

# BASIC WRITING

FALL / WINTER 1978

5. APPLICATIONS:  
THEORY INTO PRACTICE





# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

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## A PREFATORY NOTE

This issue is something of a departure from our earlier, more “concrete” issues, and some readers may be surprised at its ideological intention: To demonstrate the uses of so-called “high brow” literary criticism in the teaching of Basic Writing. Other readers may be surprised at the eclecticism of our selections: Aristotle, Marx, Norman Holland, and Walter J. Ong. Hardly a complete history, but we plead that the diversity will stimulate instructors of writing to suspend disbelief about what helps students and to look more widely for sources of aid. We hope that the deliberateness of putting theory into practice encourages instructors in the view that today’s students can benefit from literary theory in learning to write. We applaud our contributors’ imaginative uses of theory. If our readers are fired with enthusiasm for more “applications,” we could be persuaded to undertake another, later issue on the same theme.

Marylea Meyersohn

## ARISTOTELIAN RHETORIC: LET'S GET BACK TO THE CLASSICS

In his *De institutione oratoria*, Quintilian cites as an example of a *chreia* (one of the elementary exercises in speaking and writing) the following statement: “Crates (the famous Stoic grammarian), having met with an ignorant boy, beat his tutor” (I.ix.5). The continuing controversy over what Johnny and Jane can’t do has produced a host of modern-day Crates who, if they haven’t quite beaten us teachers of writing, have certainly given us some lumps. As most writing teachers will readily admit, not all of our black and blue lumps and bruises are totally undeserved. For many reasons, often historical and financial as well as pedagogical, we have failed to meet the challenges presented by clearly declining literacy skills. If we turn to Quintilian again, we find him placing great responsibility on teachers for the success or failure of their students:

The complaint is groundless that very few people are granted the power of comprehending what is imparted to them and that most people through slowness of mind waste their labor and time in study. On the contrary, you will find most people ready in reasoning and quick in learning. . . . Dull and unteachable persons are no more the law of nature than are deformities and monstrosities, and there are very few of them. A proof of this is that among boys good promise is shown by most; when such promise dies away as they grow older it is manifest that it was not natural ability that was lacking but the *proper care*” (I.i.1-3).

Not so many years ago, many teachers of composition would have scoffed at Quintilian’s considerable confidence in the ability of the human mind. And even today, too many of our fellow teachers continue

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to refer to the “boneheads,” the “unteachables,” and the “inherently stupid,” thereby implying that lack of natural ability, rather than lack of care (to use Quintilian’s words), has led to our present difficulties. Fortunately, however, many teachers of writing are re-learning the efficacy of Quintilian’s view, encouraged by the growing tendency of traditional English departments to recognize composition research as a legitimate and respectable scholarly pursuit. Teachers are re-examining their assumptions about instruction in writing and looking with renewed curiosity and vigor at the astonishing number and variety of questions posed by the Basic Writing student. For this essay, I wish to urge that we not neglect the classical sources in our search for a richer understanding of the Basic Writer’s difficulties and for methods with which to ease those difficulties. In particular, I wish to suggest some insights we may gain by applying Aristotelian rhetorical theory to what we know about Basic Writers.<sup>1</sup>

In “Basic Writing,” a bibliographical essay, Mina Shaughnessy identifies two major features of Basic Writers:

First, they tend to produce, whether in impromptu or home assignments, small numbers of words with large numbers of errors. . . . Second, they seem to be restricted as writers, but not necessarily as speakers, to a very narrow range of syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical options, which forces them into either a rudimentary style of discourse that belies their real maturity or a dense and tangled prose with which neither they nor their readers can cope.”<sup>2</sup>

I would like to elaborate by adding a third characteristic which is perhaps implicit in the second one noted above. My study and analysis of a large number of essays written by basic writers reveals a consistent egocentricity, what Piaget calls “centeredness,” in their writing. In other words, basic writers rarely are able to adopt a persona or to achieve a distanced perspective in their writing. Yet to perform successfully in academic discourse such a distanced voice or perspective is necessary.

The noted tendency of basic writers to produce “small numbers of words” most immediately draws us to Aristotle’s discussion of *topoi* in

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1. I will be relying here almost solely on the Rhetoric, though a reading of the *Prior Analytics* and *On Sophistical Relations* is highly recommended.

2. “Basic Writing,” in *Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays*, ed. Gary Tate (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 139.



the Rhetoric. Literally the “places” or “regions” of discourse, Aristotle’s *koinoi topoi* (the common topics of degree, possibility, time, and size) and *idioi topoi* (the special topics peculiar to one of the three types of discourse) provide the writer not with a set of stock arguments but with a methodology or heuristic. Ideally, that is, they help the writer probe a subject and thereby discover things to say about it.<sup>3</sup> To take only one example, let us look at the common topic of comparison. Now almost all texts include some discussion of comparison, but far too often comparison becomes an *end* rather than a means, a product rather than a part of a logical process which will reveal an insight, usually a generalization, about the subject. Students who practice using the topic of comparison will begin by searching for similarities, differences, and matters of degree in examining a subject; most importantly, however, the students will be practicing and reinforcing the skills of analysis, classification, and synthesis. They begin by asking, for instance, in what ways the subject is like another and whether or not it is more like one thing than another. They can then be led to another and whether or not it is more like one thing than another. They can then be led to generalize about the nature of the subject and eventually to utilize higher levels of abstraction. Thus, a carefully sequenced and structured assignment using only similarities can lead students to list the points of comparison, classify and analyze these points, and eventually generalize or synthesize conclusions. And this, of course, is exactly what Aristotle intended the topics to enable the writer to do. As Edward P.J. Corbett points out in his *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, “The topics represented the system the classical rhetoricians built upon this tendency of the human mind [to abstract, to generalize, to classify, to analyze, and to synthesize].”<sup>4</sup> In short, the topics provide one means of seeing relationships and connections among objects or concepts, of finding Henry James’s “figure in the carpet.” By helping us to perceive subjects in different ways and from different perspectives, the *topoi* give us the means to begin developing analytic and synthetic skills. And skills of abstraction and generalization are among the most fundamental skills Basic Writing students need to acquire and practice.

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3. For a lucid and concise discussion of the *topoi*, see Edward P. J. Corbett’s *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 107-155. For the most current and readily available summary of work on the *topoi*, see Richard Young’s “Invention: A Topographical Survey,” in *Teaching Composition*, pp. 1-43.

4. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, p. 108.

I have argued elsewhere<sup>5</sup> that Basic Writers generally have not attained a level of cognitive development which will enable them to form abstractions and apply the principles derived from their formation to college tasks. That is to say, these students may evince little difficulty in dealing with familiar concrete problems requiring abstract conceptual thought, but they are *not aware of the processes* they are using and thus often lack the ability to infer principles from their experience. I believe that careful and continued work with the topics helps students to acquire the skills necessary to facilitate cognitive growth. But let me emphasize the importance of time and repetition in this process. In order for Basic Writing students to profit from any inventional scheme, they must have time to practice it repeatedly in varying contexts. Given time and continued practice with a guiding teacher, students will begin to internalize the scheme and realize benefits. Since many teachers have argued for the usefulness of the classical *topoi*, I will not labor the point here. (For further discussion, consult Richard Young's bibliographical essay on invention in *Teaching Composition*, pp. 8-11.)

I have not yet touched on the psychological causes, namely, fear of failure and the distrust of academia and of teachers, which may contribute to the small number of words Basic Writers produce. Again, a look at the *Rhetoric* is instructive, not so much for what it literally tells us as for the method it suggests. Book Two of the *Rhetoric*, which deals largely with audience, examines human emotions in terms of 1) the circumstances in which a particular emotion is aroused, 2) the object(s) of a particular emotion, and 3) the things which arouse a particular emotion. Aristotle's classic discussion of fear is so often cited that I will not reproduce it here, but his analysis of fear's obverse, confidence, is equally enlightening though often ignored. After noting that confidence is the opposite of fear, Aristotle proceeds with his analysis:

Confidence is the hope, accompanied by a mental image, of things conducive to safety as being near at hand, while causes of fear seem to be either non-existent or far away. Confidence is inspired both by the remoteness of calamities and by the proximity of sources of encouragement. And there is ground for confidence if there are means of rectifying mistakes and means of succor. As for the conditions under which men feel confident: they do so if they think they have succeeded in much, and

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5. Andrea A. Lunsford, "An Historical, Descriptive, and Evaluative Study of Remedial English in American Colleges and Universities," doctoral dissertation, the Ohio State University, 1977.

suffered little, or if they have often run into great danger, and have come off safely. There are, in fact, two things that render human beings indifferent to peril—inexperience and resourcefulness (2.5).<sup>6</sup>

Now certainly Aristotle speaks clearly to us as teachers of writing. We can help our students gain confidence by providing “proximity of encouragement,” “means of rectifying mistakes,” “experience” (practice), and “resourcefulness.” The last sentence quoted above seems especially revealing when applied to Basic Writers. In spite of the fact that they often fear failure and, consequently, writing, in one sense their inexperience and lack of resources do make them “indifferent to peril” in their writing. I am referring to the Basic Writers who, sticking to primer sentences and bland clichés, achieve a false sense of competency, a feeling that what they have written will be safely “correct” and hence acceptable. We must learn to allay unnecessary fears on the one hand while alerting students to other genuine perils which can only be ignored if and when students build up the sufficient experience and rhetorical resources.

