NO MORE PLAIN ENGLISH PLEASE

Gary Sloan
Louisiana Tech University

What can being President of a Faculty Senate teach one about attitudes toward the nature of good writing? Prior to my recent election to the position, I would have said very little. But responses to my first presidential missive helped to correct my misconception. Motivated by a request from the Student Government Association and directed to a high administrative official, my letter bemoaned the absence of philosophy courses in the university's curriculum. Here is a representative excerpt:

As an English teacher, I find that pervasive ignorance of traditional philosophy vitiates student appreciation of my own discipline and, even more damaging, subverts in general the chief ends of a liberal education. . . . Philosophy is not only the most likely to instill in its votary that sense of the permanent and of the quintessential so allied to true sanity and resolve, but it provides as well a means of synthesizing the welter of disparate facts showered in a heterogeneous curriculum.

Via the campus's uncommonly lubricious grapevine, I soon learned that in the circle of top administrators my letter had occasioned a round of benign chuckles. In the annals of the school's internecine memoranda, mine, it seems, was generally acknowledged the most "windy" and "highfalutin" — a unique specimen of sesquipedalian achievement. In light of some upper ecolemon memos I had lately received — freighted with jargonistic "implementations," "communications," "declinations," "effec-
tualizations," "maximalizations" — the source of the accusation seemed far from authoritative. Had it not been for the President of the SGA, I would have given it no more thought. As it was, the young man, to whom I had sent a copy of my letter, provided unexpected reinforcement of the administrators' (putative) judgment. When I casually asked the student whether my letter accurately represented the desires of the SGA, the youngster turned red, cleared his throat, and said: "Well, sort of. I mean there were parts of it I was a little unclear on. Maybe if you could've made a few things a little plainer . . ."  

Confronted with the two-pronged assault on my writing — and on my ego — I retreated to my office to assess in quiet the validity of the criticism. I re-read my letter. Yes, it contained a few words remote from the vernacular of the marketplace — "quintessential," "votary," "heterogeneous" — and, yes, its tone occasionally flirted with oracularity. But taken as a whole — which I had thought was the way writing was supposed to be taken — it seemed to me that the letter had with sufficient clarity defined and developed its thesis. To my eye (nor, I hoped, excessively jaundiced), the rhetoric of the presentation seemed compatible with the quality of the subject. But nor, it was clear, with the tastes of my readers — nor, I began upon reflection to suspect, with the muse of the times.

For what the day seems to demand is "plain" prose. Plain English Please — Cowan and McPherson's titular request echoes through the pages of most contemporary rhetorics. Often advocated therein is a style lean, unadorned, and direct, its sentences short, diction heavily Anglo-Saxon. What the style forfeits to fancy, imagination, and inspiration, it is supposed to redress by lucidity, economy, virility. This is a functional style, stripped of its epauletts and frills, its sleeves rolled up, dressed to do work, not to gambol, quicken, or elevate.

Let me give the rhetoricians their due. They nearly all, in the course of their texts, allow that "different styles with different subjects sort." They concede the reality of purposes that dictate the polysyllabic, the allusive, the scenic, the involve. But such concessions are much like the interpolation of foreign phrases into a native work: easily ignored, soon dismissed. So much so that plain prose seems on its way to becoming the only prose. What began as a desirable alternative, to rank ostentation and "labored nothings" may at last out the laudable with the odious. It is already a small minority who can write with any semblance of elegance, wit, or profundity. Indeed, few have the verbal ability to write ostentatiously.

Today's rhetoricians did not create the plain style. At least as far back as the eighteenth-century, arbiters of language began to plump for a style that puts simplicity above frippery. But owing to popular misconceptions about the nature of simplicity, their own writing now seems better to illustrate what they deplored than what they championed. For what they meant by "simplicity" is far removed from what many today understand by the term. What happens now is that people who lack the ability or the discipline (or both) to write well seize, opportunistically, on the honorific concept of simplicity, of a "plain" style, and perversely to their own ends, to purposes that must make the conscientious rhetorician blush. The concept is used to vindicate, if not to glorify, the bland, the shoddy, the illiterate. It may also be invoked, in an act of inverted snobbery, to castigate any piece of writing that makes use of extended metaphors, literary allusions, or diction alien to schoolboy primers. It is easily converted into an instrument of philistinism, with which the ignorant pummel the learned.

The hegemony of the plain style is a logical accompaniment to the spiraling impact of electronic media, to the decline in literacy, and to the gradual supersession of a Liberal Arts by a technological curriculum. In an age when some "educated" people read but rarely and when others confine their reading to newspapers, slicks, and billboards, stylistic elegance and sophistication are bound to be construed as unmitigated pomposity, like tuxedos in a bowling alley. Where efficiency is defined, pragmatism touted, and time hoarded, the ideal style must be the one with the fewest, commonest, shortest words. Given short shrift, when acknowledged at all, are such criteria of excellence as exactness of connotation, appropriateness of rhythm, and felicity of sound and tone. These become the playthings of the idle and the dilettantish, of fuddy-duddies who still prefer trains to jets. Whether it is a piece of writing or a mode of travel, what matters most is how quickly it reaches its destination — here a city, there a thesis.
Though its sphere of influence has swollen during recent decades, the jet (plain) style hasn't yet won the allegiance of all. Certain bureaucrats and ologists have proved especially recalcitrant—but in a fashion that inspires neither admiration nor envy. For while a jargonic style may escape the imputation of plainness, it is vulnerable to more severe reproaches. At its best, it is meretricious; at its worst, inscrutable and monotonous, duller than unremitting plainness. Jargon gives advocates of plain prose the kind of enemy they need. It can be invoked as the visible personification of the evils that attend any renunciation of workaday language. This sort of lingual casuistry easily leads to pernicious consequences. It may cause people to unwittingly lump together all writing that uses modes of expression foreign to their own discourse. “It is requisite that a policy maximizing the utilization of instructional personnel be implemented in this calendar year” may be assigned to the same category as “In narration he affects a disproportionate pomp of diction, and a waresome strain of circumlocution, and tells the incident imperfectly in many words, which might have been more plainly delivered in few” (from the preface to Johnson’s Shakespeare). About the only thing the two sentences have in common is big words. But in the first sentence the words are used to obscure the idea, whereas in the second they define and shape it. Johnson’s sentence has the further advantages of rhythmic precision, parallel expression, and a subject that befits the elegant treatment.

Jargon is a parasite of true elegance. In this age of plummeting literacy, people who haven’t been adequately propagandized by the exponents of plain prose tend to connect grandeur with incomprehension. They reason thus: since Shakespeare, Milton, Gibbon, Carlyle, James, and the like are unintelligible (to them), opacity must be an attribute of greatness. Since jargon is impenetrable, it, too, must possess excellence. In this way, the inane and the sublime are relegated to one indiscriminate caboodle. And this may be just as the authors of jargon wish.

Those indoctrinated in the ways of plain English rightly decry the unwarranted flatulence of jargon. But too many become over-indoctrinated. Believing that a plain style is the only credible style, they can find in many great writers no virtue. Where others found sublime unintelligibility, these merely find bad writing. “Why doesn’t he just come out and say what he means?” Complaints of this kind I’ve gotten from many students, and the “he” has been Shakespeare, Sydney, Dryden, Pope, Shelley, Coleridge, Lamb, Arnold, Pater, Eliot, to give only a partial list of the traduced. While the familiar peevish cannot be blamed entirely on the latter-day apostles of plain style, the emphasis would seem highly contributory. It lends a kind of official sanction to a cultural barbarism that students in the best of pedagogic environments are too inclined to embrace.

It is easy to understand the students’ querulous attitude toward literary masterpieces. In composition courses, students are customarily asked to write simple, straightforward, declarative sentences, and frequently to read contemporary essays that exemplify the style. Instant clarity, immediate palpability, is if not all, at least most. But in their literature courses students are asked to read (and usually to admire) sentences like the following: “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbred, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat” (from Milton’s “Areopagitica”); “The mind that lies fallow for a single day, sprouts up in follies that are only to be killed by a constant and assiduous culture” (Addison, The Spectator); “Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food” (Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry”); “For order to persist after the supervision of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted” (Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”).

While the sophisticated reader has no trouble with the well-turned assertions, students nurtured on contemporary notions of plainness may think such statements impenetrably mysterious. And what they cannot readily grasp they may reckon deliberately tortuous, maliciously esoteric. Indeed, if students could contrive to emulate the styles of the masters, they might on themselves heap what Satan’s “dark designs” did on him: damnation. A student essay marked by sentences like the ones cited in the preceding paragraph might induce marginalia of the “Too verbose” or “Clarify” sort, and dispatch its author to the writing lab. For many an instructor shares the student’s intolerance of subtlety, erudition, elongation, and other qualities that demand full intellectual participation. Prudence, then, so far as students are concerned, would seem to dictate that the proper response to the masters is to read them, to revere them, and never to write like them.

