THE POLITICS OF RESPECT
Donald M. Murray
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We all know the condition of Freshman English: it is a course the administration resents having to offer and support; a course directed by someone — a part-timer (often a non-tenured faculty spouse) or a beginner — who knows the position has no professional future; a course taught by graduate students, part-time lecturers, or professors of literature who would rather teach something else (at a fine college recently I saw Freshman English referred to as "shit work" in a department memo); a course taken by students who failed to test out and have no hope that a thirteenth year of English will be better than the previous twelve.

But the situation is changing. As I travel in this country and Canada working with composition teachers I sometimes find a new, positive, professional climate surrounding Freshman English. Those who are responsible for this new attitude have learned the politics of respect.

We have built our program at the University of New Hampshire over the past ten years in what seemed to us a logical, professional manner. It has been the work of many people — Professors Thomas Carnicelli, Lester A. Fisher, Thomas Newkirk, hundreds of teaching assistants and part-time lecturers, as well as myself. Invited to look back at what we have done from the perspective of a department chairperson as well as a former director of Freshman English I think we instinctively built the program in four steps, each designed to achieve a new level of respect.

THE FIRST RESPECT

We all have our English Department meeting anecdotes. One of my first was when I heard a colleague say, "We are the defenders of the humanistic faith. We must withhold our knowledge until there is a generation worthy of it." Some smiled, but no one laughed. It was an eccentric speech, but it does articulate the unspoken attitude of too many Freshman English programs in which the students are terminally illiterate.

Of course, they are uneducated. That's why they are here. It is their job to learn and our job to teach. And to teach them we must respect their potential.

Those of us who teach by conference, meeting our students face to face every week, know that the greatest problem in teaching composition is not illiteracy, genetic stupidity, laziness, lack of motivation or total cranial emptiness. The greatest problem is lack of self-respect. Our students do not feel they have anything worth saying, and if they did they would not have the language skills to say it. Our first task, if we are to build a Freshman English program, is to respect our students' potential so they can begin to believe they have potential, and through the work with us earn self-respect. If we do not respect them they will not be able to do the work that will enable them to respect themselves.

And before anyone charges that this attitude is permissive, it should be made clear that a program based upon respect for the potential of students is far more intellectually demanding than a traditional program based on disrespect for students. Students in traditional programs constantly complain that Freshman English is not demanding, that it is boring and trivial. Of course it is. A faculty which thinks it is teaching a bunch of illiterates will, patronizingly, establish minimum standards. The present push for competency exams is not the result of lowered standards; it is more often the cause of lowered standards. A program which respects the students' potential and pushes the students to achieve it will have standards far higher than basic competency.

Here are some ways in which Freshman English can be given respect:

- Students pick the subjects for most papers so they can write from a position of authority, teaching the subject to the instructor as the instructor teaches them to write.
- Students are encouraged in conference and classroom workshops to describe their writing process — their problems and solutions — so their instructors and their classmates can get where they are and help them with the problems they are facing.
- Students use their own evolving writing as the primary text in the course, so they see how writing problems are defined and solved and so they learn that their writing is valued, worthy of careful attention and respect.
- Students help each other in conference and workshops so they discover that they can apply their experience and their intelligence to the solution of writing problems.
- Students are given the opportunity to describe the process that produced an effective piece of writing so they can teach themselves and each other what they have learned through the experience of successful writing.
- Students have the opportunity to revise and rewrite so they can make use of what they are learning from their writing, from seeing others' writing evolve, and from the responses to their drafts.

THE SECOND RESPECT

One of my colleagues says that most English Departments remind him of Czarist Russia. The aristocrats who teach advanced literature courses look down on the serfs, who till the land and support the whole effort. There really are two kinds of English Departments. In large English Departments at universities the serfs are graduate students who hope they will be able to mistreat other serfs in the future, and lecturers who do not even have that hope. In smaller colleges the English faculty must be their own serfs, usually teaching three sections of Freshman English — penance for one section of literature reward. In both cases the Freshman English instructors, like their students, lack self-respect.

If the faculty who actually teach Freshman English are going to be able to respect their students they must be respected themselves and respect themselves. If the faculty thinks it is doing remedial work that is beneath them, work that is without challenge or reward, without status or satisfaction, it will not teach an interesting or effective course. The first respect — respect for the students' potential — is dependent on the second respect — respect for the faculty's potential. The Freshman English staff
must be introduced to methods of teaching Freshman English that work. When they see writing improve, the teachers of Freshman English will begin to have respect for their students and respect for themselves as teachers. They will find that teaching English is both challenging and satisfying.

Here are some ways that a Freshman English staff can be given respect:

- The staff which teaches the course, not the aristocracy who taught the course in the past, develops the guidelines for the course so that those who carry out the policies of Freshman English have an opportunity to influence those policies.

- There are regular staff meetings at which everyone who teaches the course, regardless of academic rank, is treated with equal respect and status so that a community of colleagues develops.

- The staff meetings are planned by a committee that reflects the make-up of the Freshman English staff, giving appropriate representation to teaching assistants and part-time lecturers. Presentations of teaching techniques are made by those who are doing interesting teaching, regardless of academic rank or status.

- Freshman English staff members are urged to go to regional and national meetings and to participate in the programs, sharing their experiences with other professionals. They should receive financial support.

- Articles and books that reflect the latest ideas on the teaching of composition are made available so that Freshman English staff members are aware they are part of a professional community of scholars and teachers.

- Authorities on the teaching of composition are brought in so that the entire staff becomes familiar with the academic community of which they are a part.

- Staff members are encouraged to do research in the teaching of composition and to publish articles in this discipline.

- A diversity of approaches to teaching Freshman English is encouraged within the guidelines established by the community as a whole, so that staff members know that their own experience and ideas are respected.

THE THIRD RESPECT

The pattern comes clear. If those who direct Freshman English are going to be able to give respect to their staff, and therefore the staff to the students, then the director of Freshman English must command the respect of his or her peers. The director of Freshman English must have professional self-respect within the academic community.

The director of Freshman English faces an enormous task. A staff, often part-time or beginning, must be recruited, oriented, developed, and supervised. A curriculum must be developed that can make it possible for a diverse faculty to teach a broad spectrum of students with many writing and reading problems.

I know many directors of Freshman English who are exploited part-timers, faculty spouses, non-tenured instructors, beginning assistant professors, and by-passed, terminal associate professors who do an astonishing job that is innovative and responsible for much less money than they would earn if they were not academic outcasts. But if we are to have stable and effective Freshman English programs over a considerable period of time then we must not have an exploited Freshman English director, but a tenured, senior faculty member who is respected and rewarded for an important academic responsibility.

Here are some ways the director of Freshman English can be given respect:

- The academic reward system must take into account success in teaching Freshman composition, effective administration of Freshman composition, and scholarship in the field of composition theory in awarding tenure, promotion, and raises. The work done in Freshman English must count not only as a reward for accomplishment but also as a statement that Freshman English is valued as a legitimate academic activity.

- The director of Freshman English must chair whatever group sets the policies for Freshman English. The person in charge of Freshman English must be treated as an authority on how the course should be taught.

- The director of Freshman English must have the final say on who is selected to teach in the course and to participate in decisions on teaching conditions and rewards.

- The director of Freshman English should be encouraged to develop graduate courses, workshops, and programs in the teaching of composition, so that the experience of the director is passed on to other composition teachers in public schools and other colleges in the area. The director of Freshman English is, after all, a teacher of teachers and should be given an opportunity to extend this ability and to be rewarded for it.

- The director of Freshman English must receive the support essential for participation in regional and national meetings of composition teachers. The person in charge of Freshman English must feel part of a professional community and be aware of what is going on in this profession.

THE FOURTH RESPECT

Everyone is, of course, an expert on how Freshman English should be taught. Professors of astronomy and agronomy, coaches of football and field hockey, alumni directors and deans, presidents and students, trustees and taxpayers, newspaper editors and state legislators, as well as teachers of literature all believe they know how Freshman English should be taught. It is the responsibility of the director of Freshman English to demand the same respect from the academic community accorded other disciplines.