A study of Book Two of the *Rhetoric*, however, does more than offer us the chance to extrapolate tips on teaching. Much more importantly, it offers us a *method* for learning about our students and hence about our craft. If we follow Aristotle’s procedure, for instance, by defining and analyzing 1) the circumstances in which students write “a small number of words with a large number of errors,” 2) the object(s) or person(s) towards which such writing is directed, and 3) the things which arouse that particular writing behavior, we will have gone a long way toward helping our students break out of that particular pattern. Such work has begun, most notably in Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations* and, more generally, in books like K. Patricia Cross’s *Accent on Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976). But we need more, much more, of the meticulous observation and classification that characterize these books in order to develop a heuristically sound program of instruction.

Thus far, we have noted that Basic Writers produce few words because they feel they have little to say and because they are mistrustful and fearful of their teachers and academic surroundings. I would also like to suggest that Basic Writers produce very few words<sup>7</sup> because of a

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6. *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, trans. Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960). All subsequent references are to this edition.

7. In a study conducted at the Ohio State University during 1976, the average Basic Writing student wrote only 132 words in a 48-minute period.



tendency to assume, in academic matters at least, that they are either “right” or “wrong,” that somehow the college writing tasks they must accomplish require a set of facts which are irrevocably right, and that unless they know these right answers, then they have nothing to say or to write about. Aristotle speaks to this problem most directly in his discussions of the enthymeme, which he defines as “the rhetorical syllogism.” Specifically, Aristotle notes that rhetoric is concerned only with “such things as appear to admit of two possibilities” and with issues which affect our ordinary lives. Hence, the enthymeme deals primarily with *probable* truths, and is thus distinguished from the deductive syllogism used in dialectic to arrive at “necessary conclusions” drawn from universally true premises. Basic Writers can profit by an introduction to Aristotle’s distinction and to class or workshop exercises which lead to the search for and analysis of enthymemes. One useful introductory exercise may be derived from Aristotle’s discussion of maxims (which he classes under the enthymeme):

A maxim is a statement; not about a particular fact, such as the character of Iphicrates, but of a general nature; yet not a general statement concerning any and every sort of thing—thus ‘straight is the opposite of curved’ is not a maxim; but a statement about those things which concern human actions. . . . Now enthymemes are a kind of syllogism which almost entirely deals with such matters; take away the syllogistic form, then, and a premise or a conclusion of an enthymeme is a maxim. Thus. . . Euripides “There is no man in all ways happy’. . . Taken so, it is a maxim. You have an enthymeme when you add the next line, “For each is a slave to money or chance.’ (2.21).

Aristotle goes on to list a number of maxims and to show in what ways they may be expanded to enthymemes. The application of this passage to the teaching of Basic Writing is simple enough. In a sequenced set of exercises, students can 1) discuss a list of maxims provided by the teacher;<sup>8</sup> 2) search out maxims in materials provided by the teacher (*e.g.*, passages from newspapers, textbooks, novels, comic strips); 3) expand those maxims to enthymemes; 4) create maxims of their own based on

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8. Aristotle shrewdly notes that maxims appeal greatly to a popular audience because people are delighted “to hear stated in general terms what they already believe in some particular connection.” Precisely for this reason, maxims almost always provoke lively discussion, so lively in fact that I often find it difficult to keep students moving back and forth between concrete experience and higher levels of abstraction.

their observation and study of a set of data provided by the teacher (this step requires classification and generalization); 5) write short essays or paragraphs illustrating their own maxims; and 6) form groups to listen and argue with each others' maxims. This final step should bring the class back around to the original concept: That almost all facets of our daily lives deal with probability rather than with certainty, and that one of the major purposes for writing papers in college should always be to explore an idea for possible, not preordained, answers. Exercises such as this one coupled with steady work on *topoi* should also help build inferential and synthetic thinking skills.

The student who has developed the thinking skills necessary to help him discover dimensions of a given subject may still be inhibited by the second feature of Basic Writers: their "narrow range of syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical options." Perhaps we may agree that the student who has consistently worked through the topics and enthymemic reasoning has already expanded his options considerably. But I would like to offer, as a further means of widening semantic and syntactic options, work on the metaphor. In Book Three of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle includes a lengthy discussion of metaphor as one means of devising "lively sayings" which will please an audience:

We may start from the principle that we all take a natural pleasure in learning easily; so, since words stand for things, those words are most pleasing that give us fresh knowledge. . . . Accordingly, it is metaphor that is in the highest degree instructive and pleasing. When Homer calls old age 'stubble' [but nonetheless I ween one might see from the stubble what the grain has been], he makes us learn, gives us a new concept, by means of the common genus; . . . It follows, then, for style and reasoning [enthymemes] alike, that in order to be lively they must give us rapid information. Consequently, we are not highly gratified by enthymemes that are obvious. . . nor by those which, when stated, we do not understand. What we like are those [enthymemes] that convey information as fast as they are stated—so long as we did not have the knowledge in advance—or that our minds lag only a little behind. With these latter two kinds there is some process of learning; from the former two we learn nothing either instantly or soon (3.10).

Most notable in this passage for the teacher of Basic Writing is the connection Aristotle makes between metaphor and learning. Particularly, he stresses the way in which metaphor (and enthymeme as well) evoke synthetic thinking and identification of relationships among objects or

ideas. It seems to me, that a sequenced set of exercises on the metaphor (similar to those suggested for the maxim) would provide students not only with a means of creating “lively sayings” and options for writing, but also with further practice in generalization and abstraction.

Even though the principle is only implicit in the *Rhetoric*, I cannot leave the question of rhetorical options without arguing at least briefly in favor of *imitation*. In the classical school system, these exercises in imitation formed the core of the early rhetoric curriculum. They included not only copying and translation but analysis of models and paraphrase of them in various styles as well. Eventually, students were expected to analyze entire arguments and to rewrite them in different ways. For the Basic Writing class, however, the beginning exercises in transcribing sentences and imitating style and syntax seem most fruitful. The students begin by copying, word for word, sentences which use particular syntactic patterns.<sup>9</sup> After a sustained period of such transcription exercises, student and teacher begin the analysis of patterns and the imitation of them. In his discussion of dictation (similar to the imitation exercises I am recommending) in *How the French Boy Learns to Write* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915), Rollo Walter Brown warns that the teacher must completely explain the passage to be dictated, and he goes on to add the following caveats: “. . . the ideas and words in which they [the passages to be copied] are expressed must be just within the pupil’s reach. And . . . the teacher [must guard] against letting the exercise become monotonous. It is never long—the corrections are made immediately while interest is warm, and the pupil is not asked to rewrite. . . .” If we heed Brown’s warnings, the use of imitation exercises, especially as a means of preparing students to generate sentence patterns and later to combine sentences, deserves at least an extended trial by teachers of Basic Writing.<sup>10</sup>

The third feature of Basic Writing, egocentricity or lack of a distanced voice, may also be examined profitably in light of Aristotle’s teachings. Considerations of audience, which pervade the entire *Rhetoric*, are most immediately relevant to our concerns here. Almost never does the Basic

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9. From a teacher’s point of view, analyzing the *products* of this exercise can provide many cues to perceptual and conceptual difficulties encountered by basic writing students. See Patricia Laurence’s “Error’s Endless Train: Why Students Don’t Perceive Errors,” *Basic Writing* (Spring, 1975), 23-42.

10. For further arguments in favor of the use of *imitatio*, see Donald Leman Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), pp. 146-176; and Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, pp. 496-538.



Writers have a knowledge or sense of that ubiquitous academic audience, the teacher/critic. Part of the business of any Basic Writing course should be to help students develop this sense, and I know of no better way to begin this process than by having students write directly to each other. Misunderstandings and misapprehensions of one another's writing, which will occur immediately, can be used by the teacher as a means of motivation as well as a means of identifying the elements in each student's writing that mislead an audience. Students can then proceed to an examination of the class members as audience and, later, of the teacher/critic as audience, using for each examination the method proposed by Aristotle: 1) define the emotion or response the writer wishes to arouse in his reader; and 2) catalogue and classify the ways in which to achieve the desired response. (Teachers will recognize here the methods of task analysis and the use of student-set goals, both often helpful in achieving motivation.)