The attitude is unfortunate. For the older writers possessed styles in many ways superior to the new-fashioned plainness. In them one finds a nuance and a precision, a vitality and a grace, rarely achieved in contemporary literature. Where they are achieved—in the Bellows, the Updikes, the E. B. White, the John Fowleses—they result in large part from the adoption of styles in the lineage of such superlative craftsmen as Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Faulkner, or Fielding, Austen, Woolf, Huxley. Authors who embrace the plain, journalistic style—the Vonneguts, the Robbineses, the Shawes, the Drury— are understandably popular because they speak the language, the only one, that most people today are equipped to appreciate. Yet about the highest effects the vulgish authors can produce are a blowzy humor, a formulaic suspense, and a limp wisdom. A style hedged in by rudimentary diction, staccato sentences, and artless syntax can neither engage by novelty nor captivate by variety. For the conversant reader, there can be no profound impression where the vast resources of language remain largely untapped.

There has been, at least since Renaissance times, a fundamental continuity of style among the best prose writers of English. The differences are superficial, explicable in the main because of reduction of grammatical inflections, standardization of spelling and punctuation, and evolution of connotation. The following
Modern Composition Theory and the Rhetorical Tradition

C. H. Knoblauch
New York University

One symptom of the formative condition of our discipline, a sign of what Thomas Kuhn might call its "preparadigmatic" state, is our still uncertain perception of its conceptual foundations, the origin, history, and present character of its axioms. Despite a massive, and in many ways successful, effort over several decades to ground our work in substantial intellectual premises, we must still confront the unfortunate paradox that many composition specialists remain largely unaware of the rhetorical tradition, ancient and modern, that has so extensively shaped Western thinking about the nature of discourse. In fact, for the most part, we have yet to acknowledge, as an a priori professional assumption, the need to know much of anything theoretical about our work as long as our only concern is to teach. This curious attitude would be worse than merely paradoxical were it not for the evident fact that we are, after all, primarily nurturing behaviors when we teach writing and not presenting a body of ideas. No amount of theorizing about rhetoric, or grammar, or logic, or style will change writers' habits of composing as reliably as it improves their store of irrelevant precepts. But the attitude is unfortunate, nonetheless, because a willingness to remain theoretically naive and historically reflectively denies the positive impact that conceptual sophistication may have upon instruction, even when what is finally taught does not directly emphasize or even reveal explicitly the intellectual bases that energize it. Moreover, lacking a diachronic view of our research efforts, we risk their eventual deterioration, as masses of data accumulate without a corresponding improvement in the clarity and viability of the organizing principles that make them coherent.

Composition textbooks offer the most visible measure of the intellectual paucity and historical naiveté that we must struggle to surmount. The conventional modern rhetoric text is prone to overvalue, misconstrue, or misapply much of what its author haphazardly recalls from the classical tradition, meanwhile offering little indication that modern research has added anything significant to Cicero. Worse, it is often strikingly indifferent to distinctions between ancient and modern perspectives, neglecting to consider, for example, whether the epistemological underpinnings of classical rhetoric really make it a fit vehicle for describing the writing process. Such books tend to view rhetoric monolithically, as though its history were simply one of progressive elaborations of age-old notions, as though the only thing separating Aristotle from Kenneth Burke or Saint Augustine from Roland Barthes is the passage of generations. Many composition teachers derive their entire awareness of discourse theory from the pages of these works, so that ignorance and misinformation cannot help but be perpetuated. To be sure, the conventional textbook is too meager an artifact to support serious criticism: it is not expected to make theoretical contributions. But it can reasonably be expected to represent the state of an art, to promulgate the best, if not the latest, thinking about its subject. Yet that is manifestly not the case in our field, where standards for separating the factual from the fictional, the important from the trivial, the useful from the gratuitous, are dramatically lower than those in most disciplines.

Janet Emig, among others, has noted the discrepancies...
between our empirical evidence about the processes of composing and the statements in writing texts and handbooks. She speaks with appropriate scorn of the assumption, canonized in manuals, that writing is "a quite conscious, wholly rational—at times, even mechanical—affair with many of the components for a piece of discourse extrinsic to the speaker or writer." We know, both from experience and from extensive research, that writing is more complex and organic, more tentative and exploratory, than structural pronouncements about outlines and topic sentences, "modes" of discourse and "models" of development would seem to imply. The fact that this kind of information still dominates textbooks shows more than just the great gap that exists between the best contemporary theory and standard pedagogical practice. It shows also the depth of the attachment to ancient beliefs about the nature of discourse that we continue to sustain despite an epistemological reorientation, centuries in the making, that has long ago undermined their value. Our failure to confront the theoretical significance of that reorientation, to specify and convey its implications for research and teaching alike, is partly responsible for the durability of numerous antiquated and unseivable notions.

A brief sketch of the ancient epistemology will clarify my point. The principles of classical discourse theory, derived chiefly from Aristotle and Cicero, evolved against the backdrop of an unconscious acceptance of stable relationships between discourse and the intrinsically coherent exteriority to which it referred. The world was distributed in genera and species, substances and accidents, causes and effects, subtly interwoven to form a system of teleological necessities whose existence could be rationally ascertained and delineated separate from verbal representation. Within the limits of this system, the business of an orator was to present plausible arguments in an affecting manner to a particular audience according to the prerequisites of a particular occasion, forensic, deliberative, or epideictic. That presentation could be accomplished by means of a variety of compositional forms and devices available for use in different situations. The formal vehicles could change to suit an orator's intention, or an audience's needs, or the ceremonial context within which the orator performed. But what did not change, what was not subject to orator's manipulation or audience's expectation, was the nature of the truth itself. Beneath rhetorical contrivance lay the logical paraphrase to which any discourse, even the poetic, could be reduced and in terms of which its plausibility could be established. The truth of a statement was not dependent, in other words, on fluctuations in its representation. Message was prior to medium; substance anticipated form; words were a dress for thought. The orator's task was to select, for the communication of true statements, a verbal model that corresponded appropriately to conceptions whose validity had already been determined. As Horace taught, "The works of the Socrates will supply you with the facts; get these in clear perspective and the words will follow naturally."

To be sure, rhetoric dealt only in probabilities, leaving to dialectic the exposition of logical necessities. But Aristotle is careful to insist that "Truth and likeness to truth are discerned by one and the same faculty; while human nature, let us add, has aptitude enough for discerning what is true, and men in most cases do arrive at the truth." Hence, he concludes, one who is trained in using syllogisms, the arguments proper to dialectic, will also be ideally suited to composing "enthememes," their rhetorical equivalents, since the person "skilled in discerning the truth can do well in weighing probabilities." Aristotle concedes that human affairs, the domain of oratory, allow only for plausible rather than inevitable arguments. But it is plain through-
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frames (topic sentence, expansion), and the like, all depend on the ancient distinction between content and form, and the priority of the first over the second. The outline is perhaps the best example since its use most blatantly entails the supposition that writers somehow "know" their meanings before conveying them. As venerable and typical a work as James McCrimmon's *Writing With a Purpose* (Houghton Mifflin, 1973) includes a lengthy chapter on "shaping and testing an outline," not just offering the practical observation that it can be helpful occasionally for planning, but elaborately emphasizing its value as a significant artifact in itself, a crucial stage of writing in which truth is prepared for verbal display. McCrimmon also details a variety of organizational structures, roughly resembling the ancient *topoi*, with the claim that, "Most materials naturally fall into one pattern of organization rather than another" (page 46). Clearly, he regards content as prior to form, just as Horace had said: look to the truth and the words will follow.

My point here is certainly not to trivialize the contributions of classical rhetoric to modern discourse theory. It is only to suggest the epistemological limits of the ancient perspective and to insist that effective use of classical precepts depends on our sensitivity to a frame of reference that differs importantly from the one in which they originated. Modern physics has moved beyond the Newtonian paradigm by placing its conclusions within a more sophisticated framework; yet it has by no means repudiated Newton. In the same way, Aristotle's conceptions may represent plausible starting points for empirical inquiry, but only so far as they can be detached from a worldview that conceived them far differently from the way we do today. Contemporary psychology has largely discredited ancient arguments about the invariable, essentially static nature of human personality; yet Aristotle's intuitions about the psychology of audiences have a commonsense vitality that preserves their value for us, albeit within a subter intellectual paradigm. Similarly, his notions about modes of discourse, strategies of persuasion, and the characteristics of style may all retain a usefulness for modern rhetoric, but not as they appear in writing manuals that naively perpetuate the antiquated ontology that engendered them.