This can be done if the program respects itself, if the students are treated with respect and learn to write, if the instructors are treated with respect and know they can teach writing, if the

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Preference will be given to brief articles (5-10 pages), but longer pieces of particular merit are welcome. FEN publishes articles having to do with the teaching of writing and such related topics as rhetorical theory, linguistics, etc.

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director of Freshman English is treated with respect and knows
he or she is a member of a legitimate academic discipline.

All this, of course, is easier to propose than to accomplish. To
paraphrase Tolstoy, every Freshman English program is unhappy
in its own way, and although the discipline of rhetoric is hardly
new, we do have to fight continually for recognition in the mod-
ern world. Our university has a new president, one almost new
and two new vice-presidents. Our dean is not yet on the scene.
A university committee is investigating general education,
including Freshman English. A Master Plan Commission is
reviewing every program and making a master plan. We will
have to educate many people to what we are doing, how we are
doing it, how well we are doing it, and why we are doing it.

We are able, however, to take a positive, aggressive stance,
because our instructors respect the potential of our students.
Those instructors, in turn, are respected for the work they are
doing and the quality of that work. Some are initiated and some
are experienced, but we all belong to an academic discipline that
has its own goals, standards, theoretical base, and research goals.
We respect ourselves because we know the importance of our
work and we are confident in our ability to do it. We know that
we are part of an international community of teachers and schol-
ars dedicated to understanding the writing process and making
that process available to our students.

There are many of us now in this situation in colleges and uni-
versities across the country and there will be more, for an
increasing amount of work in Freshman English is based on a
solid intellectual base of theory and research. And in our dis-

cipline, teaching methodology is integrated with theory and
research. Our research and scholarship inspires our teaching, and
our teaching inspires our research and scholarship. We are part of
an exciting and stimulating discipline, and, therefore, in a
good position to command the respect of our colleagues within
the academic community and the general public upon which the
academic community depends.

Freshman English is not a burden but an opportunity if we
practice all levels of the politics of respect.

FROM THE EDITOR

After nine years of editing PEN, I'm taking a vacation.
For the next three issues, through Winter, '81/82, Robert
Mayberry, TCU's new Director of Freshman English, will
serve as Acting Editor. He is already approaching his edi-
torial duties with enthusiasm and imagination. And each
day I shall gleefully hand over to him the stack of manu-
scripts that arrive, although I'll continue to handle the
"business" end of our operation: advertising, subscrip-
tions, etc.

These last nine years have been exciting for me, but one
needs some time away from even the most interesting jobs,
time to read, write, and—above all—think.

G. T.

TEACHING WRITING, TEACHING
LITERATURE: THE PLAGUE
ON BOTH HOUSES

William E. Coles, Jr.
University of Pittsburgh

Even when I make the necessary allowances for the dexterity of
my own academic hypocrisy, it is still astonishing to me that I,
someone associated primarily with the teaching of writing at the
college level, should express the kind of astonishment I sometimes
do at the hostility I experience from certain of my colleagues who
are associated primarily with the teaching of literature. I don't mean
to suggest that I think the hostility isn't really there or that teachers
of writing as a group make more of it than they should.

It's there all right. And as former Director of Composition at a
large, state-affiliated university I have had enough destructive
encounters with the more virulent forms it can take to know full
well how poisoning it can be.

I mean only that I know better, that I'd better know better, than
to pretend to the kind of astonishment at the fact of the hostility
that I sometimes do—as though I'd never heard of the Fall of Man
or just dropped into the world I'm in from a Christmas tree—par-
cularly when I know perfectly well that there's hostility and there's
hostility. Or more exactly, when I believe (as I do) that there's a
legitimate way in which the recently increased attention to the

teaching of writing at the college level can be viewed with suspicion
just as there is an illegitimate way of questioning exactly the same
thing. This is not to say that those at the giving end are always
conscious of the distinction—most of the time in fact they are not
—or that at the receiving end, when the case in point is something
like promotion or tenure, the fact that a distinction can be made
always matters. But it is to say that I'd better know better than to
pretend there aren't any distinctions to be made, in part for purely
private reasons, but for professional ones as well. We are now, those
of us associated with the teaching of writing at the college level, in
the position of having had greatness, or at least the opportunity for
it, thrust upon us. It isn't going to last forever. We cannot, there-
fore, lose any chance in the meantime to turn what we are doing
into what will be worth preserving as an image of the best we can
do with the most we know. And though it may seem strange to say
so, I believe that making some distinctions about the hostility we
sometimes experience from some of our colleagues can be the occa-
sion for just this kind of refinement.

Take the central charge in which the hostility seems rooted, or at
least on which it is hung—the charge, sometimes stated openly
but usually implied, that we, teachers of writing, and what we do,
are non-literary. This is a hard accusation to come to terms with,
not just because 'non-literary,' particularly at the level of implica-
tion, can be made to mean virtually anything anyone chooses to
make it mean, but because, as I have already suggested, the inten-
sity of feeling that attends it, and that it provokes, can easily
obscure the fact that there is a way in which the charge matters
and is worth being concerned about, and a way in which it doesn't and
isn't—not for all the evil, my use of this word is not extravagant,
that may be done in its name. I do not say, you will notice, that in
its illegitimate form the charge is not worth paying attention to. I
grant that one must learn to protect one's self, that the ideal is to
survive the noisomeness of academic infighting as something,
as somebody. I mean only that there is no decent way, at least I have
never found one, of being concerned about or of fighting, a charge
that is not at all what it pretends to be, that is an attitude finally rather than an argument, and that as an attitude is calling for something quite different from the counter-argument or explanation it would seem to be demanding. Here’s its paradigm, a call to the kind of battle that everybody loses the moment somebody wins:

Composition teachers are paid less for what they do as teachers than for who they are. Who they are is in turn decided almost entirely by ‘publications’ of which the only judges deemed competent are other members of their particular specialty. The reader will recognize this as an aged issue that has been much discussed in the past, but the tired fact remains that the scarcity of jobs for college teachers has driven the frenzy for learned books, monographs, articles, bibliographies and “scholarly editions” of texts on rhetoric even wider and deeper into the profession. . . .

If this behavior prevailed among Egyptologists at private institutions, it would be of no concern to the public. But what is at issue is the transmission of literacy and literary culture within our society. And while those skills and values appear to many observers to be going the way of sand painting, the composition segment of academia indulges itself even more than ever in hobbyhorse ‘research’ of a kind that used to be done primarily by petty Church of England vicars when it was too rainy for croquet. . . .

What is the point of all this stuff besides advancing the careers of the people who write it? Except for a veneer of truly fine and intellectually adventurous work, it is in the main devoted to two topics: the justification of its own existence and what Susan Sonntag calls “hopeful guesses about the improving value of gimmicks.”—Although composition theorists and researchers, like political scientists, sometimes compete for the honorable designation of being ‘scientific,’ almost no one can agree that genuine progress has been made. In the sense of generating falsifiable hypotheses which may be tested against the evidence, ordinary composition scholarship is about as ‘scientific’ as the weather prediction in *The Farmer’s Almanac.*

The tone and manner of the passage is familiar. The details of its context are easily enough filled in. In spite of our “rhetoric of transcendence very nearly resembling that of a priestly sect,” the writer goes on to say, teachers of composition don’t really have a discipline. In fact, to judge from what we do as well as from what we are not doing, “a reasonable case can be made” for the proposition that the “pedantry and illiteracy of composition teachers” are between them contributing as heavily as any other factors to the declining prestige of imaginative literature.” Hence funding should “be cut off for [our] useless and superfluous ‘scholarly’ publishing ventures.” And on and on, assertion piling into assertion, bias slouching to bias. It’s the kind of irresponsible writing that teachers of composition have to spend a lot of time working on with their students.