In addition to a detailed study of audience demands, I would like to recommend two exercises, practiced widely in the classical schools, which I think may aid the process of "de-centering" in our students and help them achieve distanced perspectives on a given topic. In the opening of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle recommends that speakers "be able to argue on either side of a question; not with a view to putting both sides into practice—we must not advocate evil—but in order that no aspect of the case may escape us, and that if our opponent makes unfair use of the arguments, we may be able to turn to refute them" (1.1). The classical *controversiae*, often based on factitious and, later, on ridiculous themes, have been subjected to much criticism. Nevertheless, they will serve us well if, in applying this classical exercise to our teaching of Basic Writers, we always use themes evolved by our students, ones which touch on their everyday lives. Once the theme is determined, each student becomes responsible for writing about the theme both negatively and positively (preparation for this writing exercise can be combined with either work on enthymemes, maxims, or metaphors; it is best done, in my experience, in small workshop/discussion groups). The resulting products will offer a wealth of material for discussions of audience, sentence patterns, topic development, and logical reasoning. But more importantly, use of the *controversiae* helps students develop different perspectives on a topic. Practiced sufficiently, this exercise can help students get outside themselves or become "de-centered." In addition, *controversiae* will reinforce the idea that, where decisions regarding

human motives and actions are concerned, there are few absolutely “right” or simple answers.

Another exercise designed to foster “de-centering” is one the classical teachers called *prosopopoeia*, or impersonation. In these exercises, students assume the voice of a famous person and compose what that figure might have said in a given set of circumstances. This exercise, easily adapted to the basic writing class, is generally a popular one with students. The teacher, who prepares a set of situations consonant with student interests and experience, can best begin by providing an example for the class. In the beginning, characters from familiar movies or television series, or well-known public figures, can be used as subjects of impersonation. As students become more adept at assuming various personae, however, the impersonation exercise can be combined with some elementary research on a figure personally interesting to the students or about whom they are studying in another class. Although this exercise evokes intense response from other class members, discussion should ideally focus on answering two questions: 1) how true did the impersonator remain to the original figures; and 2) what elements allowed (or did not allow) the impersonator to achieve that fidelity. Used in this way, exercises in impersonation will help students gain more distanced perspectives and help them develop the ability to adopt the persona of “member of the academy” which is so necessary to success in college.

Our familiar contemporary label for such activities, of course, is role-playing. What I find most often absent from current uses of that technique, however, is a proper emphasis on the end to be gained. In the classical system, most exercises (and certainly every exercise I have recommended thus far) led to generalization and inference-drawing. And that is, at base, what I find most instructive and applicable to our instruction of Basic Writers in the work of Aristotle and other classical teachers. Our students need methods and strategies and options, not “facts.” Isolated grammar drill has never improved the writing of our students, because almost all basic writers are operating below the cognitive level at which they could abstract and generalize principles and then apply these principles to tremendously varied writing situations. Therefore, in applying classical rhetorical theory to the teaching of Basic Writing, I have stressed the Aristotelian *method* of close observation, classification, analysis, and generalization rather than a set of precepts. Only by letting our students practice these mental processes for

themselves and thus eventually internalize the principles can we hope to achieve a true transfer of learning.

Aristotle reasons that pleasure is a “certain motion of the soul, a perceptible settling of it, all at once, into its rightful nature” and that learning, therefore, provides pleasures because learning also “implies a settlement into our normal state.” If Aristotle is right, and if the methods I have suggested do lead our students to learn, then the resulting pleasure at least should be twofold. Our students will be pleased because they will have “satisfied the normal human desire to learn and to know.” And we, of course, will be pleased too, if for no other reason than that the next time we meet a modern-day Crates, he will not thrash us for sending forth ignorant youth. Finally, you see, getting back to the classics needs no other recommendation than pleasure and learning.

Louise Yelin

DECIPHERING THE ACADEMIC HIEROGLYPH:  
MARXIST LITERARY THEORY AND THE PRACTICE OF  
BASIC WRITING

*Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product of language.*

*Karl Marx, Capital*

This article was conceived as an elaboration of a question I have asked myself repeatedly during the past academic year: What does a Marxist theory of literature and culture have to offer the teacher of Basic Writing? I have realized that this question could not have been asked in the same way ten years ago. It is, in fact, a question with a very recent history, and to pose it as I have done assumes something that needs to be stated: its relationship with the historical period in which it arises. The question encompasses and links two of the many responses of academe and academics to the political and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s: Basic Writing, which entered the university curriculum as a result of open admissions, and the renewal both of Marxist scholarship and of interest in Marxist theory in the humanities and social sciences.

Marxism will have little to offer us teachers of Basic Writing if it is treated merely as another academic subject, or as a separable division of the knowledge industry at the opposite end of the academic spectrum from the one we occupy as teachers of “remediation.” To treat it this way, moreover, is to ignore the common history of Basic Writing and the recent revival of Marxist scholarship. As a theory—or mode of

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analysis—of society and culture, however, Marxism can enrich our work by providing both a way of seeing the institutional context in which we teach and a way of understanding what we teach: that is, an illumination of the relationship between Basic Writing and language, literacy, and values.

## I

For the past two years, I have taught Basic Writing at Hostos Community College, a two-year college of the City University of New York with a student population drawn largely from the black and Hispanic communities of the South Bronx. When I arrived in September, 1977, I was surprised to learn from my colleagues that a large number of students enrolled in Basic Writing courses do not complete them. Not all of these students fail; many simply disappear at some time between the beginning and the end of the term. But even though this seemed to be standard operating procedure, I was frustrated when my students began to drop out and when a large number of those who regularly attended class, did the assigned work, and took the final examination, did not pass the course.

While struggling with my frustration, I read Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*.<sup>1</sup> The elegance and lucidity of Shaughnessy's articulation of the goals, purpose, and problems of Basic Writing served as a counterpoint to the gracelessness and sloppiness of my own experience. (Frustration, unfortunately, is never elegant; at best it provokes a kind of gallows humor.) The respect for Basic Writing students which underlies Shaughnessy's seriousness about Basic Writing as an intellectual endeavor was particularly bracing for me, for it served as a constant reminder of the egalitarian perspective with which I had begun. I also learned a great deal from Shaughnessy, not only about what kinds of things to do in class, but also about what I could reasonably expect of my students—and, therefore, of myself. Nevertheless, when I attempted to put Shaughnessy's suggestions into practice, the results were rarely as I would have wished.

Unwilling to accept the propositions that I was a poor teacher or that my students were incapable of learning, I had to look for an explanation that would account for our collective shortcomings in a way that Mina

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1. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977).



Shaughnessy's did not. *Errors and Expectations*, in its respect for students as individuals entering the educational process for the first time and its belief in the value and power of education, is the most recent instance of a tradition of enlightened liberalism which began with John Stuart Mill. Indeed, Basic Writing itself is an educational project whose underlying ideology is this kind of liberalism. But while the liberal tradition offers the teacher of Basic Writing a valuable respect for the individual and a concomitant optimism about what can be accomplished in Basic Writing, it does little to explain the factors which militate against the success of programs such as open admissions. (This is one reason that this particular liberal tradition is vulnerable to the kind of attacks that have been launched—by the “new conservatives” and often in the name of liberalism—against open admissions at City University and elsewhere, attacks which focus on the ineducability of open admission students.<sup>2</sup>) In contrast, a Marxist analysis suggests that we can better understand the limitations of Basic Writing—as well as its strengths—if we examine it as part of a web of cultural, political, and economic structures and institutions.

Basic Writing students come to college with a desire to learn and a desire to get good jobs upon graduation. These two desires loosely correspond with two philosophies of education, the old ideal of a liberal, humanistic education and the more “practical” notion of vocational training. In the abstract, there is no necessary contradiction between the two, especially as regards a project such as Basic Writing. That is, the development of linguistic skills is necessary no matter what course a student wishes to pursue. But, in fact, there is a fundamental conflict between the two views, for the opposition between them is not simply a difference in focus and cannot be resolved by recourse to pluralism.

The recent book by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, and Antonio Gramsci's writings on “The Organisation of Education and of Culture”<sup>3</sup> do not deal directly with Basic Writing, but the implications of their work are relevant to a discussion of

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2. See, e.g., Geoffrey Wagner, “On Remediation,” *College English*, 38, No. 2 (Oct. 1976), and the ensuing correspondence, *CE*, 39, No. 5 (Jan. 1978), between Barbara Gray and Wagner, and Theodore Gross, “How to Kill a College: The Private Papers of a Campus Dean,” *Saturday Review*, 4 February 1978.

3. *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); “The Organisation of Education and Culture,” in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 26-33.

