and the people more realistic not because the author is more adept at “proving his point,” but because his point is more refined and speaks for itself.

If such a paper is considered in classroom discussion, most students will sense immediately its superiority to papers like the previous ones, but without knowing how to articulate their feelings very well. “It’s more interesting,” they will say, or “Mr. Best seems more human.” But if the students have already encountered the first revision of this paper, and considered it in the terms we have considered it in here, the inadequacy of such talk can be demonstrated by simply turning it into advice. Why, one might ask, does telling a writer to “Make your characters seem more human” not help much? What is it about the way Mr. Best is here represented that makes him “seem more human”?

One way into a question like this last is to consider the difference between how particular details work in this paper and earlier ones. In the second version, for instance, the reference to the Kiwanis Club exists because we are to believe belonging to the Kiwanis Club means Mr. Best is good. By imagining this reference deleted, students can be shown that the “meaning” of the piece remains unchanged: Mr. Best would be as good as ever; we would have merely one less instance of his goodness out of perhaps twenty.

But if we remove the Kiwanis reference from the third paper, the meaning of the piece changes; the complexity of the representation of Mr. Best would be diminished because as readers we would no longer be able to wonder what kind of person would have moment be making a scapegoat out of his ball-players and the next be displaying his “community-mindedness” at the local Kiwanis. One can show students then that there are answers to the question, “What difference does it make that the coach belongs to the Kiwanis Club?” — just as there are answers to questions like, “Why does Mr. Best hesitate at the top of the stairs before descending?” or “What does the narrator mean by saying “I’m sorry too?” By considering such questions, it becomes clear that the author here has put together element after element that increases the complexity of his representation of the world. This strikes me as a useful way of defining “detail,” and not just because it is as applicable to an analytical essay as to a literary one (though this is a point worth emphasizing to students). Suddenly there appears a unifying rationale for what it is we talk about in the classroom. Students are fond of believing that “It’s the thought that counts,” that teachers are nitpicking when they “rip apart” a work to find meaning in every word and sentence. They are fond of believing this because it relieves them of responsibility for what they put on paper. Not to believe in the purposefulness of everything placed on the page is to believe in its arbitrariness. It makes good writing a simple matter of taste, with the teacher holding sway because for the moment the teacher is in power. Students thus feel no need to be literate; it becomes enough to get others to agree that they sound as though they were. English teachers, for example.

To define detail as an element that increases the complexity of the representation of one’s subject matter is to position students to accept the responsibility writing entails. In writing that is worth something, everything becomes complex, and thus everything becomes a detail: the placement of a punctuation mark, the right word in place of the wrong word, the length of a sentence, the choice of where to divide paragraphs, the choice of what to put in them, the shape of a paper. The more students of writing contemplate the meaning of “detail,” the broader its definition becomes, and the more pervasive its use, until ultimately “detail” fades out, like the smile of the Cheshire Cat, and detail becomes meaning, meaning being the work itself.

“But [the objection might be raised] what good does it do us to talk about details if details are everything?” My answer would be: precisely that. When students can be brought to the point where they can understand that every mark on the paper creates meaning, they are in a position to see writing as something other than that which is to be foisted off to create in someone the illusion that the writer is someone too. Further, to view details as elements of complexity is to encourage people to use writing to enlarge their lives. One enables students to write papers like this last by helping them internalize the process of putting this and that disparate thing together. Implicit is a recognition of writing as a process creating meaning: we write; we consider if what we have written represents the fullness of our experience; we write again, seeing differently and thus becoming different.

Helping students to an awareness of this way of seeing writing is, in the end, a way to help them see themselves anew. In the thousands of choices we make each time we come to write about our encounter with “reality,” we create. Attempting to recreate, we create. We bring into being a meaning, an awareness, that previous to our art-making was nonexistent. It is the same act of creation Rollo May describes when he talks about Cezanne in his book The Courage to Create:

The painting that issues out of this encounter between a human being, Cezanne, and an objective reality, the tree, is literally new, unique and original. Something is born, comes into being, something that did not exist before — which is as good a definition of creativity as we can get. Thereafter everyone who looks at the painting with intensity of awareness and lets it speak to him or her will see the tree with the unique powerful movement, the intimacy between the tree and the landscape, and the architectural beauty which literally did not exist in our relation with trees until Cezanne experienced and painted them.

Just as Cezanne created a tree on canvas from his collision with what he saw as “the tree out there,” we create, with details, what it is that our “thing out there” becomes, is. Writing is a way of finding out what we’re doing here, how we came to be the way we are, what it means to be a person, alive and loose in a universe full of unnamed things. Through writing, through details, we can invite our students to put together not just a paper but a life. We would have them bridge that gap between where they are and where they would like to be. In that bridging is the work of a lifetime.
NOTES