But my purpose in quoting what I have is other than to set myself up with an easy target that sets up easy targets. For what I am quoting is not really the utterance of some second-rate literary sensibility speaking for what has been called the traditional power structure of an English Department against the territorial encroachments of what has the temerity to call itself the Discipline of Composition. Not at all. Instead of being directed against teachers and the teaching of writing at colleges and universities, those sentences, as they were originally written by Gene Lyons in an article called “The Higher Illiteracy: On the Prejudice Against Teaching College Students to Write” published in *Harper’s,* September, 1976, were written to denigrate the way Lyons says literature is studied at colleges and universities, what he says literary scholarship has turned into. (I have changed only nouns in the long passage; the shorter quotations, except for the material in brackets, I have not altered at all.) Thus in Lyons’ piece it is literary academics who are said to indulge themselves “more than ever in hobbyhorse ‘research,’ literary academics that Lyons accuses of being “as self-righteous as Henry David Thoreau.” It is literary people, he says sniggeringly, who “will fight like Proverbial Turks to be allowed to teach Moby Dick or The Dunciad for twenty consecutive semesters” — though why “is beyond [his] power to conceive.” And the implication of this “idolatry,” he concludes, is that “American students are not learning to write because nobody bothers to teach them how. . . . English professors as a group,” in fact, “pay almost no attention at all to such mundane topics as literate writing. If they have the misfortune to get stuck in a school that forces them to teach that horror beyond contemplation, freshman composition, they teach it against their will.” In a nutshell: “The subject at hand is literacy, for which English departments presumably bear direct responsibility.” But “the business of the American English department is not the teaching of literacy; it is the worship of literature.” Here’s One of Our Own ostensibly. A Daniel come to judgment, carving it out of the Power Structure, nearest the heart.

But we don’t have to carry very long to see that indeed there is something else, namely, the way Lyons’ conception of literature and what he imagines is involved in the study of it is both the cause and effect of his conception of writing and what he thinks is involved in the teaching of that. Not for a minute does he imagine that the enterprise could or should be other than menial or other than dull. But since it is also easy, “that which any literate person with some training ought to be able to do,” and by implication important (though Lyons never gets around to saying just how), those teachers of English who are not now teaching students to write (and who are in consequence “living one of the most personally and socially destructive forms of life known to middle-class man”) ought to be made to do it, “as a job, a useful social task which they agree to perform for money.” Otherwise, exterminate the brutes.

It is not exactly a new idea. It’s not as though it hasn’t been tried either. For not only is Lyons’ way of defining what it means to be able to read and write that which more than anything else could be said to have led to the literacy crisis, it is still the most popular way of imagining how the crisis ought to be met and dealt with. And thank you very much but we’ve had some — a bellyful as a matter of fact — with what has been done in the name of Basics, of Minimum Essentials, of Proficiency Testing. The same snaky circularity is at the bottom of all the arguments that would see such answers as a panacea just as it is at the bottom of what Lyons is suggesting will minister to minds diseased. Like the famous *Newsweek* piece on which he is riding, Lyons is not concerned with literacy as a concept, not really; he does not in fact deal with the issue at all. And yet it raises the issue with the kind of fireworks that creates the illusion that he is dealing with literacy, and as a problem, and as a problem to which the solution is easy because it is so mechanically simple. What Lyons means by literacy is exactly what *Newsweek* means by mechanical correctness, knowing the four rules for the comma and how to apply them, being able to spell acceptably, and so forth. What he means by writing is communication, a matter of product rather than process, the simple mechanical transfer of information which students can be trained to manage in the same way they can be taught to use adding machines or learn to pour concrete. Hence the activity of writing for Lyons is totally covered.
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by the use of a term like "skill." Writing itself is a tool. Or just a tool.

Given such definitions, of course, the solution to the problem of literacy is simple. But to conceive as Lyons does of the ability to write as involving no more than that which it is possible to train stupid people to teach well is to imagine that education is the same thing as a process of conditioning. "We know in a vague way," Roger Sale says in On Writing, "that certain skills in writing are important for a man to function in many daily activities that keep the world going, and without which things would probably fall apart. We know also that to teach these skills as though they were all a man had to know to be educated is a criminal act because to be educated is not simply to be able to function." But Lyons does not know this, or is pretending not to know it, which as I have said is both the cause and the effect of the job on literary scholarship, indeed on literature itself, that he does. Given Lyons' view of writing as that which just anybody can be taught to teach to just anybody, the automatic product of a process equally automatic, it is not to be expected he would see any more of any more significance in literary studies than is involved in the working of a crossword puzzle. Of course it is going to be "beyond his power to conceive" how anyone could care enough about literature to be willing to fight for a chance to teach it. In the world of such a sensibility, commitment is never any more than an elaborate form of compulsion, reverence never imaginable as other than a delusion of the ego. Of course all will look yellow to that kind of jaundiced I.

The same plague, I would argue, infects those whose view of the teaching of writing as non-literary is as passionately hostile, as maliciously indiscriminate as is Lyons' view of literary studies. And, I would also argue, just as Lyons' attack on the teaching of literature is based on at the same time it breeds a simple-minded notion of writing, the illegitimate forms of the attacks made on the teaching of writing are traceable ultimately to a simple-minded notion of literature. Rarely, very rarely in my experience, is an illegitimate attack on the teaching of writing as non-literary leveled by anyone who has made anything like a life with the teaching of literature, by anyone, that is, who both likes and understands it, and who has a record that says so. The real animosity I felt to what I was doing as Director of Composition did not come from people like the editor of the Harvard edition of The Papers of William Lloyd Garrison or from the dedicated medievalists I have had the privilege of working with. It didn't come either from those who were actually publishing in PMLA, all of them people who know nine ways to Sunday of saying how she's a hoary old mother, but who know also that she's not at the top of the line for nothing. No. It was rather from those whose Lyons-like manner is described in the December, 1980 issue of College English by Michael West, my colleague and a literary man if there ever was one, in his response to a series of attacks made on him for having dared to suggest that perhaps not all scholarly journals (like all composition programs) are equal in quality. At the conclusion of his essay West uses what such people are unable to do as writers as a way of talking about their relationship to literature:

Is good writing too much to ask from this learned profession, all of whose members can speak their mother tongue, many of whom can read it, and some of whom can even use it to pen protests about being underpaid? Probably. For in truth, English studies seem to be populated nowadays by rather pitiful gogues, preening themselves ridiculously on their denatured PhDs and incapable for the most part of running a corner candy store profitably. Looking for an easy major, they stumbled upon English, then drifted into the "profession" because it promised to reward them handsome for doing what more energetic people do for fun, i.e., read stories, listen to poems, go to movies, dabble in politics. Scorning basely to mend comma splices, to dignify their activity they invent competing critical jargons and legions of scholarly journals to expound them, thus suggesting that reading literature is a high and holy mystery not amenable to common sense. These devices more or less successfully conceal the imbecility of their enterprise from the laity who fund them, but not from their university colleagues nor, in the midnight watches, from themselves. Bound together by few shared assumptions, they are thus united mainly by the cold inner fear that someone from a real discipline armed with genuine intellectual authority may blunder into their gambols and expose to the world how little some of them know about English or anything else. Nicht wahr?

Ja wohl. Und "Frisch weht der Wind/ Der Heimat zu."

Maybe all I mean in saying that I think there's a legitimate way in which the recently increased attention to the teaching of writing at the college level may be regarded with suspicion, that there's a legitimate sense in which composition teachers, composition courses and programs, can be judged as non-literary and found wanting, maybe all I mean by this is that there are some things about our discipline that I find myself suspicious of, that there are ways, or rather that there is a central way in which I find much of the teaching of writing at the college level dangerously non-literary. And maybe this has to do with only my own history, with how I became a teacher of writing, beginning with my relatively unsophisticated, perhaps primitively wrong-headed reasons for getting into the field of English studies to begin with.

I was raised together with three younger brothers in a couple of small New Jersey towns that I spent the first eighteen years of my life believing weren't places. I was the first member of my family to drift to college, Lehigh University, where, through discovering that no one could tell a good student from a hard-working imposter, I found a way, first as an engineer and ultimately as an English major, to stop drifting. I don't say that Haddonfield and Cranford became places then, but they began to swim into some kind of focus. Under the influence of a lot of things, a couple of my teachers mainly, the way they made me see the stuff they made me read, I became someone with the kind of present from which it was possible to begin to invent my past. I'd been introduced, and without my even being aware of it, to the only power it makes any sense for anyone to have. Literature, I believed, someone's way of becoming somebody on the basis of how he or she put the world together with words, was a way of making sense of life. The study of literature, I believed, was a way of making sense of various ways of making sense of life. I went to literature then to find a way of living through the study of the work of people I was convinced knew things that I didn't. They were to light the way. They were to light my way for me. These assumptions lay far too deep for me to experience as only assumptions. In less than a year they had become as much a part of what I drew on to get through a day as breathing.