Basic Writing in its institutional context. Gramsci points out that liberal (classical) education has historically been reserved for intellectuals and members of what he calls the “dominant” classes, while vocational education is advocated for what he calls the “instrumental” or “subaltern” classes. Periods of rapid educational expansion, which generally follow periods of economic reorganization, have seen the growth not of liberal education, but of vocational education or technical training. Vocational education has therefore served as a kind of ideological underpinning for structures which reinforce social stratification. What results is a contradiction between what I have identified as the liberal, humanistic *ideology* of Basic Writing and the social practice of Basic Writing as it exists in institutions where vocational education or “career programs” predominate. These programs, in fields such as accounting (bookkeeping), medical laboratory technology, dental hygiene, and secretarial science, prepare students to enter the expanding service sector of the economy.

As teachers, we cannot resolve this contradiction in the classroom, but we can acknowledge it, as Robert Lapidés suggests in a recent article.<sup>4</sup> That is, we can acknowledge the fact that our students need—and want—to become fluent in Standard English in order to get jobs for which a vocational education presumably prepares them. This acknowledgment is related to another aspect of the liberal ideology of Basic Writing, the notion of equal opportunity. “Basic Writing” is a rubric with more dignity (and more respect for students) than “remediation,” but the latter is, in effect, what we offer in Basic Writing courses, and with it, an opportunity for students to join the academic mainstream, whether humanistic or vocational. Yet we may suspect that there are more students in Basic Writing classes than there are jobs waiting for them after graduation. In this respect, Basic Writing embodies a contradiction between the liberal ideal of equal opportunity and the economic realities of American capitalism.

One response to this contradiction is what Bowles and Gintis identify as the technocratic-meritocratic view of education, the idea that economic success and mobility depend upon education in certain technical and cognitive skills. In this view, students who fail have not acquired the necessary skills. But Bowles and Gintis cite studies which

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4. “Teaching Basic Skills: Working with Contradictions,” in a special section of *The Radical Teacher*, No. 8 (May, 1978), on “The Politics of Literacy.”

demonstrate that cognitive skills account for a relatively small part of economic success.<sup>5</sup> If education does not determine mobility, and if students' cognitive abilities do not determine economic success, then the technocratic-meritocratic view of education, the idea that students who fail deserve to fail, itself serves as a means of legitimizing social stratification.

One of the ways that this process of legitimation is accomplished is the "weeding out" of students. This was one role of freshman English in the old land grant colleges; any high school graduate was admitted, but only a few passed. It now seems to be a function of community colleges: at least three times as many entering community college students want to complete four or more years of college as actually do so, and less than half of community college entrants receive A.A. degrees.<sup>6</sup> Following out Bowles and Gintis' logic leads to the suggestion that the fact that large numbers of Basic Writing students either do not complete the course or do not get credit for it is not aberrational, but systemic.

Bowles and Gintis' analysis of American education put my frustration in context by connecting it with larger social problems and issues.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, their work is most valuable in its insistence that apparently local issues such as Basic Writing be viewed in a broader perspective. But it is not enough to see—and Bowles and Gintis do not suggest—only the ways that social institutions shape our lives. We also need to view the institutional context in which we teach as just that, a context, and to set against this kind of analysis of institutions a view of culture as it is created by human struggles within, around, and against existing social structures.

## II

There are almost as many Marxist theories of literature and culture as there are Marxisms, almost all of them with implications which touch on

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5. See, e.g., Chapter 2 and p. 106n.

6. Bowles and Gintis, p. 211.

7. Bowles and Gintis illuminate the particular discontent of teachers, and especially community college teachers, many of whom are educated within the liberal, humanistic tradition and find their jobs increasingly regimented and alienating. For a discussion of this issue while emphasizes the conflict between professors' academic training and research interests and their teaching of basic skills in English and Mathematics, see Edward B. Fiske, "How Open Admissions Plan Has Changed City College," *The New York Times*, 20 June 1978, p. b11. Fiske interviewed, among others, a physicist who teaches remedial math and a professor of German Literature who teaches ESL.

Basic Writing. Here I shall be dealing with a tradition of Marxist thought seen most recently in the work of Raymond Williams.<sup>8</sup> This tradition originates in Karl Marx's idea that social consciousness is determined by social being<sup>9</sup> and is further elaborated by Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks*.

The particular strength of Williams' work—and of this tradition of Marxist cultural theory—lies in the way that he views all aspects of society and culture as products and processes of human activity. Williams accepts virtually nothing as “given” and treats everything as having a history and therefore being open to analysis. His recent book, *Marxism and Literature*, examines the specific conditions of cultural and literary production in an attempt to forge a theory of culture which treats culture as the Marxist dialectical method treats history and society. Williams is attempting to restore to cultural criticism the wholeness, the totalizing powers of explanation, of Marxism as a mode of analysis. Like Gramsci, Williams avoids the reductive determinism of some Marxist views which treat culture simply as an ideological “superstructure” erected on the economic “base” and which regard cultural products, e.g., ideas, texts, language, as mere phantoms of the human brain which simply “reflect” an underlying economic reality (pp. 75-79, 95-97). In other words, Williams takes culture—and, by implication, cultural projects such as Basic Writing—seriously as a mode of social practice. Williams' work, like that of Marx and Gramsci, also constitutes an attempt to demystify the tools of intellectual history or cultural criticism. That is, Williams attempts to demonstrate that the analytical concepts—e.g., language, culture, and society—with which the intellectual or cultural historian works are not universal categories, but rather products of human social history.

The idea that culture, both as process and concept, has a history has implications which bear on the theory and practice of Basic Writing. First, Williams' mode of analysis provides a way of seeing established or

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8. My discussion of Williams' work relies primarily on his most recent book, *Marxism and Literature* (London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), in the *Marxist Introductions* series, ed. Raymond Williams and Steven Lukes. All references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text. I have also drawn upon *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976); *The Country and the City* (London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973); and *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958; rpt. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966).

9. Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), pp. 425-26.

“dominant” structures, institutions, and values and alternative or “emergent” ones as related parts of a whole. That is, Williams’ method enables us to see apparently disparate cultural phenomena as related aspects of a dynamic process of human history. In addition, it enables us to see the institutions in which we work and the cultural formations in which we participate not only as shaping our lives, but also as having been shaped, created by human struggles. Similarly, it offers us a vision of the cultures from which our students come as products of human activity. That is, Williams’ mode of analysis insists that we take our students seriously, but without romanticizing them as members of a “culture of the oppressed.” In this respect, Williams’ Marxist humanism resembles Mina Shaughnessy’s liberal humanism, but Williams emphasizes the dialectical nature of the relationship between our students’ alternative or emergent cultures and the established cultural institutions in which we meet them. For, as a philosophy of enlightenment—and of human liberation—Marxism differs from liberalism in its insistence that the self can be understood only in relation to society, or as it is situated in society: that is, that a fully developed consciousness cannot be other than consciousness of social being.

In addition to these theoretical implications, Williams’ theory of culture also has a more local bearing on the teaching of Basic Writing. But before we can evaluate the applications of Williams’ theory to Basic Writing, we need to state what it is that Basic Writing courses are supposed to accomplish.

Basic Writing precedes “freshman composition” or expository writing in English department curricula: its stated purpose is to prepare students for freshman English. According to the City University of New York guidelines for placing entering freshmen into appropriate English courses, students are ready for freshman English when they can write an essay which “introduces some point or idea and demonstrates an awareness that development or illustration is called for” and which has a discernible, if not fully coherent, pattern of organization. The writers’ vocabulary must be adequate to convey the range of their ideas, and their syntax must ensure “reasonable clarity of expression.” Finally, the writers must demonstrate, through punctuation, an “understanding of the boundaries of the sentence;” spell the “common words of the language with a reasonable degree of accuracy;” and show the ability to use “regularly, but not necessarily faultlessly,” the inflectional forms of Standard Written English. Thus, one evident purpose of Basic Writing courses is to enable students to write essays which fulfill these criteria.



One obvious area of instruction (and perhaps the most problematic, given studies which show little correlation between instruction in grammar and coherent writing) is the structures and codes of Standard English. In addition, the guidelines require that a student be able to make some kind of general statement in response to a given topic and offer some kind of support for this generalization. Thus, Basic Writing courses must teach students to distinguish and move between abstract and concrete levels of discourse. In this respect, our teaching of language skills cannot be separated from our teaching of conceptualization, for, as Williams suggests, language is the way that we come to be conscious of ideas, feelings, beliefs, and values. In fact, a reading of City University placement questions reveals that an articulation of feelings or beliefs about ideas or values is necessary for a passing grade. The test asks students to respond to a short paragraph which states an opinion, e.g., that TV has a harmful effect on young people or that people in our society feel successful if they make a lot of money, by agreeing or disagreeing and explaining their answers with illustrations from their own experience, their observations of others, or their reading.

