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DEVELOPING LITERACY:
WALTER J. ONG AND BASIC WRITING

Progress in what we call composition is finally progress toward consciousness.

—John Butler [1]

I. THEORY

My hypothesis is that individuals recapitulate to some extent the history of the race with respect to the development of communications skills, particularly with reference to the skills of literacy. I will briefly sketch the historical movement from orality to literacy and then discuss some specific suggestions for teaching writing to open admissions students, who are for all practical purposes beginning writers because they are still highly oral and residually oral persons. [2]

Walter J. Ong [3] characterizes cultures on the basis of the arrangement of communications media which predominate in them as a) primary (totally) oral cultures, b) residually oral cultures, c) fully literate cultures, and d) secondarily (electronically) oral cultures. When I speak of students as residually oral, I mean that they come from a cultural background in which literacy and literate (i.e., analytic, abstract, detached, detailed, scientific) modes of thinking do not predominate. Thus, while the rudiments of reading and writing are present in most people in the cultural mix within the United States, oral forms of communication and the habits of thinking fostered by orality predominate.

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1. "Writing as Self-Discovery," a paper presented at the NCTE preconvention Conference on Current Ways of Teaching Writing: From Diagram to Discovery, in Minneapolis, Nov. 21, 1972.

2. For a fuller presentation of the background of these ideas, see my "Literacy, the Basics, and All That Jazz," *College English,* 38 (Jan. 1977), pp. 443-459.

3. My presentation of Ong's ideas is based on his *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958); *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971); and *Interfaces of the Word* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

Thinking in a highly oral culture is different from thinking in a literate culture, but the characteristics of each are not direct opposites. For instance, while the thinking of highly oral students is generally more concrete than abstract, abstractions occur in their writing both in the form of generalized statements and in the form of a certain number of abstract concepts or terms, such as love, justice, etc.[4] But rather than analysis, highly oral students will produce additive paraphrases, which sometimes sound more like windy, superfluous rhetoric rather than particularized, empirical detail. Rather than detached, their statements are committed, but to highly literate readers they can often seem to be sententious and pompous platitudes. Because of a relative lack of objective or scientific knowledge upon which to base their statements, highly oral students frequently make generalizations which appear to be highly opinionated and subjective, and when challenged they will quickly point out that everyone has a right to his or her opinion. Given this initial characterization of open admissions students, let me now sketch the historical processes that I claim they recapitulate to some extent.

PRIMARY ORALITY AND LITERACY

Eric A. Havelock [5] analyzes the oral transmission of culture and the beginning of literacy in ancient Greece. He notes that in a primary oral culture information is stored through preserved speech and retrieved through recall or memory. Preserved speech is rhythmic and metrical, thus facilitating memory. Assonance, alliteration and the like, parallelism, antithesis, repetition, and the simpler figures of speech, all contribute to the acoustic effect and hence the memorability of preserved speech. Moreover, this speech of memorialization is concerned with happenings, doings, behaviors, actions, graphic images of concrete situations, not with abstract ideas. The memorable also becomes the predictable, the expected, the familiar. This form of speech is used for

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4. For an insightful discussion of the interaction of concrete and abstract thinking in the writing of open admissions students, see Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 240-241.

5. My presentation of Havelock's ideas is based on his *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963); "Pre-Literacy and the Pre-Socratics," *University of London Institute of Classical Studies Bulletin,* Number 13 (1966), pp. 44-67; "Prologue to Greek Literacy" in *Lectures in Memory of Louise Taft Sample,* Univ. of Cinn. Classical Studies, vol 2. Norman, Okl. Univ. of Okl. Pr., 1973, pp. 329-391. *Origins of Western Literacy* (Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1976); and "The Preliteracy of the Greeks," *New Literary History,* 8 (Spring 1977), pp. 369-391.

didactic purposes, as in "sayings" or, more notably, in epic tales. The epics are composed orally by singers of tales, like Homer. These men have huge stores of metrical formulas in their memories, and they use these formulas to compose narratives spontaneously on the traditional themes that they and everyone else have heard many times before. In Havelock's view, the Homeric poems served as tribal encyclopedias, from which everyone in the culture learned the ways of the culture as they listened to and remembered portions of the stories or refreshed their memories of them. Moreover, the language of preserved speech of pre-literate Greek culture did not allow, Havelock maintains, the development of abstract ideas.

Around 700 B.C., the Greek alphabet was invented, and according to Havelock, it encouraged the production of unfamiliar statements and stimulated the possibility of novel thinking, and particularly the capacity for abstract analysis. He detects in the pre-Socratics (Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Parmenides) the subtle but purposeful changes in the language, from the heavily concretized language of preserved speech to something more novel and flexible and potentially more abstract. But the unfolding of the new abstracting processes of literacy comes slowly. Literacy fosters the detached manipulation of symbols and impersonal use of symbols in reasoning processes. Havelock notes that the manipulation of numerals in arithmetical processes advances faster than the manipulation of letters because the numerals stand for something visual, whereas the Greek letters stand for something more elusive, something acoustic. The Greeks went through a period of craft literacy, as he styles it, before achieving social literacy, wherein a large number of the people could read.