Under the influence of the students of F. O. Matthiessen and George Lyman Kittredge in graduate school, these assumptions at first took only more complicated forms. I was working, after all, with the Keepers of the Flame. Leonard Dean, who for me was indistinguishable from the Shakespeare he taught. Joseph Sommers, from whom I got a footnote. R. W. Stallman
vide students with a way of seeing how getting better at writing could have something in it for them, there was no philosophy in them, either homespun or highdown, for teachers to become aware of and give to students, for students to become aware of and give back to teachers. The assignments, individually as well as in a set, were not therefore to be seen as an argument. They were arranged and phrased as they were, in fact, precisely to make impossible the discovery in them of anything like a master plan. The real continuity of the assignments, their real meaning, was to be created, and would for this reason be different for different teachers and students as well as differently come by. And it was this continuity, this meaning, which in expressing one's understanding of himself as a language user would express also what the individual teacher, the individual student, had made his experience with the subject of composition mean. That was the course. There were no books, not even a handbook. There were only those damned assignments, the students' papers, and someone called a teacher who was supposed to make it all make sense.

My panic was not immediately indescribable only because what little I could understand of such talk and the procedures it outlined of course I did not believe. I didn't have much trouble working out that the course wasn't going to be one in ways of Making the Theme. That's about all I knew for sure. That and the fact that class started Monday. I took the set of assignments and went to see the one person in the Department I knew. He'd been at Amherst a year.

"What the hell is all this anyway?" I asked him.

"They're the assignments for the course. They're pretty good this year too."

"Right. I mean what's this kind of thing?" and I turned to Assignment 10.

But sometimes you come upon another kind of appeal, an appeal for some other kind of knowing. Look at the following quotations:

Give me a sentence which no intelligence can understand.
There must be a kind of life and palpitation to it, and under its words a kind of blood must circulate forever.

In literature it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is only another name for tameness. It is the untamed, uncivilized, free, and wild thinking in Hamlet, in the Iliad, and in all scriptures and mythologies that delight us—not learned in the schools, not refined and polished by art. A truly good book is something as wildly natural and primitive, mysterious and marvelous, ambrosial and fertile, as a fungus or a lichen. Suppose the muskrat or the beaver were to turn his views (sic) to literature, what fresh views of nature would be present! The fault of our books and other deeds is that they are too humane. I want something speaking in some measure to the condition of muskrats and skunk-cabbage as well as of men, not merely to a pining and complaining coterie of philanthropists.

What do you make of this extraordinary talk? What do you suppose Thoreau means? What can this "wildness" be? What is "ambrosial" about a lichen, for example? What would a skunk-cabbage's "view" be, or a muskrat's? Why is it — whatever this view may be — opposed to the
philanthropist's? Are the muskrat and the philanthropist at odds?

State in your own words what Thoreau is talking about, what it is he seems to stand for according to your way of thinking.

Do you hear such talk in your life at Amherst College?

How do you account for your answer to this question?

"The notionalist of the quotations, you mean? Well, that's all taken care of with the terms of the assignment, isn't it?"

"I mean what's the goddamn topic? What are the kids supposed to say? What are we after?"

"Oh, I see," he said. And he smiled. "You mean you want a teacher's manual. Look, what would we be after with Lycidas? What would the students be supposed to say about Middlemarch? What are you supposed to say about it?"

"This isn't Lycidas." I was getting angry.

"No? Look at it a while. What would you have to know to put those two quotations together the way he does? He didn't just find them along side each other in a concordance, you know. See if you can catch Thoreau's tone better than he does in 'Are the muskrat and the philanthropist at odds?' In fact, see if you can change anything in the way the assignment's put together, right down to how it's paragraphed, without losing something."

"So what the hell. So it's literary. So he's literary. So we're asking students to be literary, is that it?"

"You bet it's literary, but not the way you mean. This is the only assignment in the sequence that uses anything from literature. Did you notice that?"

I had. That's why I'd singled it out. The other things in the sequence I'd found totally bewildering: a section from a geology textbook, snippets from diaries, a paragraph on mathematics, a road map, excerpts from letters, a word game, a puzzle, lots of student papers.

"Yes, well it's not literary because he uses literature in the course. In fact he avoids doing that if he can. What he wants to do is to take a literary look at what's non-literary. That's how we read the students' writing too, as though it were literature. It's the approach that's literary, how he puts things together. Look at the way that assignment links at the start with assignments that come before it. Look at the way he puts 'ambrosial' with 'lichen', just the right opposition, isn't it? But most of all, look at how he moves from that talk about skunk cabbages and muskrats to what a college is, to what education is, so that he makes working to understand literature a way of coming to understand an educational institution, which becomes in turn a way of understanding education, which can lead to a way of understanding one's self. That's where he's headed with the sequence, remember, toward forcing students to define not Amherst but themselves as students by defining Amherst; and toward their defining what education is and isn't, can and can't be, in doing that; and finally toward their defining the sorts of lives they want to have as people by doing that. Frame embracing frame embracing frame, see? All he's asking them to do in the course is to see in how they use language a way of taking responsibility for the shapes of their lives. That's all. You bet it's literary.

"This assignment is only a step on the way to all that of course, but like all the other assignments and like the movement of the sequence as a whole, it's a step in which he's showing students that the way one does that is by being in a certain sense literary, by — what did Eliot say? — amalgamating disparate experience, combining things into new wholes. That's why he has students see things both as themselves but metaphorically too, in terms of other things. It's why he pushes them constantly with fresh perspectives — that's all the assignments are really, the offering of new perspectives — pushes them into making new combinations of things for themselves. And that's the point of it, what they put together for themselves, see? Just the way he's constructed this assignment for himself. He's giving them something to shoot for rather than something to imitate. 'Here you see this! You see how I've made my mind move for me! You do that for you.' You bet it's literary. In fact he's asking students to see themselves as literary artists, as makers, composers — bad literary artists maybe, simple-minded composers the way anybody at 17 is, but simple-minded composers that don't have to stay that way, that their using language well is a way out of. So by giving students a way of seeing how it makes a difference to use language well he gives them a reason to work at trying to do that. Who do you become on the basis of how you put the world together — here and here, and with as many tries as you want? That's the question he won't let students get away from. That's the question he keeps insisting they have to keep asking themselves. That's the subject of the course. And you bet it's literary. That's what literature is all about, isn't it?"

That one conversation was really many, or rather what I in my literary way have distilled from the many conversations I had about an approach to the teaching of writing that enabled me to find myself as a teacher. It took me five years to come to my own terms with the terms of it. I'd never have done it had there been an alternative of course — nor any more than my students work very hard at what it does them any real good to work at with writing unless I find ways of making it impossible for them to do otherwise.

I was able to finish my thesis after that five years though, after five years of arranging notecards in piles I could have measured with a yardstick. I left the tail of the Peacock intact in it too, in part by ripping up the 200 pages of feathered belts and hatbands I'd already woven and starting over. My new vision of Peacock was of a writer writing. I saw him finally as a novelist of styles, holding the ultimate senselessness of the world at bay (and not incidentally himself together) in and with the various sorts of ordering sentences he rammed, lightening-like, through the chaos of experience.

I was at Case Institute of Technology then, doing the same thing for myself (without realizing it) in my work with science majors. I was working alone, teaching writing of course, and by choice, but with a gladness I hadn't known since I'd first discovered books. I was teaching writing as a literary art, you bet, and doing what I could to shape the self-consolidation attending the process into an invitation, into the demand, that my students do the same thing for themselves in their work with me. It was that as well as my work with the Peacock, what I'd seen in what it could signify to make the making of literature into a way of finding a way to live, that brought me to a recognition of where I was.

The occasion was two pieces of prose by Charles Darwin: one literature, the other — I'll play it safe here — a statement about someone's relation to it. "In one respect," Darwin writes in his Autobiography

my mind has changed during the last twenty or thirty years. Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds, such as the works of Milton, Gray, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare, especially in the historical plays. I have also said that formerly pictures gave me considerable, and
music very great, delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry; I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also almost lost my taste for pictures or music. Music generally sets me thinking too energetically on what I have been at work on, instead of giving me pleasure. I retain some taste for fine scenery, but it does not cause me the exquisite delight which it formerly did.