Basic Writing courses also perform a function formerly fulfilled by freshman English or by students' high school education. Many Basic Writing students enter college as unfamiliar with academic practices as with academic discourse (or Standard English). One purpose of Basic Writing as an entry-level course is to acquaint students with the behavioral codes which prevail in the university. Thus, Basic Writing teachers can evaluate themselves not only on their students' competency in writing, but also on the basis of students' success in courses later on in college.<sup>10</sup> If Basic Writing serves as a kind of practicum in academic codes—both linguistic and behavioral—it is also an introduction to the value these codes express, that is, to the values of the dominant institutions of American public life. Thus, when we teach Basic Writing, we are actively engaged with language, behavior, values, and institutions—with the elements of culture in the anthropological sense. How can Williams' theory of culture illuminate our practice in these areas, particularly in regard to the kinds of assignments we give, the ways we present them, and our interactions with students?

According to Williams, language is

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10. Barbara Gray, presentation at City University Association of Writing Supervisors Conference, April, 1978.

. . . a constitutive element of material social practice. But if this is so, it is also a special case. For it is at once a material practice [that is, an activity by means of which we produce our existence] and a process in which many complex activities, of a less manifestly material kind—from information to interaction, from representation to imagination, and from abstract thought to immediate emotion—are specifically realized. Language is in fact a special kind of material practice: that of human sociality. (p. 165)

Williams elaborates the theory that language is constitutive by setting it against theories which reify language by treating it as a self-contained structure or system and against those which reduce it to a simple reflection of reality or a mechanical “instrument” of communication. The idea that language is prior to social reality, Williams suggests, reduces the “living speech of human beings in their specific social relations in the world . . . to instances and examples of a system which [lies] beyond them” (p. 27). That is, by treating *langue*, or language as system, as prior to and determining *parole*, or language as individual speech acts, this notion of language treats it as a system which is “inaccessible to ‘individual’ acts of will and intelligence” and in effect denies the possibility of “individual initiative of a creative or self-generating kind” (pp. 28, 40). The idea that language is reflective or expressive of a prior social reality and the idea that language is a “medium” or “tool” of communication similarly fail to comprehend language as an active *process* of signification, which Williams defines as the “social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs” (p. 38).

As against these theories of language as prior, reflective, expressive, and instrumental, Williams argues for a dialectical materialist theory of language as constitutive both of social consciousness and social being; dialectical, in that language is both a system of signs and accessible to changes wrought by individual users of language; materialist, in that language, as signification, is a means of production of social life. Moreover, Williams goes beyond theories which view language as the result of a dialectical opposition between *langue* and *parole* by insisting that signs—words and symbols—themselves have a variable range, depending upon the situation in which they are used (p. 39).

The sign is social, but in its very quality as sign it is capable both of being internalized—and indeed it has to be internalized if it is to be a sign for communicative relations between actual persons, initially using only their

own power to express it—and of being continually available in social and material ways, in manifest communication.

(p. 41)

The consequences of this view of the sign—and, by implication, of language—are of great importance for the teacher of Basic Writing. Williams suggests that the idea of the variable range of the sign is a

. . . necessary challenge to the idea of ‘correct’ or ‘propèr’ meanings which had been powerfully developed by orthodox philology and which had been taken over both into social-class distinctions of a ‘standard’ language flanked either by ‘dialects’ or by ‘errors,’ and into literary theories of a ‘correct’ or ‘objective’ reading.

(p. 40)

This analysis obviates a need for emphasis upon *abstract* standards of grammatical correctness, although not a correctness *per se*. That is, a Marxist approach would challenge not correctness, but the *idea* of absolute standards of correctness, and the social and political relations of domination and economic, racial, and sexual exploitation concealed within that idea. In other words, Williams’ dialectical materialist theory of language provides us with a way of seeing the relatedness of different kinds of linguistic situations, structures, and dialects without resorting to a naive relativism.

In our educational practice, we can introduce our students to Standard English as a mode of discourse within a particular social and historical context and with a particular social history which involves the relationship of Standard English to other languages and other dialects of English. (As Robert Lapidès observes, we would be doing our students a disservice if we did not offer instruction in Standard English, but our instruction will be enhanced if we do what he calls “teaching to the contradictions.”<sup>11</sup>) We might consider, for example, the idea that one makes different linguistic choices in different social situations, and ask our students to think about linguistic choices with which they are already familiar. In a discussion of journal-writing, we might suggest that a journal written for a Basic Writing class, while informal, is unlikely to be as intimate as one whose only audience is the writer. Similarly, in a discussion leading to a fairly standard Basic Writing topic, a description

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11. “Teaching Basic Skills,” p. 8.

of a significant event in a student's life, we might elicit from students the various ways that they would describe the same event to their parents, their peers, their teachers, and their employers.

From here, we might move to a discussion of the social—and institutional—settings in which students encounter Standard English, and a discussion of why students feel they take Basic Writing. Some students will offer as a reason the fact that they failed the placement test; others, their desire to get a college degree and a good job; still others, their desire to speak and write correctly. All of these answers provide an opportunity not only to discuss the purposes of the course, but also to trace the history of Standard English and with it, the changing canons of correctness. We might focus on the history of Standard English as a history of migration and conquest, beginning with the Celts and moving through the conquest of “England” by Angles, Saxons, and Normans; on the movement of the English language to North America and the influence on American English of successive waves of immigrants; on changes in the language which resulted from the spread of literacy in the 19th and 20th centuries; and on the ways that slang often becomes part of standard (informal) usage and just as often becomes obsolete. Here, I think, we will be offering our students a critical perspective on language, a perspective which can be sharpened if we ask them to consider the relationship of Standard English to the languages they and their families have spoken. While pointing out the processes by which Standard English has become “standard,” we might also give an assignment which asks students to trace, as far back as possible, the linguistic histories of their families and which asks them to consider the roles of literacy and bilingualism in these histories.

What I am suggesting is that we can evoke in our students not just a thoughtfulness about language, but also a consciousness of languages in their social and political contexts, of languages as complex social codes. This kind of approach suggests that we present Standard English simultaneously as a social and historical phenomenon and as a system of linguistic forms and structures. As we offer instruction in syntax, inflection, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation, we can deal with the inevitable—and necessary—questions of correctness and error without presenting them arbitrarily, but rather, by placing them in an historical context.

Williams' notion of language as a process of signification also has implications for Basic Writing. Williams' view, like Shaughnessy's, suggests that we must regard our students' efforts at composition not

simply as struggles with inflection or sentence structure, but also as a struggle to make meaning. But he treats this struggle with an emphasis slightly different from hers. Williams observes that both the concept of purely “discursive” or “factual” writing and the concept of “fictional” or “imaginative” writing suppress the fact of writing as practice, as “active signifying composition” (pp. 145-48). In contrast, Williams insists upon the necessity of seeing all writing simply—or not so simply—as writing. This point of view is particularly useful in countering the arguments of those who say that instruction in Standard English is crippling to students who need, rather, to “find their own voices.” Williams’ analysis suggests that this argument patronizes students in the name of “creativity.” Indeed, Williams’ discussion of the history of the concepts of literary criticism, among them “creativity” and “imagination,” suggests that the idea that there is such a thing as an “individual voice” apart from any common language is itself an ideological product of a quite recent period of history.

Williams’ demystification of the dichotomy between “discursive” and “imaginative” writing, together with his notion of writing as both signification and communication, offers a means of bridging the gap, common in composition courses, between analytical or critical essays, “reports,” and “creative writing.” That is, it suggests that the distinction between fact and fiction is less important than students’ ability to move between the abstract and the concrete. Consequently, our teaching should encourage this kind of movement in writing usually classified as narrative and descriptive as well as in more evidently expository modes. In this respect, a Marxist approach does not differ from many others, but a Marxist dialectical method can offer a fresh perspective on many of the paper topics commonly given in Basic Writing courses.

Let us consider, as an example, a description of a person. The Marxist view of the individual, that the self can be understood only in relation to its social and historical setting, suggests that a fully articulated description of a person comprehends the web of relationships in which the individual is located. In presenting the assignment, then, we can discuss this network or series of networks—family, racial or ethnic group, class—and the relationships between them. In addition, we can consider the relationship of writer, subject, audience as a way of making explicit the connection between a particular act of writing and the institutional context in which it occurs: as a way, that is, of subjecting to



scrutiny the social conditions which determine the processes and products of composition.