Current views of the *topoi* are illustrative in this regard. Their textbook treatment is extraordinarily eccentric, derived from ignorance and ending in confusion. To begin with, the typical manual lists only five or six of Aristotle's topics, including definition, illustration, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, classification, and perhaps one or two more. It is curious that so many texts emphasize this particular set, since Aristotle alone offers nearly 30 topics, including opposites, part to whole, more and less, proportional results, incentives and deterrents, conflicting facts, meanings of names, and so on. Other classical rhetoricians, Cicero among them, list different, only partially overlapping sets, sometimes totalling more than Aristotle's, sometimes less. The reason for settling on the five or six that appear most prominently today is, I fear, the fact that textbooks are researched and written primarily from other textbooks, not from any serious study of the ancient tradition. But the eccentricity does not end there. Much valuable contemporary research has sought to demonstrate the heuristic uses of the *topoi*, their role in prewriting, and perhaps even their basis in cognition? But their presentation in writing manuals reflects only superficially this process-centered research and more often exaggerates a presumed organizational function, the capacity of a topic, for instance, comparison/contrast, to predict the shape of a given text. The classical tradition is vague on the question of organizational function, grouping *topoi* indiscriminately under *inventio* and *dispositio* to suggest their use both for "finding" arguments and for elaborating them in discourse. But neither Aristotle nor Cicero implies the existence of a "comparison essay" or a "definition essay" of the sort often assigned in writing courses. And to the extent that the *topoi* may have been seen as organizational structures, they are not especially relevant to the modern perspective. As "ways of seeing" a subject or a range of information, they may well function in prewriting, but as predictors of the sequence of information or the shape of an artifact, they represent esoteric constraints that writers seldom employ except in artificial classroom exercises. To argue, as some teachers do, that such exercises nonetheless "improve" student writing is to fall into the *post hoc* fallacy to which composition instructors seem especially prone: the belief that it was specifically the use of comparison/contrast that aided a student rather than merely the chance to write something and receive feedback, no matter the mode or the imposed form.

Even from a research standpoint the relevance of the *topoi* may be problematic. Their proliferation in classical theory resembles the equally open-ended listing of tropes and figures, ranging from a few to more than a hundred according to different rhetoricians. The taxonomical, product-centered focus that enables a discrimination of tropes and figures tends to yield quite arbitrary and potentially infinite data, since our capacity to use language and make meanings is vastly more flexible than any limited survey of texts could reveal. Expanding the corpus of samples or shifting the nomenclature of revealed features will inevitably generate additional items for the taxonomy. The same appears true of the ancient catalogues of *topoi*, which lose much of their generative power as invention models because they are necessarily incomplete. Accordingly, the classroom effort to memorize or to practice some idiosyncratic sampling of topics appears at best superfluous, since a writer's inventive competence may already be broader than any range of topics could describe or hope to expand; and at worst it may be harmfully restrictive, like teaching people to swim in handcuffs: they may, with difficulty, learn to swim, but the effort is dramatically more extreme than the task requires.

However, my concern at present is not to detail the positive and negative applications of classical rhetoric to modern composition theory. Rather, I am concerned about historical precedents generally, and about a shift in epistemology that makes certain rhetorical paradigms from earlier ages more congenial than others to our contemporary frame of reference as well as more suggestive for our continuing investigations. While considerable energy has been expended to show the relevance of ancient theory to our current efforts, practically no attention has been directed toward theoretical antecedents, particularly in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, whose assumptions are closer to our own and whose conclusions, therefore, serve more usefully to inform our own. The eighteenth-century reorganization of knowledge according to the methodological premises of the emerging natural sciences has a profound impact on the character of logic and rhetoric in the same period, as W. S. Howell has shown in exhaustive detail. And the changes that occur reflect more than alternating preferences in outlook: they derive from a fundamental and irredeemably deconstruction of classical ontology that engendered a radically new perception of what discourse is, how it works, and what it does. Today, our best scholarship takes that altered perception for granted, but we are too often unselfconscious about its origins. They deserve to be recollected and I propose to do so now.
tures of which are reliably mirrored in the action of discourse. It offered, instead, a dynamic theory of knowledge, emphasizing the mind's active tendency to construe order from an empirical examination of data derived from sensory experience. Coherence, in such a view, becomes something made, not something found, an achievement of human imagination, not an unassailable pronouncement from the gods. And the processes of generating coherence through verbal (or mathematical) articulation suddenly become at least as important, as worthy of study, as any resulting statement. It is this feature in particular, the concern for process, that chiefly characterizes the new rhetoric: the ancient presentational function of "method" gives way before a Baconian-Cartesian view of "method" as means of inquiry. The search for new knowledge, a progressive, open-ended struggle to discover new data and new ways of organizing them, replaces the static classical regard for merely offering what is already known in a pleasing verbal dress. Rhetorical studies since the seventeenth century have been deeply preoccupied with this shift in methodological function, and we remain similarly preoccupied today. Modern composition research emphasizes the psychological bases of verbal activity, the value of writing for personal learning as well as communicating, and the plastic, evolutionary nature of formal constraints. But to the degree that we are unaware of the long history of these concerns, we sometimes over dramatize the modernity of our insights. In addition, our teaching lags conspicuously behind our theoretical understanding because textbooks have failed to grasp both our distance from the classical tradition and the historical circumstances that have led inexorably to its displacement.

Descartes' *Discourse on Method* offers a conveniently inclusive prediction of the revolution in discourse theory that accounts for such a gulf between Aristotle and the present. The description of a personal dissatisfaction with the lore in revered books, with which he begins the *Discourse*, mirrors the growth of a general mistrust of ancient wisdom and ancient methods of argument during the mid-seventeenth century. As a child he had "lived in a world of books," having been taught that, through them, he could "gain a clear and assured knowledge of everything useful in life." But on completing his course of studies, he found himself "saddled with so many doubts and errors that I seemed to have gained nothing in trying to educate myself" (page 5). The problem, he asserts a few pages later, lies in the restrictive character of the old knowledge as well as the means of perpetuating it: "as far as logic was concerned, its syllogisms and most of its other methods serve rather to explain to another what one already knows, or even, as in the art of Lully, to speak freely and without judgment of what one does not know, than to learn new things" (page 14). In place of the "speculative philosophy now taught in the schools" he recommends a "practical one" concerned with discovering the nature and behavior of the physical world (page 45). He is convinced that living in the world, "traveling, seeing courts and armies, living with people of diverse types and stations of life, acquiring varied experiences," is finally more valuable to the growth of knowledge than "the cogitations of a man of letters in his study" (pages 8-9). We must be careful not to miss, beneath the familiar ring of these observations, the assault on fundamental principles that they represented at the time. They imply nothing less than the collapse of a worldview, not to mention the repudiation of time-honored constraints on discourse.

The new "Cartesian" method, most admirably exemplified in the processes of mathematical reasoning, advocated unbiased, rigorously inductive procedures aimed at discovering the truth, not all at once, but through gradual increments as new infor-

mation presents itself, or new connections are perceived, or new organizing ideas come to light (page 15). Truth is not something predetermined but rather something sought for by means of systematic inquiry: Descartes proposes to "think in an orderly fashion when concerned with the search for truth, beginning with the things which were simplest and easiest to understand, and gradually and by degrees reaching toward more complex knowledge" (page 15). The prototype for this orderly inquiry is to be found in geometrical method: "Those long chains of reasoning, so simple and easy, which enabled the geometers to reach the most difficult demonstrations, had made me wonder whether all things knowable to men might not fall into a similar logical sequence." Beginning with the simplest, most fundamental assertions, and carefully following "the order necessary to deduce each one from the others," Descartes reasons that "there cannot be any propositions so abstruse that we cannot prove them, or so recondite that we cannot discover them" (page 16).