I was less tempted to beg a penny for the old guy than I might have been, however, when I saw this passage in the context of another that Darwin wrote. There is no way of knowing for sure what is cause here and what is effect—or indeed whether it is possible to establish such a relationship between the two passages at all. But it is a matter of record that at about “the age of thirty,” at about the same time, that is, that Darwin says his delight in art began to diminish, he had already formulated the theory of evolution detailed in Origin of Species and capsulated in the work’s final paragraph:

It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth and Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by Reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the conditions of life, and from use and disuse: a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the creator into a few forms, or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.

The argument for that’s being literature is in the way its sentences fuse a scientist’s seeing with a poet’s seeing. Exposition becomes vision, a gathering limned in the very shape of Darwin’s prose, where all separateness moves to unity; where what appears diverse and tangled turns out to be interconnected, complexly dependent. Hence one thing “leads to” another, which, in its turn, has “a consequence,” which then “entails” something else; a law called “Inheritance” is almost implied by another law called “Reproduction”; from one phenomenon (“the war of nature”) metamorphized into another (“famine and death”) a still different phenomenon “directly follows.” Similarly, the metaphoric transformation of a “tangled bank” into an ordered world simultaneously links the terrestrial with the cosmic, the beginning of time with infinity, the sensuous with the abstract, variety with oneness, death with life. The cycles loop to embrace each other like Möbius curves; the logical, the metaphorical, the aesthetic, the scientific, the spiritual in becoming one also become poetic vision. The voice of Darwin is in fact the voice of a poet, which, throughout the passage, from the serene humility of “It is interesting” to the liturgical reverence of “from so sim-
THE WRITING PROGRAM DIRECTOR IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT POWER STRUCTURE

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People who write on subjects like this one ought to establish, or at least qualify, their credentials at the outset, hence the disclaimer which follows. I have never been a writing program director. However, I assisted in the administration of the writing program in Wisconsin's Department of Integrated Liberal Studies and in the general freshman programs at the University of Illinois and Kansas State. I visited classes, talked about specific problems with TA's, and occasionally led staff meetings on assigning and grading papers. But I was never involved in the political aspects of the job. I was close to those who were, however, and had ample opportunity to observe their status in the departments in which I served.

There are other factors in my background which I think worth noting. Although I took what we would today regard as a fairly conventional literary M.A. and Ph.D., I was always more interested in rhetoric and composition than in literature. Unlike most graduate students of my era who served under people who all too often got the "writing program job" because the department leadership felt they couldn't do anything else, I served my apprenticeship under two of the most knowledgeable composition men in the country. At the University of Kansas, where I first taught, the director was Albert Kitzhaber, who knew more than any individual of his era about the origins of freshman composition programs in this country. At the University of Wisconsin I taught under Robert Pooley, a former NCTE president, author of a fine book on English usage, and the senior editor of a number of texts used in high schools. Both Kitzhaber and Pooley were enlightened men, putting emphasis on the larger social aspects of instruction in rhetoric and delegating superficial mechanical correctness to a position of subordinate importance.

Kitzhaber and Pooley, however, offer contrasts in status because when I knew them their age, rank, and positions were very different. Kitzhaber had come to the University of Kansas a year before completing his doctoral dissertation. My understanding was that KU hired him precisely because they had finally decided that the person running the writing program ought to be someone with expertise in composition. It was a good reason for hiring Kitzhaber, and he certainly was the right person, but I never felt — and these are only the impressions of an immature graduate student who was more interested in playing the violin than in graduate study in English or department politics — that other people in the department, particularly the literary specialists who were his contemporaries in age and rank, ever accepted him as an equal. When he succeeded in getting grading sessions which the entire department — full professors to graduate students — had to attend, many were resentful and angry because they thought this activity was essentially trivial and a burden on time they wished to spend in research. Mr. Pooley, on the other hand, was the Director of the entire Integrated Liberal Studies program, and as such had the admiration and respect of his university colleagues — in science, history, and classics — who participated in it. However, I am quite sure that most of my graduate student contemporaries at Wisconsin, who got their professional education from Helen White, Roberto Quintana, Merit Hughes, Frederick Hoffman, Henry Pochmann, Harry Clark, Madeleine Donan and the rest of the Wisconsin staff, never heard of Robert Pooley. Furthermore, although he held professorial rank in the department, Mr. Pooley was not part of the group which rotated to the chair there, and I doubt that he would have been considered for that position.

My point is simply this. Until very recently, anyone whose primary responsibility in an English department was the writing program was a second-class citizen. We all knew this, but we did not know the reasons why. I think I am beginning to understand them better now, and I will summarize them briefly, not as a digression but as background for the somewhat changed conditions which prevail now.

Kitzhaber, noting the decline of the classical rhetorical tradition in the late eighteenth century, then the subsequent decline of the tradition which supplanted it for a century — rhetoric as defined in the works of Blair, Campbell, and Whately — says that in the late nineteenth century the question was "what sort of approach to rhetoric would accommodate itself to the new attitude that regarded education as a practical fitting for life in modern industrial society?"

The answer to this question took many forms as rhetoricians groped to find a central attitude on which to found a new rhetoric. The first solution proposed was simple surgery: cut away the catalogs of emotions, the long lists of figures of speech, the disquisitions on the Sublime and the Pathetic — features that now seemed anachronistic — and thus reduce rhetorical theory to its essentials without disturbing its basic character. This tendency culminated in Barrett Wendell's formula Unity-Coherence-Emphasis, which was designed to replace sets of injunctions that in earlier texts had covered scores of pages. Another solution was to make rhetoric 'practical.' In its ultimate form, this attitude resulted in the 'daily theme;' constant practice and little or no theory. Other men thought rhetoric could be rejuvenated by aligning it more closely with the popular new study of English literature — either through rhetorical analysis of masterpieces or through wide reading in good literature apart from any rhetorical injunctions. Bain's 'forms of discourse' were welcomed as devices around which rhetorical instruction could be centered. Scott and Denney proposed the paragraph as the central prose unit, mastery of which would lead to mastery of most other details of composition. For a brief time the conception of writing as communication filling social needs received some support. Running beneath all these theories, however, and stronger than any of them, was the doctrine of mechanical correctness.

A few of these devices and theories were fruitful; most were not. Each was advanced by its originator in full confidence that it was the right and only answer to the problem that rhetoric faced: how to become once more a vital discipline, in step with the age. The trouble was that these men lacked a perspective comprehensive enough to see rhetoric in all its ramifications. The solutions they proposed were partial, so that after 1880 American rhetorical theory splintered into many small separate emphases, each having its day of popularity and its enthusiastic supporters, but none being broad enough to furnish the basis for a significant new tradition. The solitary exception was Fred Newton Scott, who tried to create a new system of rhetorical theory drawing on the data of experimental psychology and linguistics. Scott's approach was fundamental, and, had it become popular, would have made the subsequent history of rhetorical theory far different from what it actually was. But Scott was ahead of his time. The new psychology, offering so many opportunities for enriching rhetorical theory, was not widely enough understood for its bearing on rhetoric to be appreciated. The same may be said of linguistics. Therefore, when the clamor aroused by the Harvard Reports reached its height (reports of 1892, 1893, and 1897 from the Committee on Composition to the Board of Overseers; they focused on mechanical deficiencies in the writing
of students' entrance examinations to Harvard) Scott's ideas were smothered by the demand for superficial correctness. Kitzhaber ("Rhetoric in American Colleges: 1850-1900," doc. diss., University of Washington, 1953, 347.)