The notion of composition as a process of signification, as Williams presents it, is not individual, but dialectical, in the sense that individuals use and shape a collective language. Williams argues, in his discussion of "Signs and Notations," for a similarly active concept of reading:

The most basic kind of notation is of course the alphabetic. In highly literate cultures this means of production is in effect almost naturalized, but the more we learn about the processes of reading the more we realize the active and interactive relationship which this apparently settled kind of notation involves. Thus, the notation is not, even at this level, simple transfer; it depends upon the active grasping, often by repeated trial and error, of shapes and relationships which the notation promotes, but does not guarantee. Reading, then, is as active as writing, and the notation, as means of production, depends on both these activities and upon their effective relationship. (p. 170)

If, as Williams suggests, notation is a means of literary production which depends upon the relationship of reading and writing, Basic Writing courses should be concerned with reading as well as writing. Writing teachers, that is, might teach reading, and not just as ancillary (using essays or excerpts in readers as models for student essays or as material for analysis) to the teaching of writing. Implicit in Williams' emphasis upon reading as an active grasping of shapes and relationships is the idea that instruction in "techniques" of reading (e.g., "scanning") is likely to be less fruitful than encouraging students to engage in a sustained and often laborious effort at understanding. In addition, we can discuss with students the ways that language "means", and make explicit the connections between the active processes of reading and writing.

In fact, the current division between reading and writing in academic skills departments often results in an artificial split between the production and consumption of language. This split parodically reproduces the split between the spheres of production and consumption within the advanced capitalist economic system. In addition, it reifies language (or the texts in which we encounter it) as an artifact to be consumed or raw material to be transformed within the process of production. That is, the split between writing and reading courses reinforces the sense of language as a thing and literary texts as commodities which can be distinguished from the ways in which and the people by whom they are used.

A recognition of this split can illuminate the quite special place we occupy as teachers of Basic Writing in regard to language as a process of signification. On the one hand, we act as participants, in some sense, in the composing processes of our students; this is what is meant, I think, when we say that we “teach writing.” On the other hand, we are also professional critics—consumers?—of language as it is encountered in written texts: those of us who studied or teach literature and those of us who engage in literary scholarship are critics of texts, while all of us are critics of the texts produced by our students. In this respect, we belong to what Williams describes, in his discussion of the development of philology as a discipline, as a tradition of privileged observers of language and languages:

There was the largely unnoticed consequence of the privileged situation of the observer: that he was observing (of course scientifically) within a differential mode of contact with alien material: in texts, the records of a *past* history; in speech, the activity of an alien people in subordinate (colonialist) relations to the whole activity of the dominant people within which the observer gained his privilege. (p. 26)

An acknowledgment on our part of the privileged situation we occupy as observers of our students’ use of language does not imply that they do not need to become fluent in Standard English, but it places questions of fluency—and competency—in perspective.<sup>12</sup> As a result, we can enter the composing processes of our students—and perform our roles as teachers of writing—with a fuller understanding of what it means for them to write in general, and to begin to write Standard English, in particular.<sup>13</sup>

What I have been suggesting is that the activity of writing (and therefore the practice of Basic Writing) cannot be isolated from broader questions of literacy. But these, in turn, are related to the concept of literature as Williams explains it. Williams traces the history of

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12. The question of competency tests is a complicated one. These tests are often advocated by those who would like to return universities to an Edenic state which existed, supposedly, before open admissions. As a result, some radical groups have suggested that competency tests discriminate against third-world and working-class students and therefore argue for their abolition. But neither competency tests nor abolishing them solves the problem of insuring competency. A fresh approach to the problem is therefore needed.

13. For a discussion of “beginning” as, among other things, an intention to mean, see Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intentions and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

“literature” from its beginnings, as a condition of being able to read, and later as an increasingly specialized kind of language and as a category of analysis (pp. 48-52). He points out that until quite recently, most Marxist theories of literature have not questioned this category. Rather, the most valuable contributions of the Marxist tradition to literary studies have been an expansion of the definition of literature to include popular literature (the “literature of the people”) and an attempt to relate literature to the historical period within which it had been produced. If the former is analogous to the work of social historians which restores to a prominent place in history the lives of those who have been dispossessed, the latter is analogous to the work of Marx and subsequent Marxists in deciphering social products as hieroglyphs by revealing the conditions of their production.<sup>14</sup>

These two aspects of Marxist literary theory are complemented by a third which insists that we recognize each literary text, each act of signification, as an articulation of ideas, feelings, or values. It is in regard to the question of values that a Marxist approach to literature has the fullest implications for the teaching of Basic Writing, for it is here that Marxist theories of culture converge with Marxist analyses of institutions.

As I suggested earlier, Basic Writing courses often constitute students’ introduction to the values and institutions of American public life. Williams’ discussion of the concept of hegemony suggests that what students encounter, in Basic Writing courses, is an experience of hegemonic values and institutions:

The concept of hegemony often, in practice, resembles [that of ideology], but it is distinct in its refusal to equate consciousness with the articulate formal system which can be and ordinarily is abstracted as ‘ideology.’ . . . Instead it sees relations of domination and subordination, in their forms as practical consciousness, as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living—not only of political and economic activity, but of the whole substance of lived identities and relationships, to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense. (pp. 109-10)

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14. See, e.g., *Capital*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967), I, 74-75; 175-76.

The notion of hegemony, that is, enables us to see the ways that values, in particular the values of a dominant class, are encoded in practices which we may take for granted but which our students do not. In addition, it provides us with a way of seeing culture not in opposition to society, but as a part of a whole structure of political and social relationships, as part of the “lived dominance and subordination of particular classes” (p. 110).

A crucial consequence of this kind of analysis is its insistence that the notions of “inside” and “outside”—as in inside and outside “the system”—are myths: ideological constructs which conceal relations of domination and subordination. For if our students do not begin “outside” the system, it cannot be the function of Basic Writing to “integrate” them into it. In our educational practice, therefore, we need to demystify the notion of “integration into the system.” On the one hand, we can explain that there is no outside, by revealing that “outside” is a figure for dispossession, for economic, racial, and sexual exploitation. We can ask our students, for example, from whose perspective they appear to be outside, and who if anyone, appears to be outside to them. On the other hand, we can dissect the promise of entry “inside” by analyzing the ways that the relations of domination and subordination which prevail in American society militate against equal opportunity. In other words, we can restore the social and political content of these ideas and, in effect, engage our students in a discussion of the relationship of social consciousness and social being. This kind of discussion might lead to the assignment of an intellectual autobiography which asks students to describe a particular belief or value they hold, trace it to the conditions or events which caused them to hold it, and relate it to what they see as their place in American society. Such a writing assignment, and the discussions which precede and follow it, can provide the basis of a common language, shared by us and our students, embracing rather than flattening differences in cultural assumptions, in systems of meanings and values.

Indeed, the concept of hegemony offers such a perspective of relatedness. Williams insists that we see hegemonic structures as a dynamic and changing set of relationships between “dominant” meanings, values, and institutions and “oppositional” elements (pp. 123-25). Some of these oppositional elements are “merely novel”; others, which he terms “emergent,” are part of a process whereby new meanings, values, practices, and relationships are constantly being

created. Williams' discussion of dominant and emergent cultural values and institutions is elaborated in regard to the development of "high" cultural movements and formations, but it also provides us with a way of seeing our students as members of emergent social groups and ourselves—and Basic Writing—as representatives of established institutions. Williams' insistence that "definitions of the emergent . . . can only be made in relation to a full sense of the dominant" suggests that Basic Writing is, in effect, the terrain in which the relationship between "emergent" and "dominant" is realized.

A dialectical approach to Basic Writing as a cultural project not only requires a recognition of this relationship, but also suggests that as we teach our students the codes and structures of Standard English and acquaint them with the values and practices of academic life, we must also offer them a means of deciphering the academic hieroglyph, a way of understanding that inscribed within each act of signification, within each social process and practice, is a whole structure of social relations.



Thomas J. Farrell

DEVELOPING LITERACY:  
WALTER J. ONG AND BASIC WRITING

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

—John Butler<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

Walter J. Ong<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup> 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 Conn. 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.<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 acknowledges 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-

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8. We can speak of prototactic, paratactic, and syntactic (meaning characterized by hypotaxis) stages of cognitive development. The prototactic stage is pre-linguistic. The paratactic stage is associated with primary orality, the syntactic 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 paratactic to the syntactic stage. “Mesotactic” could be coined and operationally defined as the cognitive stage between the paratactic and syntactic 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<sup>9</sup> and Albert B. Lord,<sup>10</sup> 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 clichés, 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

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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.<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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 justify 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

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 formulaic 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.<sup>13</sup> 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*<sup>14</sup> and its sequel, *No Longer at Ease*.<sup>15</sup> 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 clichés or stock or formulaic 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, clichés pose a further problem because they are formulaic reactions rather than unique responses to immediate situations. Formulaic 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 formulaic 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 clichés about women, I distribute copies of an editorial cartoon by Lois Bass and Meta Sylvester which cleverly arrays a large number of clichés about women among caricatures of the "types" these clichés suggest.<sup>16</sup> The banner cliché says, "You women are all alike." I point out that this cliché 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

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

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 empathize 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 accommodate 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 Instruction*, 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.<sup>20</sup> 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).