The significance of these methodological assumptions lies not in their details (which were extensively challenged and modified by British empiricists of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries), but in their relevance to our contemporary philosophical and research perspectives. We are inclined today to accept, as working premises, the notion that writing is an endlessly renovative process, the notion that any achieved coherence is necessarily partial and tentative, carrying a latent potential for its eventual reconstruction, and the idea that composing is as open-ended as the search for knowledge itself. Descartes argues at length for similar assumptions and passes them on to natural scientists and rhetoricians alike in the next century. Having decided to devote himself to medicine, he acknowledges at once both the power of his method for medical investigation and the impossibility of completing that investigation by himself. He sees the tension implicit in his frame of reference: the dictum"promise of his discovery procedure guarantees both success and failure in its application—success in formulating some limited range of new, reliable insights, but failure in the larger effort to exhaust all their possibilities or to complete the unbounded line of reasoning to which they give rise. Each new insight leads to others; each additional proposition in the chain of arguments implies more to follow. There is no ultimate destination in the search for truth, no conclusive text that will, once and for all convey the fully perceived significance of things. Knowledge, for Descartes, is an activity, not a state; it can never be freed from the process of articulation. Recognizing the limit of his own capacity, he frames his obligation in narrow terms: "to publish faithfully to the world the little which I had discovered and urge men of ability to continue the work." He hopes that every scholar will "publish whatever he had learned, so that later investigators could begin where the earlier had left off. In this way mankind would combine the lives and work of many people, and would go much further than any individual could go by himself" (page 46).

Of course, a crucial, and troubling, implication of this perspective is the indeterminate nature of "knowledge" separate from its expression as discourse. Writing is a heuristic exercise for the writer, a discovery of meanings, not merely a mode of presentation. Descartes' sense of writing as a learning process closely resembles our own: he proposes to "continue to write everything that I consider important ... as if I intended to publish it. In this way I will have additional opportunities to examine my ideas." He insists that the writing be of publishable quality, not just personal notes, because "we always scrutinize more closely that which we expect to be read by others than th-
which we do for ourselves alone." But he does not imply that everything will be published merely because it is written. Instead, he composes with the realization that "frequently the ideas which seemed true to me when I first conceived them have appeared false when I wished to put them on paper" (page 48).

The writer perpetually confronts error, impression, and incompleteness as new assertions are posed and tentatively related to any developing chain of reasoning. We grope for meanings, test them for plausibility, learn what we want to say by making repeated efforts to formulate and reformulate coherences. We reject more than we keep, but we cannot even reach the decision to reject without first engaging in the process of formulation. And what is kept, the resulting discourse, is not itself free of uncertainty: there will always be more to say and more precise or comprehensive ways to say it.

The point here is that Descartes celebrates method in the absence of a clear, preverbal conception of the truth. And in this skepticism, he shows most evidently the modern temper of his mind. His application of the new discovery procedure to the domain of ethical conduct is interesting in that regard: "I patterned my behavior on that of travelers, who, finding themselves lost in a forest, must not wander about, now turning this way, now that, and still less should remain in one place, but should go as straight as they can in the direction they first select and not change the direction except for the strongest reasons." The parallel to composing is noteworthy. Methodological rigor succeeds at least in generating internal consistency, without which questions of truth and falsity are irrelevant: "if the course selected is not indeed a good one, at least the reasons for selecting it are excellent" (pages 19-20). In this insight we perceive the paradox of modern discourse theory: writers see the plausibility of their statements only in and through the process of articulating them. What they end up with is at best an approximation of what they sought, liable inevitably to modification; and at worst, it is false or merely trivial, though perceived to be so only after the labor of composing has progressed. The unpredictability and openness of writing that Descartes describes is intellectually energizing or debilitating according to the temperaments of individual writers: we can see, from the eighteenth century onward, varied responses to the psychological pressure both of its potential and of its limitations. But after Descartes it is, in any case, no longer possible to conceive the authority of writing in sweeping Aristotelian terms. Discourse is no longer merely a system of formal rituals for conveying timeless, previously validated insights; rather, it is the tentative and ephemeral achievement of a groping, uncertain, but hopeful intelligence.

Eighteenth-century rhetoricians and logicians are quick to expand upon the Cartesian viewpoint, though only as it is refined by British empiricists such as Newton and Locke. Adam Smith, for example, the most celebrated of the mid-century Scotish rhetoricians, comments typically on the decline of the ancient perspective beneath the impact of the new "scientific" method: "We need [not] be surprised . . . that the Cartesian philosophy . . . should have been so universally received by all the learned in Europe at that time. The great superiority of the method over that of Aristotle, the only one then known . . . made them greedily receive (id)." To be sure, there is a note of condescension in these remarks, for Smith is by no means a disciple of French rationalism. But he readily acknowledges the supremacy of scientific method, attributing its refinement to Sir Isaac Newton. In the same way, Isaac Watts, the most widely influential English logician of the century, proclaims the victory of empirical investigation though similarly crediting fellow Englishmen with its perfection: "I confess the old Aristotelian scheme . . . will teach us very little that is worth knowing about these matters; but the later writers, who have explained nature and its operations in a more sensible and geometrical manner, are well worth [study]." He recommends, in particular, those writers who have "followed the principles of . . . Sir Isaac Newton."

With the rise of the new method in eighteenth-century rhetoric came a detailed and concentrated attack on certain dominant features of the classical tradition, including the tropes, the artistic proofs, syllogistic reasoning, the tropes and figures, and the Cicereonian six-part oration. Watts, for instance, challenges the use of topics for inventing arguments, suggesting that, "when a man of moderate sagacity has made himself master of his theme by just diligence and inquiry, he has seldom need to run knocking at the doors of all the topics that he may furnish himself with argument or matter of speaking." Adam Smith alludes, likewise, to Cicero's absorption with the topics, commenting superciliously that "this may serve to show us the low state of philosophy at that time" (page 173). Smith also takes Cicero to task for his emphasis on the artistic proofs, insisting that, "if one has been seen committing the fact, and the witnesses testify it [i.e., the nonartistic proofs], there is no other proof necessary" (page 166). The artistic proofs, he argues, assume a fixed connection between human motives and human deeds, so that if, by argumentative skill, a person can be characterized as a particular sort, with a tendency to act in a certain way, the likelihood is that the person will have acted that way on a given occasion. But, Smith says, "it is not sufficient proof that one committed any action that he had a motive to do so." Moreover, "the character of man is a thing so fluctuating that no proof which depends on it can be altogether conclusive" (page 165). Beneath Smith's observations on the artistic proofs we may detect the influence of the new associational psychology, which proposed a more dynamic concept of human personality than Aristotle or Cicero had at his disposal. For the eighteenth century human behavior had become too complex and mysterious for easy reduction into the absolutes of Book II of Aristotle's Rhetoric. Hence, the proofs that depend on absolutes in that behavior were bound to be unappealing.

Syllogistic reasoning also fails under attack as disputation gives way before empirical method. George Campbell, who with Hugh Blair dominates rhetorical instruction in the schools of the later eighteenth century, asserts, for instance, that he has long been convinced by "what Mr. Locke had said on the subject, that the syllogistic art, with its figures and moods, serves more to display the ingenuity of the inventor . . . than to assist the diligent inquirer in his researches after truth." He argues that, in earlier ages, "when all erudition consisted more in an acquaintance with words . . . than in the knowledge of things, dexterity in this exercitation conferred as much lustre on the scholar, as agitating in the tilts and tournaments added glory to the knights." He concludes, significantly, that, "in proportion as the attention of mankind has been drawn off to the study of nature, the honours of this contentious art have faded, and it is now almost forgotten" (page 70). Adam Smith deals in a similar fashion with the tropes and figures, suggesting that they are the product of mere academic refinement, adding glory to the scholar but offering little real insight into style. Just as syllogisms demonstrate only the cleverness, not the understanding, of logicians, so the endless discrimination of tropes reveals little more than the pedantic ingenuity of literary critics. Smith suggests that it is "from the consideration of these figures, and divisions and subdivisions of them, that so many systems of rhetoric, both ancient and modern, have been formed," adding that
about their differences from the ancient epistemology. In any
case, we might be wise to heed their reservations. Adopting clas.
cival conventions within the modern rhetorical perspective, even
with scholarly caution, is at least to distort their ancient formu.
lation and intent. And adopting them with no sensitivity what-
ever to the epistemological barriers qualifying their use is surely
to fall victim, as our textbooks often do, to unserviceable con-
cepts that force us to view through an ungenial lens whatever
we have learned empirically about how people write.

But a last question remains to be explored concerning the
eighteenth-century challenge to classical discourse theory: if the
ancient conventions were unacceptable, what took their place?
What were the "internal requirements" of discourse to which
rhetoricians directed their attention? The answer lies in
eighteenth-century expansions of Descartes' line of thinking:
that empirical method is a process of investigation, governed by
certain definable constraints, which yields strings of connected
assertions that represent the track of a writer's learning. John
Locke, who melds Cartesian and Baconian arguments for Engli.
sh consumption at the threshold of the new century, argues in the
Essay Concerning Human Understanding that the search for knowl-
edge consists in making inferences about plausible relationships
among ideas and representing those related ideas as chains of
propositions embedded in verbal statements. Like Descartes, he
suggests that the "schools of mathematicians" best illustrate the
scientific method: "from very plain and easy beginnings, by
gentle degrees, and a continued chain of reasonings, [they] pro-
ceed to the discovery and demonstration of truths that appear at
first sight beyond human capacity" (Bk IV, 12). The crucial task
in this process, accomplished by powers of reasoning, is to
"order the intermediate ideas as to discover what connection
there is in each link of the chain, whereby the extremes are held
together"; by this means, a writer can "draw into view the truth
sought for, which is that which we call ilation or inference, and
consists in nothing but the perception of the connection there is
between the ideas, in each step of the deduction" (Bk IV, 17).