Kitzhaber's description of what happened to the study of rhetoric is especially important because, as rhetoric became more focused on matters of usage and mechanical correctness, and as the Harvard group was influential in giving it this character and in spreading this perception of it, the literature program at Harvard, under the leadership of Francis Child and George Lyman Kittredge, was acquiring new territory and vastly improved status. The result was that the rhetoric program there became more and more the property of second-raters; the literature program became more and more the domain of the prestigious. Only at Michigan, where Scott had created a separate Department of Rhetoric, did the latter enjoy equal status with the English department. After Scott's retirement in 1927, the two departments were merged at Michigan, an event which took place with much bitterness over several years. Significantly, those who took the lead in attempting to force this merger, particularly O. J. Campbell, were Harvard men. And their perception of rhetoric was quite obvious to the men in Michigan's Rhetoric Department. In a letter from Harold Scott to F. N. Scott, on leave during the 1923-24 academic year, the former tells his leader that "the new blood in that department [English — reference is to Campbell, James Holly Hanford, and Louis Bredvold], all outsiders, have really got the whip hand there. They believe that rhetoric and literature should be taught together, because they were taught together in the schools from which they came. They believe further that, because they have always put rhetoric in second place, it rightfully belongs in second place."*

My point is that, historically, rhetoric and composition have been the refuge of second-raters because that is the perception of the discipline by those, particularly from Harvard, who were leaders in the profession.

Further exacerbating the problem historically, as my own department head has pointed out, is that those entering the profession were accepted for graduate work in English because of their interest in and demonstrated ability to read and analyze literature. Their subsistence came, very often, from the teaching of composition classes which, for reasons I have already suggested, were generally intellectually impoverished and dreary. Thus, the budding professional in our field, from the beginning of his or her work, came to view work in composition and all those associated with it as peon work done by peons as a means of saving the state money. Small wonder then that writing programs and writing program directors were perceived as second-class citizens.

But that has changed somewhat in the past five years. We all are perfectly aware of the depressed job market for literary specialists. We are also painfully aware of declining enrollments in literature classes. The freshman composition course is now the single most important economic factor in a department's survival. Thus, the supervisor of that program is vitally important to a department's health and to the way it is perceived on campus and by the public it serves. I do not think that those who have a life-long commitment to studies in literature really think differently about the intellectual status of the writing program or its director; many cannot think differently because the condition has gone on too long and is too deep. Of such people, one of my colleagues remarks, somewhat cruelly, "Death is our ally." That seems a bit extreme to me. At any rate some very interesting work is now going on in composition, and it is not easy for even the most hardheaded anti-composition person to disregard the work of people like Richard Young, Ed Corbett, Gary Tate, Ross Winterowd, Janet Emig, James Kinner, Winston Weathers, Win Horner, and Charles Cooper. Composition research is becoming much more sophisticated than it was in the past, and as more and more of our better people gravitate to it, the prestige that goes with it will increase. But for now, I suspect that any political advantages that the writing program director enjoys are caused by economic not intellectual factors.

The respect that a writing program director has in a department is not difficult to test. I would ask those questions of anyone attempting to determine the status of that person in his or her department: (1) does the WPD get rewarded for publications in composition and service with salary increases and promotions commensurate with those of other members of the department; (2) does the WPD have an influential voice in decisions affecting the tenure, promotion, and salaries of his colleagues; (3) is the WPD an influential voice in significant changes in the department's curriculum; (4) how highly do department members, particularly the department leadership, value publications on composition topics in such journals as College English and College Composition and Communication; (5) is the composition person one who has had to prove him/herself with publications in literature as well as in composition?

In the absence of anything resembling trustworthy data (and how one acquires data which reflect honest attitudes on this topic is a very difficult task), I am forced to say that I am uncertain about the place of the writing program director in the current English department's power structure. My guesses are these: in departments where power is vested in individuals who find their professional identity primarily in the Modern Language Association and who, in some cases, may never have heard of the National Council of Teachers of English or the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the writing program director has no place in the department's power structure. In those departments now served by a younger generation which, even if its primary loyalties are to the MLA, is aware of and sympathetic to the professional interests of those affiliated with NCTE and CCC, the writing program director is an active participant in the department's inner circles. I count my own department as one of these, an excellent nineteenth century scholar, who by his interest in the activities of all of his colleagues sets the tone for our department's priorities. All of my colleagues serve the department in important ways. There are, of course, a few places where considerable power is vested in a person whose interests are more strongly CCC than MLA. The obvious examples are the University of Iowa where the chair, Richard Lloyd-Jones, has been a recent CCC chair; Carnegie-Mellon where Richard Young, as Head, is rapidly implementing a rhetoric program of considerable sophistication and prestige; and USC where Ross Winterowd holds an endowed chair.

It is probably best to say that we are in a period of transition in which schools which formerly held the leadership in our profession are gradually, in many cases unknowingly, giving up that leadership. Supplanting them is a new generation whose priorities are very different from those of the old. Given the current trend, one would not be surprised to see writing program directors and their colleagues whose work is research in composition, achieve, by the turn of the century, parity with those already established in English departments. Providing, of course, that the world's militarists cease piling up their nuclear warheads and give us all a chance to live long enough to see it happen.

*This letter, dated March 26, 1924, is in the Fred Newton Scott papers, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. Permission to quote it has been granted by Marion Scott Goodrich and Richard Gushman Scott.
WRITING REDUX

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Empty Pages: A Search for Writing Competence in School and Society, Clifton Fadiman and James Howard (Belmont, CA: Fearon Pitman Publishers, 1979, 166 pages)

Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, ed. Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland (Urbana, III.: NCTE, 1980, 160 pages)


"In this writing class this semester I plan to finalize my writing technique since this will probably be the last writing class I will ever be taking." I can’t say I was surprised by this response to a recent writing assignment in my freshman composition class. (I asked the students to write a brief paper answering the questions “What do you expect to learn in this class, and what do you intend to do to learn it?”). This student was simply more honest than her classmates. For most of our students, the second semester of composition is the last writing class they take. What is tragic is that it may very well be the last class in which writing is discussed or valued highly. But that word “finalize” continues to stick in my craw—not because of some John Simon-like fear of the deterioration of the language. The word is ugly not so much because of its “ize” ending, but because it is so totally inappropriate in the context of education. "When," I indignantly asked the student in class, "will your dance style be finalized? When will your education be over? When will your personality be set for life?" She knew the answers the teacher wanted to those questions, and she realized her “error.” But I felt bad for humiliating her. She is not alone in thinking of writing as something to be "finalized," nor is it her fault that she expects that to happen in my class. The entire educational establishment, indeed the culture itself, creates a sense of "doneness," the expectation that when you’ve completed a course you’ve finished with the subject. “I already took a writing class. I’ve done that stuff.”

Product, not process, is the real goal of education most of the time. Putting aside all the educational philosophies and institutional missions that clutter our catalogs, it is product that we value—because it is product that we can measure. SAT scores, GPA’s, multiple choice tests, final exams, term papers all emphasize what students learn, not how. In spite of our best efforts to concentrate on the process of composing, students know that in most cases they will eventually be graded on a finished product. It’s true in every other class; it’s been true throughout their schooling; why should they expect it to be any different in freshman comp? So, it’s not surprising that they come to us, their last writing teachers, expecting to “finalize” their writing, to polish the product once more, to put an end to all this preparing. It’s not surprising, but it is disturbing.

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Time and Newsweek tell us there’s a “writing crisis” in this country, so there must be. Clifton Fadiman and James Howard, in Empty Pages: A Search for Writing Competence in School and Society (developed by the Council for Basic Education’s Commission On Writing), provide a more thorough, and less sensational, discussion of the causes and consequences of this “crisis,” which they prefer to call an “illness,” than you will find in the pages of Time or Newsweek. Fadiman and Howard explore the social forces which have created this “time of trouble,” including the family, community, media, and the culture in general, as well as the conditions of learning in both the home and school. They advocate a serious commitment to writing which is jointly shared by parents and schools, concluding that the recent and continuing decline in writing skills (which they document with national test scores, new remedial curricula in universities, and testimonials of writing teachers) is the fault not solely of the schools, nor television, nor parents, but a fault we all share as members of the same culture. Fadiman and Howard “take into account underlying social forces that move us all” and that implicate us all in the failure of our schools and teachers to train writers. Empty Pages is an intelligent search for the causes of our collective failure. Its authors do not jump on the bandwagon of back-to-basics as a panacea, rather they endorse the “basic” assumption that teachers of all disciplines share the responsibility for teaching students to read and write. No simplistic solutions are offered; the book provides a clear and thoughtful analysis of the context of the problem.