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 syntactic 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.

## NORMAN HOLLAND'S "NEW PARADIGM" AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING

It is not uncommon to find that writing is taught by one department at a university and reading by another. Whatever the advantages of this separation, it has the disadvantage of confirming to impressionable students that there is little connection between the act of writing words and the act of reading them or between the person or persons who perform these acts. Critical theory that connects reading and writing is therefore of especial value, and "reader-oriented criticism" in particular reminds us, and encourages us to remind those we teach, that there is a connection.

Most of the trail-blazers among the new wave of reader-oriented critics, however, have tended to focus their comments on fictional literature. Norman Holland, particularly in works such as *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968) and *Poems in Persons* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), has confined his explorations of the process of reading (or rather or "re-creating") to novels, poems, and plays.

His emphasis on what is usually thought of as "imaginative" or "creative" literature is due, perhaps, to the psychoanalytic bent of his approach. All stories "mean," he writes in *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, by "transforming the unconscious fantasy discoverable through psychoanalysis into the conscious meanings discoverable by conventional interpretation" (p. 28). "On the conscious level," the reader

is actively engaged in perceiving the text and thinking his perceptions into meaning. Unconsciously, the text presents him with fantasies and defenses like those in his own mind. (p. 62)

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As Holland sees it, reading is like being hypnotized. In both cases, you suspend your disbelief, your preconditioned sense of reality (p. 85). Under the hypnotic influence of literature, you are free to entertain the unacceptable without guilt or restraint. The result is a kind of Freudian version of Aristotelian catharsis:

The psychoanalytic theory of literature holds that the writer expresses and disguises childhood fantasies. The reader unconsciously elaborates the fantasy content of the literary work with his own versions of these fantasies. And it is the management of these fantasies, both his own and the work's, that permits their partial gratification and gives literary pleasures. (p. 52)

Expressed in this way, the psychoanalytic approach to reading would seem to apply only to writing that deliberately creates imaginary worlds to which each reader can personally relate. Seemingly, non-fiction (*i.e.*, the typical freshman composition) is not included.

But in a more recent essay, "The New Paradigm," (*New Literary History*, VII (Winter, 1976), Holland places his perspective in a context and terminology that makes direct application to expository writing more tenable. The paradigm is new because it discards the notion of subjective and objective perception. In both life and literature, he argues, "instead of two ways of perceiving reality, one 'objective' and one 'subjective,' we have only one way—transactive" (p. 339).

In making this assertion, Holland takes his cue from child psychology. The child acquires a sense of self in the early months of life by recognizing his nurturing parent as a separate Other. The recognition comes, however, not through passive observation of this Other, but through experiencing the "transactions" that take place between them (*i.e.*, mother soothing and feeding, mother withdrawing, mother responding or not responding to crying, etc.).

Similar transactions between the "Me" and the "Not-Me" occur in reading. All reading, whether of a textbook, a thesis, or a pornographic novel, constitutes a re-creating or adaptation of the existing Self in recognition of an "Other." This existing Self includes one's present knowledge (*i.e.*, what you already know about Egyptian tombs). A "transaction" takes place when you read a new book about Egyptian tombs. Although your emotions may not be involved in the reading of this factual material, you are not detached or passive. In fact, no transaction between the "litterant" (anyone "actively responding to a

literary work," p. 280) and the written word is either scientifically objective or passionately subjective. All acts of reading are acts of making meaning through accommodation of Self to Other.

This accommodation is completed through a process which Holland now calls DEFT: "*defenses, expectations, fantasies and transformations*" (p. 338). DEFT is simply a rephrasing of his earlier concept that literature is a world of make-believe into which the reader projects himself in order to work out in fantasy (unconscious) real conflicts he is unable to resolve consciously in the real world.

Rephrased as part and parcel of his transaction thesis, however, the idea of reading as entering the Other's fantasy and, so to speak, making it your own, relates more immediately to literature that is intentionally *non-fictional*. The freshman essay, be it exposition or argument, fact or opinion, is also an imaginary world into which readers enter and in which they actively participate through a hypnotic suspension of disbelief. The reader of an essay on "How to Build a Model Airplane," for example, is entering into a pretend situation in which he is being "spoken to" and instructed by a person (the writer) not actually present. He brings to this transaction a sense of himself in relation to model airplanes. He thinks of himself either as a naive beginner, a competent amateur, or an expert. If he knows anything about the writer, he has prefixed notions about the writer's degree of competency, too. Otherwise, as he reads the essay, he will form an opinion of the writer's expertise in his subject. Either way, by the third or fourth paragraph, a transaction is taking place between a reader (beginner, competent amateur, or expert) and a writer (beginner, competent amateur, or expert) as a result of which the literant (reader) will "DEFTLY" change. He will learn something about model airplanes, about the writer, and about himself—his identity will be altered by his re-creation through reading.

Of course, all of this theory is very interesting, and you and I, reader, are both benefiting from the transaction in which we are at this moment engaged. But 1) how do we make these concepts of the relation between writer and reader accessible to our Basic Writing students, and 2) how do we use Holland's insights to teach freshman compositions?

First, try presenting Holland's view to a class by asking them to see writing and reading as participation in a play. The *dramatis personae* are two: "Writer" and "Reader." The Writer provides the Reader with an appropriate setting in which to suspend disbelief and work out fantasies, dreams, and confusions. The writer provides approximately one-half of the lines; the reader, in responding to these, "ad-libs" the rest. If the

dialogue between the two players is successful, the writer has enabled the reader to make conscious thoughts and feelings formerly kept unconscious, and to review them in a manner both entertaining and self-instructive.

As the writer, then, the student provides a setting, stage props, implied descriptions of the writer's and reader's roles, and even, in the most carefully structured works, step-by-step blocking. Like all dramatists, the student relies on the actors (readers) to bring his meaning to life. While he tries to give these actors the right cues, he realizes that acting (reading) is partly a matter of individual interpretation. The final stage production is neither the writer's nor the actor's version of the play, but the result of an interaction between the two.

The basic principle behind this concept of all written communication as drama is, of course, not new. "Remember the audience" is a phrase as familiar to English teachers as "Remember the Alamo" is to Texans. We are tireless in attempting to raise freshman writers' consciousness to the fact that when they write, they are performing for *someone*. We have tended to put less emphasis on the fact that when their writing is read, someone performs for them.

The practical application of Holland-style reader criticism to the teaching of Basic Writing involves a combined program of writer/reader consciousness-raising, frequent writing, and frequent reader feedback. The program I am about to describe has worked well both at City College, C.U.N.Y. and at Case Western Reserve University in a freshman writing course that meets for fifty minutes, three times a week (MWF). Basically, the schedule is an in-class writing assignment on Mondays, a reading assignment on Mondays, a reading assignment in an anthology of fiction and non-fiction on Wednesdays, and in-class discussion of anonymous samples of the students' own writing on Fridays. Every other Friday an essay prepared at home (c. 500 words) is due. Each student has three regularly scheduled conferences with the instructor, more, if necessary. The framework for the course, in other words, is fairly traditional.

The difference is that all assignments are geared to discovery and exploration of the writer/reader transaction. For initial diagnosis students are asked to write an essay on "How to Write an 'F' Paper."<sup>1</sup>

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1. See Marilyn S. Samuels, "Choice for a First-Essay Topic," *College Composition and Communication*, XXVII (Dec., 1976), 395-6.

They can take any position and use any tone they like (e.g., that five grammatical errors constitute an “F,” that there is no such thing as an “F” because if the student has written anything he has not failed, etc.). The one special stipulation is that the writer and the reader of this paper must be given a specific identity: a student who has never received an “F” writing to other students who have also never received an “F,” but would like to know how; a teacher writing to other teachers about what their students need to have done “wrong” to receive an “F”; a student who is an expert on failing advising other students who can get only “C’s” and “D’s” on how to reach their goal. The possible combinations are endless. The important thing is that the student must identify the writer/reader transaction he intends to take place *before* he writes. He must have a cast and a scenario and write the actual essay with the players and the situation as the determining structure.

For most freshmen this is a whole new way of approaching essay writing. Particularly during a first in-class essay assignment, they have neither sufficient time nor adequate familiarity with the method to do a thorough job. But I do not put a grade on these papers, and my major concern is not how “good” they are. Rather, among other things, I see this first essay as a step in awareness of the Self and the Other in written communication. Eventually, an acute sense of whom one is writing for, and of what may happen to the “literants” when they read what one has written, become subsumed by the writing process. But beginning writers must make themselves deliberately conscious of the writer/reader transaction. They must see via numerous examples that a) reading is an interaction with, not a reaction to, words and b) the reader is a personality affecting as well as being affected by what he reads. Only then will the knowledge of these concepts form an unconscious, automatic influence on what and how they write.