Havelock maintains that the oral cast of mind constitutes the chief obstacle to the abstract classification of experience, to the rearrangement of cause and effect, to the use of analysis, and to scientific rationalism. The oral person is involved and committed to a given (perhaps "received" would be more accurate) position on matters, whereas the fully literate person, precisely because of being literate, is capable of being detached and looking at matters from different points of view. Highly literate persons can examine experience and rearrange it, can separate themselves from their experiences instead of just identifying with them, can stand apart from the "object" and reconsider it and analyze it and evaluate it.

The oral tradition according to Havelock does not analyze history in terms of cause and effect, of factors and forces, of objectives and

influences and the like because these analytical processes are not amenable to the psychodynamics of the memorizing processes upon which oral composing is based. Moreover, oral discourse in a predominantly oral culture does not engage in abstraction because totally oral people can not see or hear or taste categories, classes, relationships, principles, or axioms. Oral discourse is attentive to the sensual (the concrete) and is more disposed to describing actions than to creating abstractions.

James A. Notopoulos characterizes oral composing as paratactic, inorganic, flexible, responsive to the live audience, digressive, and more concerned with parts than with wholes.[6] By comparison, written composing is hypotactic, organic, logical, and concerned with relating parts to one another to achieve a unified whole. Notopoulos' observations coincide with those of M. L. West. In commenting on the "somewhat illogical" sequence of thought in lines 94-97 of Hesiod's *Theogony,* West notes that "a series of thoughts ABC, where A and B or B and C make a coherent sequence, but ABC taken as a whole seem to lack all cohesion, is characteristic of archaic Greek literature."[7] This aspect of parataxis is also characteristic of the writing of residually oral open admissions students. "Parataxis," Notopoulos says, "is first of all a state of mind" (p. 11), the primary oral state of mind as manifested in Homer and others, and he notes that it is "the regular form of thought and expression before the classical period in Greek culture" (p. 13), before the middle of the fifth century B.C. (The classical period corresponds with what Havelock calls the period of social literacy, and it was during the pre-classical period that what he calls craft literacy developed.) Notopoulos detects the paratactic-inorganic tradition in the writings of the pre-Socratics. But he notes that the pre-Socratics were instrumental in formulating concepts that were basic to the later development of ideas about organic unity. Havelock's observations about the changes in language which the pre-Socratics gradually made can be interpreted as changes away from paratactic structures and toward hypotactic structures, even though Havelock does not put it in those terms. The pre-Socratics, then, represent a transitional stage between primary orality and full literacy, which stage corresponds to

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6. "Parataxis in Homer: A New Approach to Homeric Literary Criticism," *Transactions of the American Philological Association,* 80 (1949), pp. 1-23.

7. *Hesiod Theogony* (London: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 186. I am indebted to Professor Eric Havelock of Yale University for calling my attention to this passage.

what Ong calls "residual orality." Open admissions students are also residually oral, and like the pre-Socratics, they are somewhere between paratactic and hypotactic language structures.[8] Consequently, more will be said below about parataxis and hypotaxis in the discussion of sentence combining.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE VERBAL ARTS

In discussing the historical development of the communication arts, Ong notes that they unfold in the sequence of narrative, rhetoric, and then logic. While he acknowleges that oral epic narratives are organized with consummate skill and a lot of conscious control, he nevertheless maintains that the oral epic tradition which produced Homer is largely not conscious of the organizational structure used in the oral narratives. Conscious control comes with writing, but it grows out of the formulary tradition of oral composing. The formulary sayings of an oral culture make it possible to conceptualize and manipulate sizable bodies of knowledge, and Ong and Havelock agree that abstract thinking grows out of a fixed formulary thinking by a process of liberation made possible through writing. It is rhetoric, not narrative, which schematizes what would otherwise be too fantastic into identifiable figures of style and thus enable a movement away from the inductive learning of the encyclopedic oral epics to something more abstract and more consciously controlled.

Rhetoric is built on formulary expressions or commonplaces, which one stocks up in one's memory in order to insure *copia,* a fluent abundance, when one speaks. Ong distinguishes between analytic and cumulative commonplaces as they were taught in Western rhetorical education for centuries. The analytic commonplaces include definition, genus, species, wholes, parts, adjacents, relatives, comparisons, opposites, and witnesses. He characterizes these as "concrete conceptualiza-

8. We can speak of prototaxic, parataxic, and syntaxic (meaning characterized by hypotaxis) stages of cognitive development. The prototaxic stage is pre-linguistic. The parataxic stage is associated with primary orality, the syntaxic stage with literacy. But there is no comparable term to aptly characterize the cognitive stage of residually oral students as manifested in their talking and writing. They are in transit from the parataxic to the syntaxic stage. "Mesotaxic" could be coined and operationally defined as the cognitive stage between the parataxic and syntaxic stages, in which a person intersperses paratactic language structures with hypotactic language structures without being aware of it. But that coinage probably would not add significantly to what I have to say here, so I will mention it only in passing rather than use it throughout this paper.