However, the book troubles me because the discussions of writing, particularly in the chapter “What Is Writing?”, are concerned almost exclusively with a product, a finished thing. What is emphasized is not the act—writing as it is made, a behavior, a participle—but the artifact—what is written, a noun, an object. This presumption ignores the bulk of research over the past decade, devoted to the exploration and instruction of writing as a process, a behavior we can teach, rather than an object to be judged. Fadiman and Howard seem to share my student’s expectation that writing is something that can be finalized.

On the one hand, the authors of Empty Pages say that “learning the mechanics of writing is not the same thing as learning to write,” but their list of “elements of competent writing” suggests a contrary, preponderant interest in the proprieties of writing: penmanship and spelling; grammar; idiom; usage; “correctness”; precision; thinking and organization. The latter element, the only one not concerned exclusively with writing as artifact, is allotted a brief, five-page section, the initial part of which is a superficial discussion of orderliness, but the bulk of which is a lengthy attack on self-expressive, creative writing. There is nowhere any discussion of the act of invention, of prewriting activities, or of revision (except in the sense of correcting errors). In an earlier chapter, writing is described as “the covering of clean paper with correct squiggles.” The authors are more concerned about the correctness of those squiggles than about how they are produced.

Empty Pages is valuable for its exploration of the forces—social and familial, cultural and institutional—behind the failure of our students to write well. However, the authors’ implicit attitude toward writing— their predominant concern with correctness and their utter neglect of the process of composing—is part of the cultural context creating a writing crisis. Put bluntly, Fadiman and Howard’s concept of writing is reductive. It’s as if they have panicked during the depression and decided that writing is going out of business, so sell what’s left: a drastically reduced notion of what constitutes writing.

Reading Empty Pages only increased the burden, and the sorrow, of teaching.

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The eight essays in the NCTE’s recent collection, Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, describe widely different methods of teaching writing in universities, though each shares the assumption Donald Murray articulates in the initial article, “How Writing
Donald Murray’s fine essay, the first in _Eight Approaches_, serves as an overview of what it means to teach writing as a process. One of the important confirmations of recent research is something writers like Murray have known intuitively all along: writing is not a step-by-step formula that can be outlined, prescribed, and then followed with guaranteed success. Writing is a recursive series of interacting and interconnected activities. Murray identifies four: writing, reading, collecting (of information), and connecting (information as well as ideas). The labels of these activities are not nearly as important as the realization that writers move back and forth between them many, many times as they write. Murray discusses the consequences of this model of writing for teaching and for the evaluation of student writing, one of the great bugaboos of our profession. However, his notion of evaluation is much broader and, it seems to me, much sounder pedagogically than the limited idea of a teacher marking papers.

Evaluation in the writing course is not a matter of an occasional test. As the student passes through the stages of the writing process and tries to bring the forces within the process into balance, there is constant evaluation of the writing in process.

The evaluation begins with each word as it is considered and reconsidered in the mind and then as it appears on the paper. The word is reevaluated as the phrase is created and recorded. The phrase is reevaluated as the sentence is created and recorded. The sentence is reevaluated as the paragraph is created and recorded. The paragraph is reevaluated as the page is created and recorded. The page is reevaluated as the entire piece of writing is created and recorded. And then the writer, having once finished the writing and put it away, picks it up and evaluates it again.

In the writing course the writer’s evaluation is shared with the teacher or with other writers in the class.

Each draft, often each part of the draft, is discussed with readers—the teacher-writer and the other student-writers. Eventually the writing is published in a workshop, and a small or large group of readers evaluate it.

After all that, putting a grade on the bottom of a paper seems redundant and reductive.

The essays following Murray’s are no less challenging to the customary emphasis placed by most teachers and textbooks on the finished product of writing. For example, in his essay “The Experiential Approach: Inner Worlds to Outer Worlds,” Stephen Judy argues that “the structuring of writing is learned as one shapes ideas and experience,” i.e., form is not something that can be taught separate from considerations of purpose and audience in any given piece of writing. “Generations of students have been taught an idealized form of the paragraph, then told to match their writing to that model,” Judy says. But he tells his students that “form grows from content and is inseparable from it,” and urges them to create a form which fits their needs and not to “look about for a ready-made structure.” In this respect, Judy’s essay is similar to Janice Lauer’s “The Rhetorical Approach: Stages of Writing and Strategies for Writers.” Lauer explains that different rhetorical purposes create different types of writing, i.e., different forms. Such “rhetorical powers,” Lauer warns, should not be confused with conventional skills (grammar, punctuation, spelling): “The former are capacities for choice guided by rhetorical principles and context; the latter enable adherence to the rules of a given language.” Both Lauer and Judy suggest that teachers respond to student writing during
the composing process and not solely at its conclusion. Furthermore, both author/teachers propose dealing with issues of "form and correctness" as they arise in the student's writing — not in a prescriptive manner beforehand.

Kenneth Dowst's article, "The Epistemic Approach: Writing, Knowing, and Learning," describes what is perhaps the least familiar, most radical departure from conventional modes of teaching comp. He identifies three closely related propositions central to his approach:

1. We do not know the world immediately; rather, we compose our knowledge by composing language; (2) how we can act depends on what we know, hence on the language with which we make sense of the world; (3) serious experimenting in composing with words is experimenting in knowing in new ways, perhaps better ways.

Dowst explains that he no longer sees writing "primarily as the production of well-made artifacts" but as "a means of knowing and a means of coming-to-know." This has a profound effect on the teaching of composing because writing is viewed not so much as a code to be mastered but as a means of learning — not a subject, but a process. This "epistemic" approach is found in the series of writing assignments William Coles published in two provocative texts: Teaching Composing (Hayden, 1974) and The Plural I: The Teaching of Writing (Holt, 1978). Dowst's approach also has a good deal in common with Janet Emig's article, "Writing as a Mode of Learning" (CCC, 28, 1977, 122-28). Dowst has articulated the propositions underlying Coles' and Emig's work and provided us with a very different vision of what "process" means in writing.

In a more familiar vein, Paul Eschholz' essay, "The Prose Models Approach: Using Products in the Process," points out that, traditionally, prose models (such as we find in the endless numbers of composition readers published every year) are read and analyzed prior to writing. "Read, analyze, and write" is the typical pattern of instruction in many classes and many texts. Eschholz argues that model essays are more helpful if introduced to the student during the process of writing. "When the writer is trying to solve a specific problem in the composing process, ...

prose models can be valuable if introduced appropriately." Example readings are chosen to fit the individual student's problem and subject. Eschholz suggests that the personal conference is the appropriate time for the teacher to "intervene" in the student's writing by suggesting she read a particular essay.

Eschholz's article is not the only one to endorse the usefulness of the private meeting between student and teacher; a number of the essays in Eight Approaches mention such conferences, either outside of class in the teacher's office or during class as other students work on the next assignment. "The Writing Conference: A One-to-One Conversation," by Thomas Carnicelli, is a persuasive argument for using teacher-student conferences as the principal mode of instruction in composition classes. "Individualized instruction in writing," Carnicelli argues, "is more effective than group instruction." This is exactly what we've been saying when we complain about our comp classes being too large; writing instruction should be as personal as possible. Carnicelli and other practitioners of the conference method, such as Murray and Roger Garrison (whose book is reviewed later in this essay), have developed writing courses that either substitute personal conferences for class meetings or incorporate one-to-one dialogues within workshop classes. As an example of the latter, Carnicelli describes some of Garrison's workshops in which Garrison manages to hold up to twenty conferences in a fifty-minute class hour." He treats one problem per conference; "he sees the same paper so often — sometimes in four or five drafts — that he can respond to it very quickly." The more common conference is probably a private interview between student and teacher intended to substitute for the teacher's written comments on the student's paper. Carnicelli argues that "the teacher can make a more effective response to the paper in an oral conference than in written comments." This is perhaps the most difficult assertion about the conference method for teachers to accept. We have been trained to respond with marginalia and summary comments. There is security in our distance from the student during evaluation. But, as Carnicelli points out, we are denying ourselves access to a valuable resource:

"students come to conference with an enormous amount of information about their papers. They know, more or less, what they were trying to accomplish in the paper. They know the problems they encountered in writing it. They know what they meant in specific words and sentences. They know other ideas and facts about the subject that they couldn't manage to fit in. All of this information can be immensely useful to the teacher in diagnosing the paper and in suggesting new possibilities or entirely new topics."