Starting from Locke, numerous eighteenth-century discourse
theorists develop arguments about the inferential learning pro-
cess that writing represents and also clarify the principle of con-
ssecutive entailments that regulates composing. Watts, for in-
fance, defines "natural" method as that which "proceeds in
such a manner as that the knowledge of the things which follow
depends in a great measure on the things which go before"
(Logik, p. 263). George Campbell makes essentially the same
point: "As to order in time, which in composition is properly
styled Method, it consists principally in connecting the parts
in such a manner as to give vicinity to things in the discourse
which have an affinity" (page 77). But perhaps the most careful
and elaborate argument for the theory of inferential entailment
is that of Henry Home, Lord Kames, a mid-century literary
critic and aesthetician whose contributions to rhetoric have been
unfortunately overlooked. Kames insists that "every train of
ideas must be a chain, in which the particular ideas are linked
to each other. We may vary the order of a natural train; but not so
as to dissolve it altogether, by carrying on our thoughts in a loose
manner without any connection" (1, 24). Of course, there is
nothing necessary about the connections themselves; it is only
necessary that connections be established, since they insure the
cohesion of discourse. As Watts points out, the connections
may specify cause/effect, or primary/subordinate, or prior/post-
terior/simultaneous, or superior/inferior/equal, or some other
"orderly disposition of things" (Logik, p. 263). But one system
of connections could not be predicted as the only legitimate pos-
sibility. Instead, writers infer relations according to what seems

"they are generally a very silly set of books and not at all instruc-
tive" (page 23). What chiefly troubles Smith about the value of
the figures is his perception that they constitute nothing but lin-
guistic illusions, distinctions without difference, breaking lan-
guage use into static categories that fail to represent the actual
nature of stylistic choice. Hence, he complains that "it is impos-
sible to assign the distinct limits of the ancient figures." For
instance, "When the shout of the fallen angels is said to have
torn Hell's concave, this figure might be asserted with equal
reason to be an Hyperbole, a Metonymy, or a Metaphor"
(page 24).

Watts expresses what we may take as a consensus eighteenth-
century opinion about the rules of ancient rhetoric: "a happy
genius, a lively imagination, and warm passions, together with
a due degree of knowledge and skill in the subject to be
debated," and, he would add, some experience of the best
speeches and writings, "will do more to make an orator than all
the rules of art in the world without these natural talents, and
this careful imitation of the most approved and happiest orators"
(Improvement, p. 223). Watts distinguishes here between recog-
nition of rules, which is passive, and the performance of opera-
tions, which is active, a general knowledge of principles versus
an ability to do certain tasks. There may be value in both the
conceptual awareness and the concrete ability, but there is no
necessary connection between the two: one does not enable the
other. Watts is also going further, however, as do most theorists
of his age, in singling out the ancient rules especially as too elab-
orate and overrestrictive, unconcerned on the one hand about the
power of "lively imagination" or the use of pertinent knowledge,
while cascaded on the other hand with ceremonial form for its
own sake. The six-part oration is a case in point, since it exag-
gerates certain constraints for ordering the substance of a dis-
course without regard for the natural movement of consecutive
assertions that a due attention to the evolving substance can
itself initiate. Smith, for instance, is clearly unimpressed by clas-
sical arguments for the validity of the Cicersonian structure,
though he half-heartedly describes that form of the oration while
considering rhetorical arrangement. At one point, he notes that,
"In the practice of the modern Courts of Judicature the narrat-
en is never introduced; the pleader barely relates the things he is to
prove, without giving us a detail of the whole transaction, and
it is only where there is very little attention and great ignorance
that this can have much weight" (page 172). According to
Smith, even where orators apply Cicersonian conventions they
adjust them to the rhetorical situation and the internal require-
ments of the argument. And there is no question that Smith's
primary focus of attention, as well as that of Watts and others,
is precisely those internal requirements rather than rules exter-

In reviewing these eighteenth-century misgivings about clas-
sical conventions, the irony of our contemporary pedagogy
becomes apparent. Nearly all modern textbooks include some
information on the topics and the artistic proofs (usually under
"modes of development"), syllogistic (or at least "deductive")
reasoning, the nature of figurative usage, at least metaphor and
simile, and the superstructures of discourse, either the outline or
some adaptation of the Cicersonian oration form. It seems unde-
niable that these formulae, which were commonly questioned
nearly three centuries ago, fit uncomfortably with theories of
 discourse that have evolved since the epistemological revolution
of the seventeenth century. Rhetoricians of that era appear to
have sensed the disjunction more acutely than some of their
twentieth-century counterparts, perhaps because they were more
aware of classical attitudes about discourse and therefore clearer
significant in their information or what seems dictated by the conditions of different writing situations: "We can insist upon one, rejecting others," Kames says, "and we can even insist upon what has the slightest connection." Such is the artifice implicit in all writing. But typically, "where ideas are left to their natural course, they are generally continued through the strongest connection." (I, 24).

Kames holds, then, as Locke had before him, that writers begin by searching for plausible relationships in the information pertaining to their subjects, a process that results in the stating of assertions which describe the relations uncovered. Those assertions form sequences that constitute lines of reasoning. The sequences are extended according to the process of inferential entailment; that is, the perception of implications in one assertion gives rise to others, while the larger perception of the cumulative tendency of the evolving sequence directs additional choices of what to say and where to say it. The process continues until all the relevant inferences have been made and some conclusion is in view. As a result of this reasoned, inductive movement from assertion to assertion, the finished discourse conveys an impression of coherence and inescapable logic. That impression is fictional in a sense, because other, equally viable connections could have been made; but it is nonetheless essential to the probity of the discourse. Hence, as Adam Smith notes, "It is in the proper ordering and disposal of this sort of arguments that the great art of an orator consists." Taken singly, he says, propositions "have often no great impression. But if they be placed in a natural order, one leading to the other, their effect is greatly increased." Smith's sense of the artifice of composing, and of the merely relative reliability of the subsequent artifacts, is acute: he advocates fashioning the pattern of assertions as "a sort of narration, filling up in the manner most suitable to the design of the speaker what intervals there may otherwise be." In this way, even though the orator may offer little specific proof, the established connections are "easily comprehended and consequently agreeable," so that "when the adversary tries to contradict any of these particulars it is pulling down a fabric with which we are greatly pleased and are very unwilling to give up" (page 167).

Eighteenth-century rhetoricians pay as much attention to the constraints regulating this inferential process as they do to the nature of the process itself. Since the making of inferences and the stating of consecutive entailments is both open-ended and unbounded, there must be some means of controlling it so that conclusions can be reached and unified insights retained. The unhappy alternative is evident in the incoherence that Laurence Sterne describes in *Tristram Shandy*, a provocative text in view of the theory of composing prevalent at the time. Tristram's effort to write his autobiography "fails" because his process of making connections is unchanneled. He flounders in the multiple possibilities that the writing itself discovers. What ordinarily regulates the writing process is the action of two coordinated constraints, the writer's purpose and the needs and expectations of some intended reader. Isaac Watts describes their relevance succinctly: the completeness of any particular discourse "does not require that every thing should be said which can be said . . .; for this would make each single science endless." Instead, "you should say everything which is necessary to the design in view, and which has a proper and direct tendency to this end" (Logic, p. 277). Otherwise, he adds, "the readers or hearers will have reason to wonder for what end that or this particular was introduced" (Logic, p. 283). The order of assertions depends, then, on some interaction between what the writer wishes to achieve and what a reader is judged best able to comprehend. Hence, it is insufficient to concentrate exclusively on the inferential connection between any two assertions: a broader concern must influence this more immediate one, the concern for adapting a line of reasoning to the limits of a given discourse situation.