tions," but they were certainly an advance over the unconscious structures used to organize the oral narratives. The cumulative commonplaces or formulary expressions include the metrical formulas described by Milman Parry [9] and Albert B. Lord, [10] as well as the gnomic expressions known as proverbs, adages, maxims, apophthegms, *sententiae,* epigrams, even epithets, *exempla,* and emblems. These sayings transmit the wisdom of the ages, and one brings them to bear on present problems in order to determine the proper course of action. Of course, one must choose appropriately from among the available commonplaces, and the consummate rhetorician is the one whose use of formulary expressions warrants the description Pope succinctly formulated: "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." Of course, the highly literate person today regards these heavily formulary expressions negatively and labels them cliches, conveniently overlooking the fact that all of us make statements that are formulary to some degree. The systematic, self-conscious cultivation of both kinds of formulary expressions in rhetoric historically represented a movement toward greater abstraction and control of knowledge compared to the level of abstraction and control in the oral composing of narratives. But the graphic imagistic language of formulary expressions is more rhetorical and generalized than empirical and particularized.

The practice of rhetoric existed before the "art" or study of rhetoric, which developed only after the invention of writing. And just as the analysis and systematic organization of the practice of rhetoric depended on writing, so too do the analysis and systematic organization of reasoning. Ong says that Aristotle generated logic, or the science of reasoning, and this could not have been done without writing. Logic moves toward greater and greater explication, as typified by its stress on definition. Since definition usually proceeds negatively, by making clear what a thing is not, logic generally proceeds by setting up greater and greater antitheses. But rhetoric also proceeds by antithesis, by differentiating opposites, by accentuating the boundary between self (or group) and other (people or things). However, the antitheses in rhetoric are frequently general or global compared to the sharper, more specific antitheses employed in logic. Logic thus represents a historical movement

9. *The Making of Homeric Verse,* ed. by Adam Parry (London: Clarendon Press, of Oxford University Press 1971).

10. *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

toward greater abstraction and analysis and more conscious control of knowledge.

The dichotomies of the logic developed by Peter Ramus (1515-1572) are probably the most notable example in the history of logic of stress on division and distinction. Although Ramist logic or method was developed during the Renaissance, Ong regards the Renaissance as a residually oral culture because the educational practices of the day were those of old for training an orator, and the written composing processes as a result still strongly echoed the paratactic practices of oral composing processes, especially with reference to thematic (episodic) construction and the use of formulary expressions. Although the fifteenth century invention of the movable printing press laid the groundwork for the movement toward universal literacy within a given population and therefore the widespread use of literate modes of thinking, it still took several generations to produce a consistent prose style free of the effects of oral residue.

In narrative poetry, the shift away from oral residue can be noted by comparing certain elements of style in Spenser's *Fairie Queene* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. John Webster notes that Spenser's style generally echoes the assumptions and expectations of oral narrative poetry, and this illusion of oral style gives to the poem a sense of simplicity and ease.[11] Spenser's style tends to be paratactic, or additive and loose, because each line in the poem appears to be an independent unit. (Lord regards this independence of lines as a touchstone for testing the orality of a poem.) Webster examines Spenser's use of formulas in those seemingly independent lines of poetry, with particular attention to epithets. While some of these epithets may appear empty to a highly literate person, they are nevertheless mellifluous and contribute to the smoothness of the narrative.

Spenser's epic is loosely organized, whereas Milton's is much more tightly controlled. For instance, Phillip J. Gallagher describes *Paradise Lost* as "an inspired hypotaxis of the paratactic narrative of the Fall in the book of Genesis."[12] Moreover, Ong writes of Milton's "logical epic" because the design is under more conscious control than the design

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11. "Oral Form and Written Craft in Spenser's *Fairie Queene,*" *Studies in English Literature,* 16 (Winter 1976), pp. 75-93.

12. "More Theirs by Being His: Teaching Milton to Undergraduates," *Milton Quarterly,* 11 (March 1977), p. 6.

of the original oral epics. Milton has an announced aim — "To justifie the wayes of God to men"—which is logical or analytic, and he begins each book by stating the argument. In addition, many of the characters' speeches are organized like classroom lectures following Peter Ramus' method. (Milton wrote a textbook of Ramist logic.) Ong discusses the use of epithets in *Paradise Lost* and finds that they are quantitatively fewer than and qualitatively different from Spenser's epithets. Milton's qualifiers have more particularizing force than Spenser's oft-repeated epithets. Milton controls the tradition through his somewhat individualized use of epithets, whereas the tradition is more in control in Spenser. The contrast in the styles of these two narrative poems might be loosely extended by analogy to describe the "Miltonic" expectations of teachers of open admissions students who are just beginning formal writing in contrast to the "Spenserian" performances of the students.

As the example of Spenser illustrates, writing was not only used to transcribe the oral epics; written practices emulated oral practices. In a similar way, the writing of highly oral students echoes patterns of oral discourse more than it imitates the conventions of written discourse. Just as the pre-Socratics had to subtly modify the Greek language to move away from paratactic structures and toward hypotactic structures in order to lay the groundwork for the glorious blossoming of analytic thinking that followed, so too Basic Writing teachers need to modify the language of residually oral students to enable them to move toward more literate modes of thinking. The key to starting this movement is making them write with specific detail, which of necessity is a more reflective and consciously controlled use of language than the spontaneous use of language in oral discourse. Particularized detail is as central to literate written discourse as formulary expressions are to oral discourse.