It seems obvious to me after reading Carnicelli's article that conferring with students as they write is truly responding to and intervening in the writing process, while commentary on finished papers, no matter how insightful or conscientious, is a response to product only. * * *

Roger Garrison, one of the proponents of the conference method whom Carnicelli cites, has written a brief and provocative text and accompanying Instructor's Manual intended to assist teachers in overcoming their doubts and fears about plunging into something as unconventional as the conference method of teaching writing. The text is entitled How a Writer Works and is simply a guide to the process of writing as one writer/teacher experiences it. The early, brief chapters describing the stages and strategies of a writer are simple, clear, pertinent, and conversational. The later chapters on grammar, punctuation, paragraphs, wordiness, and cliches may sacrifice usefulness for brevity. But in the Instructor's Manual, One-to-One: Making Writing Instruction Effective, Garrison explains his rationale and arrangements for conducting a writing course through individual conferences. The practical details, including a discussion of how to adapt a Monday-Wednesday-Friday fifty-minute class to the conference method, make this pamphlet as useful as the text it accompanies (a rare achievement among teaching manuals).

In addition to suggestions about scheduling, grading, and questions to ask during a conference, Garrison proposes a hierarchy of concerns for the conference, what he calls "the priorities of attention":

1. Idea or subject
2. Content
3. Point of view
4. First draft or organization
5. Sentences
6. Diction

The list dramatically demonstrates Garrison's concern with process. Teachers are advised to attend, in the conference, to such matters as idea and content and point of view (all subjects related to how the student handles the writing task) before there is talk
of grammar, punctuation, spelling, or diction. Garrison knows this is more easily said than done:

It takes constant alertness and real courage (literally) not to check, circle, or underline grammatical or spelling errors, especially at first. For example, if a paper is general or vague, poorly organized, jumps from one point of view to another, is marred by faulty grammar and misspellings, ignore everything but the vagueness. Until the student learns how to be specific, there is little use in asking him to attack his other problems and you shouldn’t waste time or energy identifying them.

The Carnicelli essay in Eight Approaches voices the same point about the priority of matters of process and content over mechanics and “correctness,” but Carnicelli is blunter: “Not even conferences will help the teacher who treats grammar as more important than content.”

The remaining essays in NCTE’s collection, Harvey Wiener’s “Basic Writing: First Days’ Thoughts on Process and Detail” and Robert Weiss’ “Writing in the Total Curriculum: A Program for Cross-Disciplinary Cooperation,” extend the principles of teaching the composing process to basic or remedial writing classes on the one hand, and to classes outside the English curriculum on the other.

What is extraordinary about Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition is not so much the individual essays but the wide spectrum of methods of teaching comp represented. The diversity of ideas and practices is a clear indication that, as the editors put it, “teaching is, like writing itself, an art that depends less on formulas than on a blend of knowledge, skill, and creativity.”

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Among the dozens of new books on composition that appeared in my mailbox this winter, one has delighted me, impressed me, made me laugh, and caused more consternation among my colleagues than any other. It is Winston Weathers’ An Alternate Style: Options in Composition. Growing in part from an article published in Freshman English News five years ago (“Grammars of Style: New Options in Composition,” Winter 1976), this book invites us to explore an entirely different kind of writing from that which we customarily discuss in our comp classes, “another grammar/community of style, another set of conventions and criteria, another way of writing that offers yet more options and offers us yet further possibilities for rhetorical adaptations and adjustments.” This style, which Weathers calls Grammar B (as opposed to the predominant style, Grammar A), is characterized not by the concerns of subject and thesis, classification and order, beginning and ending, expansion, continuity, and emphasis that typify Grammar A, but by “variegation, synchronicity, discontinuity, ambiguity, and the like.” After looking up some of those terms, I better understand what Weathers means when he says that all the stylistic options we offer our students fall within the bounds of one “grammar of style . . . within a particular box.” Weathers is not suggesting that we abandon Grammar A, but that we expand the repertoire of stylistic choices our students are exposed to.

He traces the literary tradition of Grammar B from Laurence Sterne’s violation of narrative in Tristram Shandy, from Walt Whitman’s 1855 Preface to Leaves of Grass, from D. H. Lawrence’s Studies in Classic American Literature, and from Gertrude Stein’s essays, to Tom Wolfe’s New Journalism, Donald Barthelme’s short stories, and Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow. The fifty pages of Part Two of An Alternate Style are filled with literary examples of Grammar B. I doubt that any reader will question the literary claims of this alternate style, but Weathers is proposing Grammar B be taught as part of the composition course.

It is a mature and alternate (not experimental) style used by competent writers and offering students of writing a well-tested set of options that, added to the traditional grammar of style, will give them a much more flexible voice, a much greater communication capacity, a much greater opportunity to put into effective language all the things they have to say.

I can hear the voices now. “Has this man gone off the deep end? In the midst of a literacy crisis he wants us to teach this crazy, creative stuff? My students don’t even know what a comma splice is.” Weathers hears the objections and responds:

No one is suggesting that we do away from continuity, order, good paragraph development, or complete sentences. It’s not a matter of elimination. It’s a matter of increasing the possibilities and the options. . . . I think we should teach the alternate grammar of style alongside the traditional grammar of style, giving students the whole story of contemporary composition. I think we should simply posit, at the beginning of our instruction, the full range of styles available in both grammars, and use the two grammars tandemly, revealing the virtues of one by comparison with the other, revealing to students how nearly everything they are able to do in writing has its place in some sort of composition or other.

Weathers is careful to tell us that “Grammar B in no way threatens Grammar A,” but I’m afraid that it threatens many teachers. Alternatives, however, force us to ask ourselves: Why do it the way it’s always been done? Is there a better way? Weathers’ book is a challenge to expand our repertoire as teachers, just as we ask our students to expand theirs as writers. “Without options,” Weathers writes, “there can be no rhetoric, for there can be no adjustment to the diversity of communication occasions that confront us in our various lives.”

An Alternate Style, like Eight Approaches, broadens the horizons of our discipline. Both books invite us to teach writing in new, exciting, risky ways. The remedy to the writing “illness” described in Empty Pages is the exploration of new ideas and practices.

Winston Weathers is wrong. Grammar B does threaten Grammar A. And we are healthier for it.
STUDIES IN WRITING AND RHETORIC

The Conference on College Composition and Communication announces the continuation of Studies in Writing and Rhetoric (SWR), a series of monographs or other studies significant to the theory or practice of composition but too long for journal publication. With the series, CCC hopes to encourage study and research in writing, and to increase opportunities for the publication of important manuscripts.

The SWR Publications Committee will consider manuscripts of 70-140 double-spaced typed pages. They may be speculative, theoretical, historical, or analytical studies; research reports; or other works contributing to a better understanding of writing, including interdisciplinary studies or studies in disciplines related to composing. The series will exclude textbooks, unrevised dissertations, book-length manuscripts, course syllabi, lesson plans, and, in general, collections of previously published material.

An author interested in publishing in the series should submit a prospectus of a manuscript for consideration by the Publications Committee. A prospectus should have at least the following elements: (1) a rationale, (2) a definition of readership among the audience of rhetoricians and their students, (3) comparison with related NCTE publications, (4) a tentative table of contents, and (5) an estimate of length (in double-spaced 8½ x 11 sheets) and date by which full manuscript can be expected. Preference will be given to those authors who can, if encouraged, deliver a full manuscript within a few months after approval of prospectuses.

Because of economic constraints, the Publications Committee in late 1980 decided to encourage only three manuscripts from thirty-two prospectuses submitted. Prospectuses submitted or resubmitted by September 1, 1981, will be considered for prospective manuscripts to be reviewed and published in 1982.

Inquiries and prospectuses should be identified as SWR submissions and mailed to the Director of Publications, NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The Winter 81-82 issue of Freshman English News will be devoted to the role of Teaching Assistants in the composition program: their training, their roles and problems in the classroom, their status in the department, and whatever other concerns need to be voiced.

Submissions are invited from current Teaching Assistants, former T.A. s, and faculty experienced in working with T.A. s.

Manuscripts should be received no later than October 15, 1981. Address correspondence to Robert Mayberry, Acting Editor, English Dept., Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX 76129.
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THIRD CLASS