Kames elaborates on this point. "The train of thought depends not entirely upon relations," he suggests. Another factor bearing on the shape of a sequence of assertions is "the sense of order and arrangement," by which Kames means a larger perception of structure that determines whether one entire group of assertions will precede or follow some other. "Thus our tendency is, to view the principle subject before we descend to its accessories or ornaments, and the superior before the inferior or dependent." He adds that, "We are equally averse to enter into a minute consideration of constituent parts, till the thing be first surveyed as a whole" (I, 29). It is on this question of larger structures in discourse that eighteenth-century theory approaches most closely the formal constraints of the classical period. But there are two crucial differences. The first is that few of the rhetoricians who espouse the inferential theory advocate as static and inflexible a form as the Ciceroian oration structure. Typically, they either directly fault the ancient model, as Smith does, or, like Kames, they ignore it altogether. The Scottish rhetoricians will often distinguish between analytic and synthetic modes of arrangement, that is, a movement from general to specific or from details to generalities in different discourses, but they seldom advocate Cicero's rigid compartments. The second, more important difference is that their concern for structure is motivated chiefly by their understanding of the psychology of audiences, not by some notion of the ceremonial rubrics that ought to govern the shape of texts.

E. D. Hirsch has recently argued similarly for the psychological origins of formal constraints. He suggests that, "The best sequence for economizing the reader's attention is the sequence which leaves the reader in uncertainty for the shortest period of time." He then quotes Herbert Spencer's "The Philosophy of Style" (1852) as the prototype of this argument and describes Spencer's theory of discourse at some length. But the fact is that Spencer's observations are anticipated a century earlier. George Campbell, whose lectures were delivered at Aberdeen as early as the 1750's, though the *Philosophy of Rhetoric* was not published until 1776, comments that, "as nothing can operate on the mind which is not in some respect present to it, care must be taken by the orator that, in introducing new topics, the vestiges left by the former on the minds of the hearers may not be effaced." He adds, significantly, that, "It is the sense of this necessity which hath given rise to the rules of composition" (page 75). Campbell explores the psychological sources of form with considerable subtlety. Scientific proofs, he notes, consist of "an uninterrupted series of axioms. But this process is of necessity gradual, and these axioms are all brought in succession. It must then be solely by the aid of memory, that they are capable of producing conviction in the mind" (pages 58-59). As the sequence grows, the possibility of losing track of the line of reasoning grows as well: hence the importance of reminding the reader at strategic points about the direction in which the writer plans to go. Conventions such as introducing a conclusion at the start of a discourse, or forecasting turns in an argument, or grouping strings of assertions in paragraphs and other larger contextual units, all arise from the need to support memory in the process of reading.

Watts argues in the same fashion that "a discourse cut into a vast multitude of gradual subordinations has many inconveniences in it; it gives pain to the mind and memory, in surveying and retaining the scheme of discourse" (Logic, p. 275). But, he adds, "it is one great use of method that a multitude of thoughts
and propositions may be so distinctly ranged in their proper situations, that the mind may not be overwhelmed with a confused attention to them all at once” (Logic, p. 276). Adam Smith suggests how a writer might reduce the reader’s burden of recollecting long chains of assertions. He points out that it is often necessary “to prove fourteen or fifteen subordinate propositions, in order to confirm the principal one.” In such cases, the writer should group no more than three to five assertions at a time in a short chain, linking all these chains in turn to form hierarchies of subordination. He is persuaded that “the mind will much more easily comprehend” these smaller sequences and the relations among them than it would the entire set of subordinate propositions “which immediately depend on the principal one without any intermediate steps” (page 138). Hence, as a discourse evolves, argumentative patterns emerge that inform the reader about primary and secondary lines of reasoning. Presumably, the pattern shifts will often coincide with the ends of paragraphs or short paragraph sequences, but they will be subtler, more intrinsic to the argument, than such artificial and formulaic divisions as introduction, thesis statement, supporting evidence, counterstatements, refutations, and summary. The concern is for representing, for a reader’s benefit, natural movements in the fabric of the reasoning — elaboration, reiteration, reversal, change of pace, alteration in focus or emphasis — not for merely filling up prefabricated structural molds.

Obviously, this superficial review of certain features of eighteenth-century discourse theory cannot serve adequately to suggest all of its potential relevance for composition research and pedagogy. Nor is it necessary to do so much in the present context. I only wish to point out some implications that may derive from the brief glimpse of early-modern rhetoric that has been offered here. It appears self-evident that there are important similarities between eighteenth-century theory and our own thinking about discourse, similarities that should serve at once to show the lineage of our contemporary perspective and also the value of looking backward for serviceable insights. This is not to say that our ideas are equivalent to those of two centuries ago: such an assumption would only reintroduce the naive view of rhetoric as intellectual monolith that I have been explicitly challenging. We have progressed through nineteenth- and twentieth-century reorientations of thought nearly as substantial, if not quite as fundamentally disruptive, as the epistemological revolution of the seventeenth century. Our perspectives and tools of analysis have sharpened considerably. But the fact remains that we agree more than differ in outlook with the rhetoricians whose arguments I have sketched. More to the point, numerous aspects of our research echo their similar kinds of inquiry, proceeding from similar hypotheses. We should hear those echoes: retrospective awareness will reveal the cumulative strength, not to mention the continuity, of our insights.

We ought also to confront certain obvious limitations in the power of the ancient rhetorical paradigm to yield an understanding of the nature of discourse that conforms to modern attitudes and expectations. What we retrieve from the classical tradition will not easily serve our research and pedagogical purposes unless we understand — and in a sense neutralize — the alien condition within which ancient speculation evolved and the corresponding inadequacies of its prescriptions. Eighteenth-century reservations about the topoi, the artistic proofs, deductive reasoning, the tropes, and the Ciceronian oration structure, all arising out of the deeper perception of error in ancient arguments about truth, verbal reliability, and the priority of idea over articulation, should give the contemporary rhetorician pause as well. Although we are (properly) less driven than “Enlightenment” thinkers to repudiate classical assumptions merely out of enthusiasm for a newer way of seeing things, we should be no less cautious in applying those assumptions toward ends they were not designed to serve. This care seems especially crucial for progress in the quality of teaching. Classical rhetoric does not offer the behavioral, process-centered focus that we have seen in early-modern theory and that continues to develop today as the most suitable underpinning for instruction. It describes discourses that have already occurred and, by implication, overrestricts the formal alternatives for additional composing. But it does not reveal the writer writing, the uncertainty, the imaginative searching, the testing and reformulating that we recognize as integral to the slow evolution of coherence. These are the peculiar preoccupations of the modern, relativistic mind. But if we see more anxiety in the writing process, we also see more potential for new discovery. What we require, therefore, are teaching strategies that enable us both to cope with the anxiety and to realize the potential in developing writers. We also need to continue our cultivation of research perspectives that offer the richness and most intellectually provocative context for that endeavor.

NOTES


3 For Aristotle’s “four causes,” efficient, formal, material, and final, see his Metaphysics, Book I. For the predicates (genus, species, differentiae) and the predicaments (the “ten categories”), see Aristotle’s Categories.

4 I refer to Aristotle’s distinctions of speech situations in the Rhetoric, Book I. Other classical theorists offer more situations, or fewer, or different, but all advance similar arguments about the functions of oratory and the concerns of the orator.

5 For substantial development of this idea, see Aristotle, Rhetoric, Book III (“Lexis”).


7 This relationship is discussed at length in Aristotle’s On Interpretation.

8 For a recent study of contemporary uses of enthyemamic argument, see Lawrence D. Green, “Enthymemic Invention and Structural Prediction,” College English, 41 (Feb., 1980), 623-34.


10 Ross Winterowd makes just this point in his essay “Invention,” in Contemporary Rhetoric, 39-49.


Teaching Research Writing:
Five Criteria

Stephen North
S.U.N.Y., Albany

Almost every aspect of the course known as Freshman English has been seriously reviewed in the past fifteen years, and many positive changes have been made. For some reason, however, there has been little written on what, in many such courses, is the culmination of the semester: the "term" or research paper.

I will not rehearse here the peculiarities of research writing as it is presented in the handbooks. There have been plenty of attacks on those texts and their handling of writing in general; the same criticisms apply here. Nor will I offer a sketch of the evolution of the research paper and its time-honored pedagogy, interesting as that might be. It is enough to acknowledge that the research paper must once have seemed the logical next step in a course that introduced new students to academic writing—research writing is, after all, the cornerstone of academic discourse. Unfortunately, somewhere along the line the course has grown out from under the research paper, which seems to hang on now as a gesture of goodwill from the English Department to the rest of the university or college—a gesture, it seems fair to add, of growing futility.