II. PRACTICE

Beyond learning to use particularized detail, there are still other difficult tasks for beginning writers. Eventually these students must learn to control their written language so that they can consciously produce complete sentences which are properly punctuated according to the conventions of Edited American English (EAE). Moreover, their control of written language needs to extend to producing complex sentences so that they will have a variety of sentence patterns in their writing. While important, however, these concerns can be postponed until the second or

third semester in the sequence of writing courses. For the purpose of getting them consciously to modify their conventional use of language in writing, it is important to get them to write regularly at some length and in detail. The historical sequence of narrative-rhetoric-logic can be readily adapted to provide a pedagogical model for a writing program, but since beginning writing is presently my only concern, the following comments will describe only some approaches to descriptive-narrative writing and some initial exercises in rhetoric. (The teaching of logic and more advanced forms of rhetoric are treated in numerous textbooks.) I will also consider the appropriateness of sentence combining as a method for getting residually oral students to construct complex sentences with conscious control.

Obviously the term "residually oral" covers a continuum of verbal behavior, including virtuoso performances by Shakespeare, Spenser, and others. But their virtuosity is due to their degree of conscious control and organization of language, which is generally more conscious and more complex than the use of language in strictly oral composing, even in virtuoso oral performances. While open admissions students have moved beyond the primary oral situation inasmuch as they have acquired the rudiments of reading and writing, they are far from virtuosity in the written use of language, even in the written use of formulary or stock expressions, because their degree of conscious control of what they are doing is minimal. So-called "traditional" students have greater conscious control of these skills, although they too are moving toward fuller control. In what follows, I describe a series of writing activities for residually oral, non-traditional students, going from descriptive-narrative writing to rhetorical writing, with a certain amount of attention to the careful reading of narrative and rhetorical selections of writing.

1. Talking and Writing Differ.   I begin all my classes by asking the students to identify how talking is different from writing. They usually quickly identify the characteristic of voice, and speaker-listener interaction which contribute to the meaning of live talk but are not operative in writing. They note with relief the absence of punctuation and spelling. These and other things are clearly regarded as advantages of talking. When I then ask them the advantages of writing, the responses come more slowly. Usually they point out that writing leaves a record of itself, and that you can think more carefully about what you're going to say. Occasionally a student says that writing helps you learn spelling. All agree that writing is "harder" than talking, but they are not sure why.

The questioning about talking and writing takes the better part of an hour because I want them to consider the questions seriously and to try to formulate answers of their own. As they respond, I usually make brief notes of what they say on the board to minimize repetition (which is an advantage of writing they don't mention).

The next class I review and amplify the things that they said, especially the issue of writing being harder than talking. I note that all the qualities of voice and the varieties of body language obviously contribute to communication orally, and that only analogies of these things appear in writing. As a result, words carry a greater burden in communicating in writing than they do in talking, and a writer must be in greater control of words than an ordinary talker. Then I mention that we use words spontaneously in talk, whereas in writing we can use them more reflectively, more deliberately. Therefore, writing can be more than simply transcribed speech. Whereas talk is loose, digressive, and repetitive, writing affords the possibility of tightening up and unifying ideas and saying them *once* in the best words available to you at the time. Talking often includes numerous generalizations and allusions to background information which the talker and listener(s) have in common. Because talk is live, the listener can ask questions or state disagreements if the talker says something which is unclear or disputable. But the audience cannot respond in this way to writing, except when the product is finished. This too puts a greater burden on the written words to communicate what the author wants to communicate. Put another way, the writer who controls those words has a greater burden of responsibility to communicate her or his ideas clearly and exactly because there is no on-going listener feedback to help.

It is difficult for beginning writers to anticipate adequately the needs of an audience for information. As Ong notes, a writer's audience is always a fiction, so the students need to learn how to imagine a fictional audience. At the outset, I tell my students they are going to read many of their papers orally in class, and to regard the class as their audience when they write. Because they hardly know one another by then, it is not difficult to illustrate to them how wary they should be of assuming that the others in the class will know what they mean or will automatically agree. At this point I talk about generalizations which can be acceptable or barely noticed in talk, but which ring hollow in writing. I stress the need to support generalizations by developing the ideas in detail, and I forewarn them that they are going to hear about the need for detail the

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entire semester. I point out somewhat schematically that the ideas in student papers frequently jump from A to B to A to C to B to A (in a manner similar to what West observes in archaic Greek literature). I explain that writing in detail means saying all that you have to say about idea A before starting idea B and that it also means that you do not introduce idea C unless you are going to develop it and relate it somehow to A and B. I also illustrate what I mean by detail in descriptive and narrative writing. By learning to write in detail, I maintain, they will in effect be learning how to think differently—they will be moving from residually oral modes of thinking to more fully literate modes of thinking. I amply illustrate this entire presentation with examples of discourse which the students can readily understand. I repeat most of these ideas throughout the semester but never again as one extended discourse.