It is time for a major reconsideration of the place of research writing in the college curriculum. To some extent, this reconsideration has already begun as a byproduct of the writing-in-the-disciplines movement. By and large, however, our teaching of research writing remains conventional: in a five- to eight-week block of our introductory writing courses, we march students through a dry, a-disciplinary, note card and sentence outline affair, writing done in a vacuum on topics that draw annual guffaws in faculty lounges—"Harry Houdini and Freud"; "Abortion: Yes or No"; "The History of WWII"; "The Maginot Line: It Could Not Fall." The system probably does more harm than good by creating problems for our students that undermine our chances for successfully teaching them anything. In this essay, I will briefly describe what those problems are, what goes wrong for students when they hit the research paper as it is currently taught. Moving from those problems, I will suggest five minimal criteria against which any revised approach to research writing ought to be tested, and conclude with some general remarks about the shape our future courses in research writing ought to take.

Problem I: Research writing will not solve or erase students' existing problems with writing.

This is common sense. Students who have difficulty writing to an academic audience, who cannot shift from one level of abstraction to another, who are consistently unable to generate anything to write about—such students are likely to have similar or worse problems when they meet the special demands of research writing. There may be occasional exceptions, such as those few students who find that notecards provide them with a system of discovery they never had before, but such instances are relatively rare. Research writing will more likely just deepen their confusion: cognitively and rhetorically.

Problem II: Students have a difficult time making their research material their own.

Any writing requires of the writer a mental paradigm, a con-
ceptual model out of which that writing emerges. Acquiring and using information demands that we have criteria for separating the important from the unimportant, and rules for fitting new information into existing schemas. Our students obviously have the mental equipment for taking in new information; for some, students in some topic areas, the skill is finely developed — baseball trivia, or the recent history of popular music. What they are not able to do is use this skill in the sustained, systematic, and finely discriminating context of academic research writing. Sometimes their difficulties are rhetorical, in the sense that they have a grasp of a substantial body of material, but do not understand their audience well enough to sort through the information successfully. More often, however, the problem is that they have no depth of knowledge, no existing schema for the subject area in which they are writing, nor sufficient time to establish one. At best, writing from such a position produces reports, with the author serving as little more than a referee for the sources; and at worst, plagiarism: "But they said it so much better than I could."

Problem III: Students cannot write well in a form they have seldom seen and never studied.

Much of our learning to write is by imitation. We need to know what the final product ought to "look" like in order to work toward it on our own. Since students have so little experience with the forms of academic discourse, they don't know what they are trying to construct.

There seems to be some resistance to this notion among teachers. They dislike the implication that academic essays are somehow "canned." Such concerns are not entirely unfounded. Given a text they have never read, a flyleaf plot summary, and a topic, skilled academic writers (who might, I suppose, be called academic hacks) can produce a "B" paper for most literature courses. I have done so myself. This merely proves, however, that academic writing, like most formalized writing, is formulaic: there is a predictable size, shape, tone and rhythm for English papers, political science papers, GCC articles and so on. Abuses of those formulas raise moral issues, not writing issues. Without such formulas, without the generic shape and feel of disciplinary (and other) writing, communication would be much less efficient.

Problem IV: Students get too few chances to make mistakes in research writing.

In too many college courses, students are expected to succeed at research writing after a little instruction and one or, at most, two attempts. In the traditional composition course, the term paper is usually weighted heavily in the students' overall grade, but it is not supposed to present major difficulties because it is "assembled" step by step. We know, however, that learning is not promoted so much by step-by-step instruction as by trial and error. Nor is fragmented research writing — quizzes on note taking or practice outlining — necessarily a solution, though it may help. Students need repeated practice writing whole pieces of discourse. In fiction writing workshops, we are willing to let students work on a single form, even a single work, over and over again, and we usually let them repeat the course for credit. The demands of research writing are not so superficial that they deserve less respect.

Problem V: The research paper, as it is presently taught, is alien and even harmful to our students' developing composing processes.

This is not to say that the research writing "system" pre-
scribed by the handbooks (note cards, et al.) is entirely misguided. Clearly there is sense in providing an efficient setting in which the rather organic process of research writing can work. What is wrong is that it makes no concession to the students' existing composing habits. Research writing is a very natural development in the growth of any writer — a broadening in scope and depth of inquiry, and a shift to a more public or formal audience. The prescribed approach of the handbooks, however, makes this development anything but natural, either in subject selection or in process. As a result we see an awful lot of what might be called forced bloomings.

Given these five problems, then, any new research writing course ought to meet at least the following criteria:

Criterion I: Research writing should be taught only to students certifiably ready to learn it.

Research writing need not be offered to students every few years as though it were a vaccine. Limited kinds of research writing might, indeed, be taught in high school, but they ought to meet the other four criteria to be listed here, and should not demand of students systematic inquiry beyond their abilities. To qualify for college research writing courses, students ought to be able to do at least the following: shift levels of abstraction appropriately; define an academic audience and control the language well enough to demonstrate that recognition; and be able to move beyond what Britton has labeled the analogic (low level generalization) stage to the analogic or speculative stages of the writing continuum. (Difficulties in other areas — poor editing or weak organizing ability — may or may not be sufficient to prevent a student from doing successful research writing.)

Criterion II: Students should do research writing only on material that enables them to establish a conceptual framework in which to work. This takes time.

Research writing, as we know from long experience, is not best done in the vacuum of a Freshman English course in which the students' writing itself is the content. There have been efforts to overcome this difficulty; giving the course a 'theme' ("Man and His World"), using self-contained casebooks, studying literature, studying language (linguistics, semantics), and so on. One current popular text, Murder, Mischief, and Mayhem (W. Keith Kraus, NCTE, 1978), tries to solve this problem by providing each student with the specific and limited context of a crime about which the student becomes something of an expert. This approach ought to work better than the old choose-a-topic-that-interests-you ploy, but the situation is still artificial and the writing a-disciplinary. It would be far better for students to work in an area in which they have had some experience before they write a paper. It takes time to become involved in research writing, to absorb and sort through reading, to seek out a direction, to do more reading, to draft and redraft. Most often one doesn't know what the research is for until a draft or two has been written. We need to provide students with opportunities for this kind of involvement.

Criterion III: The course must focus on carefully limited kinds of research writing in specific disciplines: the biology lab report, the literary research paper using primary sources, the reading case study, etc. Two such related forms per semester seem ideal, with three as a maximum.

These kinds of writing need to be defined in both rhetorical terms and in the terms of the discipline itself, including at least the following: the purpose of the writing; the nature of the audience and its expectations; the acceptable range of tone and
style; the format (including a history of the form and the logic behind its current conformation); and finally, how it fits into the overall communication scheme of both the discipline and of academic writing in general (defining it, that is, by saying what it is like and unlike).

Students need to study real examples of such writing (good and bad) frequently in order to develop criteria according to which they can judge their own work. Hence, the text for any research writing course would include a collection of pieces of research writing of the desired kind.

Criterion IV: The course must provide students with repeated opportunities to attempt each kind of writing. The fifteen-week semester obviously limits the amount of research writing any student can do in a single course, but by limiting the kinds of writing, by keeping the subject matter within a discipline (ideally one in which the student already has some background), by relating one paper to the next, and by not demanding fully typed, spotless copy on all assignments, teachers can usually give students three full attempts at two forms of research writing in a semester.

Criterion V: The course must present research writing as a natural step in the students’ writing development, calling forth their existing composing skills as far as possible. The teacher’s primary job in such a course is to help students extend their composing processes to handle the complexities of research writing, especially in the areas of discovery or invention, perception of audience, control of persona, and manuscript conventions. The teacher ought to have knowledge of different approaches to the mechanics of research writing, and ideally will have materials to refer students to, but the class should be a workshop, not a lecture course.

These criteria, taken together, suggest a three-credit, fifteen-week, sophomore (or higher) level workshop course connected to a specific discipline. The course would focus on two or three carefully defined kinds of writing in the given discipline, and each student would get three chances to do full versions of each paper, with full corrections between attempts. (For this reason, the course ought to be graded pass/fail.) The texts for the course would include a collection of good and bad examples of the kinds of writing being taught in the discipline and an appropriate stylesheet.

The actual mechanics of such a course would necessarily vary from institution to institution. One can imagine, for example, five week, one-credit mini-courses covering one kind of research writing each; these could be offered through a Research Writing Center, supported by videotapes, auto-tutorial materials, and trained tutors. Whatever specific form it takes, this model departs from our traditional presentation of the research paper in two important ways. First, it reverses the direction of our general-to-specific pedagogy. That is, until now we have operated on the assumption that it was best to teach students general research writing skills and hope that when faced with specific research tasks, they could apply what they had learned. Under the proposed model, the assumption is that it is better to immerse students in specific, discipline-oriented research writing. Later, if they need to learn the research conventions of other disciplines, they can adapt what they have learned from their specific experience (or even take another course). This way, they will not only have had four or more chances to work through the research process, but will have mastered the research conventions of one or more disciplines as well.