2. Journals for Fluency.   Ong points out that a ready abundance of formulary expressions was necessary to insure fluency in rhetoric, and it is obvious that the oral singers who composed epic narratives as they sang likewise needed an abundance of metrical formulas at their immediate recall. Extended verbal composing will not take place if students are convinced that they have nothing to say. Composing requires getting some flow of words going in a somewhat sustained manner.

I emphasize regular writing and the need for fluency by having students write journals. I distinguish it for them from a diary as not so much a daily, or near daily, record of events as reflections on past or present events usually intended to show the significance of the events rather than just record them. I explain that they will be reading journal entries to the class and remind them to keep the class in mind as the audience when they write. I emphasize the need for detailed development, and I restrict them to entries that are at least a page in length to reinforce the idea. I require 45 to 50 pages over the semester and a certain number of pages each week, but the number per week depends on other activities I have planned. Generally I collect and read the journals three times, grading them only at the end. The students do not rewrite journal entries; the idea is to get them to write abundantly about familiar subjects which they select.

I state the criteria for grading the journals at the outset and remind the students of them several times throughout the semester. The criteria that I announce for grading the journals are: 1) clarity, without which there is

no communication; 2) detailed development, my major concern in this course; 3) organization, as opposed to a parataxic array of ideas or events; 4) variety of subject matter, which is important to state at the beginning but which diminishes in importance as the journal unfolds; and 5) variety of kinds of writing achieved by establishing different purposes for writing, which is a criterion designed to make students attempt forms of writing other than narratives. When I present these criteria, I tell the students that clarity is a baseline or minimum standard in the sense that lack of clarity will diminish their grade. However, the most important criteria for their grade are detailed development, first, and organization, second. The two variety criteria fall in behind these in importance. The concepts behind these criteria are presented and amplified in a variety of ways throughout the first weeks of the semester, particularly through my comments on entries read aloud in class. We begin reading entries the first week.

3. Purpose in Writing.   Early in the semester I hand out a work sheet on designating one's purpose in writing. Drawing on the classification of purposes used by Gregory Cowan and Elisabeth McPherson, the five basic purposes of writing are identified for them as 1) telling what happened, 2) giving directions, 3) explaining, 4) convincing others, and 5) summarizing.[13] I explain to the students that they need to designate a purpose for their writing in order to decide what they want their piece of writing to accomplish and in order to help them organize what they are doing. In a sense, then, these five purposes can function as modern "analytic commonplaces" of rhetoric. In presenting the five purposes in a hand-out, I use examples of writing that I think the students might be familiar with. I then ask students to use this system of classification to identify the purpose of various sentences, to write five sentences with a different purpose for each one, and to find examples of each purpose in the printed materials available to them. The fact that the students have much difficulty classifying newspaper and magazine articles according to this relatively simple rhetorical scheme is probably indicative of why they later find it difficult to follow these purposes in their own writing or even to identify them in things they have already written. These five purposes are slightly above the analytic formulations that students bring to the rhetorical situation, but they are not so far above these students as to be

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13. *Plain English Please: A Rhetoric,* 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, 1976).

beyond their level of mastery. And they do need some "analytic commonplaces" to help them sort out what they are doing when they sit down to write, if they are to move consciously from narrative to rhetoric.

4. Summarizing. In addition, I have students summarize articles having to do with language or writing which I give them throughout the semester; they are either excerpts from longer articles or complete short articles. These articles serve as touchstones for ideas that I present to the class about language and writing, and in the end there is a final exam over all these ideas, but mostly over the articles. In other words, they eventually go from writing a summary with the paper in front of them to writing a short essay in response to a question that necessitates their summarizing part of the article from memory. In this way I feel that I am preparing them to some extent for one form of writing that they will be called upon to do in other college classes, and I am having them work closely with ideas about language and writing that are integral to my class.

To summarize one leaves out the details and includes the generalizations, but this is easier said than done. Many open admissions students read with cognitive tunnel-vision. At first they do not effectively differentiate between main ideas and supporting details. Because their informational background is limited, many details seem very important since these details represent new information. Consequently, their summaries initially are more like slightly abbreviated paraphrases than effective summaries. In struggling through the process of summarizing each article, I hope that they will learn to distinguish the supporting details from the main ideas, because I assume that perceiving this distinction in selections written by others will facilitate their consciously including more particularized details in their own writing.

Furthermore, summarization requires close reading. Ong mentions that Renaissance schoolboys built up their abundance of nifty things to say (to guarantee *copia* or plentitude) by keeping a *copia*book or copybook. In addition, as part of their learning Latin, they did double translations: They translated a model passage from Latin to the vernacular, and then they translated their vernacular passages back to Latin without the aid of the original. Both the copying and the translating required close attention to the text. I cannot think of a direct counterpart to these exercises, but summarizing is something of an analogue to them because it requires close attention to a text to pick out what is important and it necessitates careful comprehension to accurately state in one's own words what another person said. In effect,

summarizing is translating what someone else said into your own words but retaining that person's message, and summarizing involves "copying" out the nifty ideas from another's piece of writing and putting them in your piece of writing. So summarizing is at least roughly analogous to keeping a copybook and doing double translations. In addition, summarizing is a good inductive way to familiarize students with some forms and practices of writing.

5. Nigerian Novels. By far the most successful thing I've done in nine years of teaching open admissions students is to have them read and talk and write about Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*[14] and its sequel, *No Longer at Ease.*[15] These highly readable novels chronicle the story of the fictional Okonkwo family for four generations, from before the turn of the century through British colonization up to the mid-fifties in Nigeria. As background information, I explain the function of proverbs and other formulary expressions in an oral culture: they are a means of preserving and transmitting the wisdom of the group. I usually distribute a newspaper feature story discussing tonal languages and debates in proverbs among Nigerian tribal chieftains. At times I have had the students write debates in proverbs using materials from books of quotations. Some students have great fun playing with the proverbs, frequently producing sparkling debates. When they then read the novels, they are instructed to mark all proverbs (which are frequently identified by such words as, "our elders say," or "as the Ibo say,") and proverb-like expressions. After discussing the characters, the conflict, and the plot development, we usually spend one class period discussing the meaning of the proverbs. This fascinates them tremendously. In addition to the low-keyed literary analysis and language analysis, these novels provide the students with concrete images of life in Africa before and during colonization. Moreover, the discussion of the proverbs gives them excellent practice producing the "particularized details" of the novel and their own experience which give meaning to the proverbs.

In addition, students write a chapter-by-chapter summary of *Things Fall Apart,* a 500-word summary of *No Longer at Ease,* and the first class day devoted to each novel, a paragraph stating their attitudes toward the main character, being as specific as they can in terms of events (particularized details) in the story that led them to formulate the

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14. (1960; paperback rpt. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, n.d.).

15. (1960; paperback rpt. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, n.d.).

attitudes they have. We use these paragraphs to start our discussion of the novels. Eventually they write a longer paper requiring more detailed development (approx. 500 words) about each novel.

6. Sexism in Language.   One idea that I want students to become aware of is that language conditions attitudes, as for example, when cliches or stock or formulary expressions transmit to us unconsciously stereotyped views of others. These all-too-common expressions can be patronizing or denigrating or overtly hostile. Quite a few are de-humanizing. Aside from the overt insult of the words per se, cliches pose a further problem because they are formulaic reactions rather than unique responses to immediate situations. Formulary expressions are the staple of primary orality, whereas literate thinking stresses the unique, the particular rather than the already formulated. Students need to learn, therefore, to reflect on formulary expressions as part of their developing more literate modes of thinking. The ultimate of this unit is to get students to look more carefully at the language in their own writing. While oral discourse involves the spontaneous use of language, writing involves the reflective use of language, and it is easier to learn to reflect on fairly common examples of oral language and obvious stereotypes before reflecting on one's own written language.

In order to introduce a discussion of cliches about women, I distribute copies of an editorial cartoon by Lois Bass and Meta Sylvester which cleverly arrays a large number of cliches about women among caricatures of the "types" these cliches suggest.[16] The banner cliche says, "You women are all alike." I point out that this cliche clearly denies all uniqueness and implies "and that's not a very good way to be." We discuss the half dozen or more whose alleged offense escapes the students.

Next the students review the "No Comment" section of a number of back issues of *Ms.* in small groups of three to five and discuss what the offense is in each item. Even though the items require no comment for the regular *Ms.* reader, most open admissions students need to discuss what's going on before they fully understand the implications of how the language in each item is biased. Reviewing "No Comment" in several issues of *Ms.* demonstrates fairly concretely to students just how stereotypical language works in daily life against women.

As the students progress in their awareness of how language is used to stereotype women, I have them take a more active role in identifying

16. *Up from Under,* 1 (Winter 1971-72), pp. 21-22.

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examples of this process at work in advertising, first by noting the patterns of speaker and spoken to and who says what in TV ads. Then, I have the students collect magazine ads for a paper they eventually write in which they restrict themselves to ads for one product, with only one example for each brand name and substantiate the claim that women are stereotyped as sex objects in magazine ads for product A. They are to state the thesis at the beginning and give a detailed analysis of each of the five ads. They rarely have difficulty coming up with appropriate ads; the difficulty most often is in *explicitly* citing details of the ads to substantiate the claim of the thesis. While the papers usually require rewriting and the rewritten papers are an improvement, the students rarely exhaust all the possible facets of the ads that contribute to the sexual stereotyping. But they usually end up with a fuller idea of what is entailed in stating and supporting a thesis. In other words, the unit on language and women culminates in a thesis-defense exercise in rhetoric.