The second difference between the proposed model and our current model is that it moves research writing away from Freshman English and toward the disciplines, where it belongs. We were long content in Freshman English to concentrate on products: the modes of discourse most common in the English Department, and the elusive clear style. The course is now much more student-centered and concerned with process. Unless there is some remarkable change in the writing abilities of our entering students, this trend will continue, and introductory writing courses will concern themselves with each student’s writing process: developing in each an understanding of the rhetorical context for writing, procedures for discovery, fluency in written English, mastery of a heuristic for revision, and so on. Such a course is not the place to concentrate on the idiosyncratic requirements of the forms of writing in specific disciplines.

The problems and solutions in the teaching of research writing defined in this essay are offered as untested hypotheses; they are based on my work with students and teachers, and not on empirical research. They need to be tested in the field, measured against the experiences of many teachers and students, and against the demands of research writing in different disciplines on our campuses. I do not think, though, that pedagogical reform can afford to wait for research. It is safe to say that we know that our present form of teaching research writing is inadequate, both for the writers to whom we offer it and the disciplines we think we serve by teaching it. We need to do something about it straight away.

NOTES

1See, however, Ken Macrorie’s recent Searching Writing, Hayden Book Company, Rochelle Park, N.J., 1980.

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Being There

C. W. Griffin
Virginia Commonwealth University

A major problem in teaching writing is the time gap between when students take Freshman English and when they are actually required to write for classes other than English — usually much later. During the freshman year, most of us try to teach such skills as invention, organization, and stylistic clarity, so our students will be able to write the papers they will later be assigned — papers such as literary analyses, book reviews, research reports, and proposals of various kinds.

But most freshmen are not required to write these papers except in our composition classes. Usually, they are in large sections of biology, psychology, history, etc., sections in which writing may be limited to tests, many of these objective. By the time they are in the advanced courses that require the kinds of papers I’ve mentioned above, they have completed their freshman composition and we’re not around to help them anymore. Some, of course, have learned and retained the skills we taught them; later they will be able to apply them. More, I suspect, either never learned the skills because they didn’t perceive the need, or learned them but forgot them, or learned them but can’t see how they quite apply to the writing situations they are now in.

For years, we’ve tried to close this learning gap. Some schools have tried vertical programs, requiring the second composition course in the sophomore or junior year. Others have supplemented freshman offerings with advanced courses in writing for particular areas — the sciences, humanities, or business — in hopes that students will take these courses when they need help writing papers in these disciplines.

Writing across the curriculum projects are another way to close the gap. Most attempt through a summer institute or series of workshops to show faculty in content areas how to help students apply fundamental writing skills to particular papers they have been assigned. And in these institutes or workshops, faculty frequently work on other matters also — many practice improving their own writing and many learn to make assignments effectively and evaluate papers accurately and helpfully.

At my university, we are trying to close the gap in a slightly different way — through team teaching. We have received a small grant to release five English faculty from one class apiece so we may work with content area colleagues to help them teach students to write the kinds of papers assigned.

Here’s the way the project works: we locate content area faculty willing to team teach their paper assignments with us. In a university with nearly 18,000 students and schools as varied as Arts & Sciences, Business, Community Services, Education, Fine Arts, Medicine, Nursing, and Social Work, this is not difficult. After we’ve located a faculty member, we first sit down with him and find out as much as we can about the kinds of papers he assigns.

If he teaches history, perhaps he wants students to review books in the field or research some project. For a biology class, he may want students to write abstracts of a number of articles in a particular area or write lab reports; in a business management class, he may want students to apply a theory of management or motivation to a particular group or company.

We’ve worked with teachers in education who wanted their students to be able to observe pupils in some activity and write detailed observation reports. We’ve also worked with a teacher in recreation who wanted his students (as a class) to write and present orally a “site proposal,” a proposal for creating a new recreational facility, a park for instance, that involves population studies, soil and water tests, and environmental impact studies. And we’ve worked with those who wanted their students to write journal articles modeled on ones published in their fields, or who simply wanted students to be able to write clear, concrete, and thoughtful answers to test questions.

Once we’ve discussed with a colleague what kinds of papers he assigns, we talk about how we might work together to help his students write them as well as possible. Usually we plan to use two or three class sessions to team teach the papers to students. The instructor will be present to help students with content, research methods, and with the peculiarities of papers written in his discipline, while we will be there to teach writing skills they might actually use in the papers.

A typical scenario might go like this: over the semester we plan to do two classes together, one when the paper is assigned and the other just before it’s due. When the instructor first makes his assignment, we’re there together. He can help students with problems such as these — what abstracts to use, what journals to look at, the key books in the field, and key research techniques peculiar to the discipline. We can help students find ways to discover ideas and organize them. We can suggest a variety of techniques, ranging from free writing and brainstorming to a simplified version of tagmatics. This first step seems to work best when students know they must begin the paper fairly soon. It also seems to work best when we and our colleague work with concrete examples. If he wants them to apply a management or motivation theory in a paper, then together we show them with an outline how it might actually be done.

When we work together the second time, we choose a time close to when the papers are actually due, a time close enough to guarantee that students are actually writing. This time we emphasize style. We both discuss writing clear sentences and choosing words that potential readers will understand. The English instructor shows students readability formulas (such as those of Rudolf Flesch and Robert Gunning) that help check whether their style is understandable enough.

In some cases, we get into detailed (and heated) discussions about the style required by a particular discipline. Does the writer have to eliminate all personal pronouns and use the passive voice in scientific writing, for instance? Or how much must one rely on jargon in a field such as psychology or sociology? Once again, the two of us, the content instructor and the English instructor, work together. He can tell students what typical readers of their papers will expect while we can show them how to fulfill these expectations.

During these team teaching sessions, we’ve discussed other important areas of writing. One example is revising and proofreading. We ask students, for instance, to hand in drafts of their papers prior to a particular class. Then during that class, we work with the papers, showing how to look for ways to improve them and how to find typical problems or errors. Here it’s particularly helpful to work together — the content instructor, for example, can point out problems of research and content while we work on writing problems.

These team teaching sessions help students close the gap between their composition courses and their content courses. Both teachers are there when they are needed. But the sessions are just as valuable to the faculty involved as they are to students. We learn to teach writing by watching and listening to
each other. We English faculty learn more about the problems of writing for particular disciplines and about how our colleagues solve them. They watch us show students the kinds of discovery, organizational, and stylistic skills necessary to write their papers.

Usually those in English spend anywhere from four to eight hours outside of class talking about writing with each content area colleague. During this time, we don’t limit ourselves just to planning a few classes together. We discuss other issues also — the most helpful ways to make assignments, some of the latest techniques of invention developed by composition research, and efficient and accurate ways to evaluate papers. In essence, our times together become like mini-workshops, tailored to each instructor’s needs.

But speaking of workshops, there were two other components of our original plan that we had hoped would develop. First, we had hoped that working together with content area colleagues would lead to doing more formal workshops with them. And it has. We’ve already conducted two workshops on the writing process and how to teach it with faculty from the School of Community Services. And we’ve got two more planned, one limited exclusively to faculty and the other an all-day affair with four faculty who teach in the field of public administration and all the students in their program, about twenty-five altogether.

Second, we had hoped that we would have the chance to help content area colleagues develop materials explaining paper assignments. These could either be handed out to students or put in the library for reference. They might be like self-paced units for each assignment, describing in detail the assignment and showing students how to go about fulfilling it — how to research material, organize it, and express it clearly.

This has begun also. For our second semester freshman course, we had already developed such units on writing book reviews, essay test questions, papers about literature, argumentative papers, and abstracts. We’ve now given out hundreds of these units in the writing across the curriculum project.

This approach to teaching writing across the curriculum has several strengths. More importantly, both the English teacher and content area teacher are there when they’re most needed — when students are actually working on a paper in a particular discipline. Second, we learn from each other. We English faculty learn a good deal more about the kinds of papers our students are writing for other courses and the kinds of problems they are encountering. Content area faculty, in their own classes, in talks with us, and in workshops, learn more about how to teach writing.

Best of all, this system is simple and inexpensive. It doesn’t look formidable to content area faculty, because they can participate as little or as much as they please. They don’t have to come to a two or three day workshop on teaching writing, for instance, unless they want to. And the costs of the project can be just about as high or low as an institution wants them to be. It could go all-out and hire one English instructor just to work with content area faculty full-time. Or it could pay for released time for several English faculty to do this (this released time pay really amounts to just the price of adjunct faculty to replace the English teacher in a course).

Being there when we are needed is one of the keys to teaching writing well. This project helps us accomplish this.
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