7. "Oral-Imitation." Lately I have had students do a prepared oral reading and then a written imitation of selected passages of rhetorical or literary writing. I regard this oral reading/written imitation process as another rough analogue of the double translation practice. I was persuaded to attempt this oral approach to writing improvement by William C. Forrest of Le Moyne College. Let me quote his explanation of how the oral-reading/written-imitation process works:

> As a crucial transition from the "natural" human activity of speaking to the "artful" human activity of writing, oral reading had a central place until quite recent times.
>
> Learning to read style aloud is a necessary step in learning to write a written style. Silent reading does not go far enough as a principle for learning to write just because the written style is left the style of another. I *receive* it in a passive vein as something coming at me from another. I do not identify myself with the author. He remains, perhaps, one of the superior group of others that I cannot aspire to. But when I perform his work aloud, all is changed. Instead of a passive recipient of another's language, I myself become an active doer of the language action. I can now emphathize more easily with the author as a maker of language because I am incorporating his language action right in my own mechanism for producing language. And—a very important point—I am incorporating his written style into my own speech production.
>
> To do this well, I have to modify my speech as I read him aloud in order to accomodate my speech to the more sustained structures of the written language. This takes work, hard work, to do the thing well. But when I

have learned to accommodate my voice to the meaning and feeling of the written style, I am interiorizing the written style. I make this style my own speech action. I am doing something like what I shall need to do when I try to expand my own verbal production from the oral to the written mode.[17]

Since none of the students in my classes report having any experience either with oral reading or with written imitation, I begin with single sentences with multiple clauses rather than extended passages. Moreover, these are descriptive-narrative sentences. At first I am seeking what might aptly be called meaningful vocalization rather than anything approximating a dramatic reading, but on the written imitation I do expect a somewhat close adherence to the structure of the model sentence. It is better to let the students attempt a written imitation on their own before analyzing the sentence structure on the board and showing them how it works. Once they have an acceptable imitation, they rehearse an oral reading of it and then read it orally in class, just as they did with the original model. After working through a couple of model sentences each, the students are presented with a model sentence by Martin Luther King, Jr. This periodic sentence with its ten when-clauses takes them from descriptive-narrative writing into rhetoric. I emphasize that they are to read this effectively and meaningfully in their own voices; they are not to try to sound like King. When they actually read in class, they evaluate one another anonymously on separate index cards which I collect, read, and distribute to the evaluatees without comment. If nothing else, the rehearsing and oral reading closely familiarize them with the text and give them some feel for the movement of the words in it. When they begin the written imitation, I tell them to write the conclusions to illustrate the kinds of subject matter they could work into this format. After they decide on a conclusion for the sentence and start to generate reasons to support their conclusions, the major stumbling block is logical consistency. Eventually everyone reads and re-writes three drafts of his or her imitation of King.

In the case of King, everyone received the same model for imitation. I have also distributed a packet with models of rhetoric by Jesse Jackson, Clare Booth Luce, Spiro T. Agnew, Gloria Steinem, Phyllis Schlafly, and Germaine Greer. We analyze and discuss all these selections in class, then the students choose one to rehearse for an oral reading and

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17. "An Oral Approach to Writing Improvement," a paper presented at the New York State English Council meeting at Binghamton, May 4, 1974.

subsequent written imitation. In addition, I have used models from literary works, after the rhetorical models, and models selected by students, but subject to my approval.

Open admissions students do not produce highly polished imitations, even on the third extensive re-write. But that's not important. The important thing is that they work more closely with words and ideas, picking and choosing words with greater care for detail than they normally do in their own writing. They become more aware of what it takes to make an effective, logically consistent argument. The effort, the conscious striving to produce a sound case is what counts most, even when the final product leaves something to be desired.

One practical matter should be mentioned. The students copy the first and second drafts of their imitations of King onto ditto masters and do the same with at least one draft of each of the other models imitated. Therefore, most of the time everyone in the class has a dittoed copy of what is being read orally by the student-author-imitator. This in turn means that comments I and others make can be much more specific than they could be if we had to rely solely on listening carefully, and perhaps taking notes. However, the final draft of each imitation is not duplicated and is usually read solely for performance and not for criticism. Going over sets of unsigned dittoed journal entries in class is also very productive. Although making dittoed copies is time consuming and cumbersome, I think that the benefits derived from closely reviewing copies of students' work in class outweigh the disadvantages of this procedure.

8. Sentence Combining.   Throughout these activities I have stressed the need to enhance the students' awareness of language and conscious control of language in writing. It is almost axiomatic that these highly oral students who are beginning writers are not masters of the conventions of EAE; I maintain that their control of these conventions will increase as they become more aware of what is involved in the composing processes. Until they reach a certain level of consciousness in this respect (i.e., the intermediate level of writing), overt instruction in the conventions of EAE will not effectively "take." The intermediate group of writers sometimes called "traditional" students are probably at the level of consciousness where overt instruction in the conventions of EAE would be most likely to "take" effectively. Since I have been arguing for a developmental model of writing, perhaps I should say that some 12-14 year olds may be comfortably beyond the beginning stage in terms of language ability, whereas some 18-25 year olds may not be

approaching the intermediate level of writing. These remarks are intended to clarify why the writing activities I have described for beginning writers do not include any overt instruction in the conventions of EAE. In addition, I maintain that the language awareness or consciousness of beginning writers is not sufficiently developed to substantially benefit from sentence combining exercises.

Sentence combining is fun to do (because of the rhythmic effect of the formula-like paratactic structures?), and that's a distinct virtue. Moreover, there is some research to support the positive claims for sentence combining.[18] However, I don't believe that anyone else has commented on the likeness between the kernel sentences used in sentence combining exercises and formulas used in oral composing. In a recent article, Jeff Opland gives a number of examples of formulas in Xhosa oral poetry.[19] Here are four examples from different poems:

> We see a ray of sunlight,
> We see a ray of sunlight on this Sabbath day,
> On this Sunday,
> On this day of the speaking of the news,
> The good news. (p. 198)

> I speak of the chief,
> I speak of the king,
> I speak of the one who does what he says. (p. 199)

> Where were the people of this land?
> Where were the great men?
> Where were the dignitaries?
> Where were the men of experience . . . (p. 201)

> What do you want me to say, child of Opland?
> What do you want me to say, fair-skinned one,
> Handsome fellow who comes from the Cape?
> Why do you want this information,
> Information about the people? (p. 199)

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18. John C. Mellon, *Transformational Sentence Combining: A Method for Enhancing the Development of Syntactic Fluency in English Composition,* NCTE Research Report No. 10 (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1969), and Frank O'Hare, *Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing Without Formal Grammar Instructino,* NCTE Research Report No. 15 (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1973).

19. "*Imbongi Nezibongo:* The Xhosa Tribal Poet and the Contemporary Poetic Tradition," *PMLA,* 90 (March 1975), pp. 185-208.

The repetition of key words not only creates the formulas that Opland discusses, it also emphasizes the paratactic structure of the language, which appears to be characteristic of oral composing. The formulas in Opland's article resemble clusters of kernel sentences in William Strong's textbook on sentence combining.[20] In a series about coffee, Strong has:

> The taste is bitter.
> The taste is acidic.
> The taste is faintly soapy.
>
> There is a film.
> The film is brown.
> The film is on the inside of his cup. (p. 11)

The ideas are expressed in paratactic structures in the clusters of kernel sentences, and the students are to transform these sentences into hypotactic structures. Strong encourages students to read the clusters of kernel sentences aloud before attempting to combine them, and he advises them to test out their transformations by reading them aloud. While his approach is probably a very sound one for certain students, I claim that open admissions students are not ready upon starting a sequence of writing courses to benefit substantially from sentence-combining exercises precisely because the formula-like lists of kernel sentences are so close to the spontaneous composing processes of these highly oral students: They regularly string together two or three sentences about one thing that sound like a string of kernel sentences. While these sentences are written, they probably amount to transcripts of patterns of thinking close to the students' oral discourse. Since, as Havelock suggests, oral composing processes are likely to be maintained by rhythm, I suspect that it is an unconscious concern for rhythm that sustains the paratactic structures and the recurring use of formula-like expressions in the writing of highly oral students. To develop writing in detail, one must slow down and reflect on the words being used, particularly when one is first learning to write in detail. This breaks the rhythm, and the writing subsequently moves away from being a transcript or oral discourse.

Certainly the kernel-like formulas quoted by Opland are used to sustain the rhythm of the poems. The repetition of the stems (of varying

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20. *Sentence Combining* (New York: Random House, 1973).

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length) contributes to the evocative resonance of the poetry, and it enables the poet to concentrate on the new tidbit to be offered in the next line rather than having to compose a whole new line—no small advantage when you consider the rapidity with which the poet sings as he composes (right then and there!) the poem. (An analogous process may take place in the minds of highly oral students when they write.) In addition to building the rhythm, the repetition probably helps the audience follow along better. To combine these kernel-like formulas would destroy the rhythm of the poem, and it's at least partly the rhythm that makes the poem captivating and memorable to the audience. (Perhaps some student resistance to combining kernel-like sentences in their own writing is based on a sense that they wouldn't "sound right" then.)

Certainly producing kernel-like sentences is a functional stage in the development of the writing abilities of highly oral students, and having them learn how to write in detail is an effective way to get them away from the rhythmic pattern of using formula-like strings of kernel sentences. Of course, it would be desirable for them to learn later to consciously use hypotactic language structures. This would be an appropriate pursuit for them when they move into the intermediate stage of writing, and sentence-combining exercises would be one suitable means toward that end.

CONCLUSION

In sum, I have suggested that individuals to some extent recapitulate the history of the race with respect to the development of the communications arts, moving from narrative to rhetoric to logic. Writing is a developmental process of acquiring more conscious control over language and composing per se, and people develop writing facility at different rates. Open admissions students are simply at different levels than "traditional" students, and nobody is "remedial."

A full writing program should have the students work their way through narrative, rhetoric, and logic. Accordingly, courses for beginning writers should concentrate on narrative and rhetoric, as I have suggested in the activities that I described. The basic objective is to get the students to develop literate modes of thinking, and I argued that the best impetus in this direction is to get them to write in particularized detail. Stressing detail in writing will not only hasten their *already begun* movement from parataxic to syntaxic forms of thinking, it will also help break the

rhythm of formula-like strings of sentences and thereby lay the groundwork for them to consciously move from heavy reliance on paratactic language structures to a varied use of hypotactic constructions. Until that groundwork is laid, overt instructions in the use of hypotactic structures will have a limited impact. Consequently, I argued that sentence-combining exercises and other forms of instruction aimed at the conscious control of sentences would be most appropriate for intermediate-level students, but not for beginning writers.