The second step in this “consciousness-raising” is to reproduce anonymous samples of the students’ work for group analysis. The samples are distributed before the Friday meeting at which they will be discussed. Students are asked to see if they can answer the following questions about each sample:

- 1) What is the main thesis of this essay?
- 2) What role (perspective) is adopted by the writer?
- 3) What are the characteristics (perspectives) of the reader for whom this essay is written?



- 4) Do the introduction, supporting paragraphs, and conclusion promote a consistent and appropriate transaction between the writer and reader described in 2. and 3.? Explain.

In other words, the traditional concern with singularity of purpose and organization of paragraphs is modified by concern for the transaction between the writer and the reader. The thesis must be geared to a specific individual or type by a specific individual or type. And the structure must not merely get the point across but enable a specific exchange or experience to take place between the projected players.

Asked to deal with the above-listed questions, student-readers become much more aware of switches in perspective and inconsistencies of motive on the part of student-writers. Also, they become much more conscious of themselves in the role of "readers." When they read a passage they don't understand or one that disturbs them, instead of immediately assuming there's something wrong with *them*, they re-read and try to analyze what is happening to them as they read this section and why. They re-enter the experience of the passage. The result is that either they "get it" better the second time, or else they realize that something which should have occurred between themselves and the writer didn't take place. The next step is to figure out why. What changes might the writer make to facilitate the reader's progress through his work?

Here, for example, are the first three paragraphs of a sample essay on "How to Write an 'F' Paper":

Incredibly, it is almost impossible to write an F paper. Perhaps one may manage to produce a C paper or even a D paper, but never an F paper. Sure, anyone could load up on run-ons, invent new ways to spell words like "phantasmajorical," or even invent a new word or two. Add to this a decentralized theme and a view distasteful to the professor and one would think the student had just completed the perfect F paper. Sadly, however, the student will most likely get a D for his efforts.

What the student didn't consider were all the factors against the F paper. To begin with one must consider how undesirable an F really is. To the student the F, besides being an unpleasant sound, is significant of failure. In our success-oriented society every drive is against this type of work and the student must be very strong-minded to pit himself against these drives. Psychologically, he must convince himself that it is good to be the only one to receive the accolade for success as a complete failure. Otherwise he will suffer guilt and a sense of inadequacy knowing that he did not do his best.

The English professor also considers the F undesirable. Ignorant of the

fact that the student is seriously attempting to achieve the F grade, she will more likely place a D or a C at the top of the paper. The English professor realizes that while the paper may deserve an F grade, she will never be able to motivate the student to do better if the F is given. Besides, she is afraid he will complain to her department chairman or that his parents will complain to the President of the college, so she is unwilling to give him his F.

The first thing students observed from reading this paper in its entirety was that it lacked a single unifying thesis. Approaching this deficiency through an examination of reader and writer roles, they discovered that each paragraph in the essay began a new writer/reader transaction. In each paragraph new roles were assigned to writer and reader, and a new scenario was begun accordingly. In each case, however, rather than complete the transaction, the writer set it up and left it, only to begin a new transaction in the next paragraph. Each time, just as the reader became accustomed to his part in the drama, he was required to switch roles.

The students decided that in the first paragraph the writer came across as a person who had been frustrated in his attempts to achieve an “F,” and was explaining the reasons why it might seem easy to get an “F” but really isn’t. They decided that the role he had assigned to the reader was “Sympathizer.” We were supposed to understand his problem and, perhaps, be fellow sufferers—students who also had tried and failed to get “F’s.” Implied was an ironic reversal of the expected scenario—a student who has tried and failed to get an “A” writing to students who share his frustration.

But in paragraph two, not just the scene, but the entire play changes. The writer now functions as a kind of Superego, admonishing a confused reader that unless he is willing to become a social outcast, he should not even desire an “F” in the first place. As one student reader put it: “In the first paragraph the writer and I are in this thing together. In the second paragraph, he is on the other side, warning me against adopting the very same values he himself advocated in the first paragraph. I feel I’ve been misled and to no purpose.”

The third paragraph, instead of being scene 3 or Act III, once again begins a fresh play. This time the problem is re-introduced from the teacher’s perspective. Teachers don’t like to give “F’s” a) because they don’t want to discourage students; and b) because they fear for their jobs. Student readers had mixed views about the writer/reader trans-

action being set up in this paragraph. Some felt that the “real” student was using this paragraph to tell his “real” teacher (me) why she shouldn’t give *him* an “F.” Others felt the writer was a student telling other students one reason why, in a fictional world where the “F” is desirable, they were having difficulty getting one. Still others felt this paragraph represented an insecure student reassuring other insecure students by telling them why their teacher doesn’t want them to get an “F.”

The class agreed that the essay-writer needed a single thesis which he could achieve by adopting a consistent role for himself and for his readers. In the transaction that ensued he could play all kinds of variations on these roles, but the basic identity of Self (writer) and Other (readers) must remain the same throughout. As a class project, students divided into groups, and each group made a list of the main points the sample essay-writer wanted to make. They then conferred on the type of writer/reader transaction that might best present all or most of these points, and each group reported its findings to the rest of the class.

Subsequent paper topics are also designed to heighten awareness of the writer/reader transaction and encourage students to account for reader activity in the planning of their essays. One topic that has worked extremely well at Case Western Reserve is “Describing Cleveland to a New Yorker.” The freshman class at CWRU is usually  $\frac{1}{3}$  native Clevelanders,  $\frac{1}{3}$  residents of rural areas in Ohio or Pennsylvania, and  $\frac{1}{3}$  out-of-towners. I present myself as a native New Yorker and ask the class to write an essay in which they describe to someone (such as me) who has recently arrived here from New York some aspect of life in Cleveland. One stipulation is that I must know from their essay who they are and to whom they are writing. If they themselves have just arrived here from Boston, then the essay must read as a transaction regarding Cleveland between a former Bostonian and a former New Yorker. Figuring out how to make each paragraph reflect this specialized point of view on the part of both writer and reader increases student sensitivity to the subtleties of written communication. It exercises their ability to control their presentation of self.

Writing assignments in writer/reader transaction are balanced by reading assignments at the Wednesday meetings. In this way, the student becomes a proficient role-player performing the roles of writer and reader of his own and fellow students’ work, as well as the role of reader of published writers’ essays and stories. We approach the published writers’ works in the same way that we approach our own. If the

Wednesday assignment is an essay such as E.M. Forster's "My Wood," or H.L. Mencken's "The Libido for Ugly," students are asked to apply to it the same list of questions that they apply to each other's essays. In addition, once they have decided what the main theme and the roles of writer and reader are, they are required to prepare an explication of one paragraph. Their aim is to demonstrate how the selected paragraph does or does not advance the essay's writer/reader transaction.

There are several other reading exercises that effectively alert writing students to the implication of writer/reader exchange. One is asking students to imagine alternate writer/reader transactions that might take place in the treatment of the same topic. If an essay about the shortage of gasoline is presented as a dialogue between a writer who advocates greater use of public transportation and readers who share his view, the students are asked to list other possible writer/reader combinations that could be used to structure other essays on the same topic: a private car owner to users of public transportation; a city-dweller to those living in a suburb; a taxi-driver to a commuter, etc. In class, the lists are read, and students consider what changes occur in the topic and its presentation in each alternative writer/reader interaction.

Another good exercise is leaving out the ending or the last page of an essay and asking students to write their own conclusion based on how they think the writer/reader transaction of this essay should conclude. The results are interesting to talk about because they emphasize the role of reader as "re-writer" or "re-creator," and raise vital questions on the extent to which writers can or should limit individual reactions to their work.

When the reading assignment is a short story, I sometimes ask students to create an imaginary reader for the work. They are to prepare a detailed background sketch and character analysis of this person, and then interpret the story as they feel it would come across to this particular reader. The exercise works nicely with Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation." Variations in the age, place of residence, profession, religious beliefs, and physical appearance of the imagined readers in all kinds of inventive combinations have significant effects on how the story is read, on the transaction that occurs when it is read.

The ultimate effect of applying Norman Holland's "new paradigm" to the general rationale and specific lessons of a freshman writing class is not the production of amateur psychoanalysts. To be sure, depending on your own interests and the abilities of the class, there is more than

sufficient opportunity in this approach for group therapy sessions on the why and how of writing and reading. More significant for writing teachers and students is the opportunity the "new paradigm" affords to acquire a fresh attitude toward written communication. It enables the student writer to conceive of himself not as a person alone with pen and paper, but as an active participant in a relationship.

Each time students write, they are beginning something that a reader is going to finish. By the end of the course I have described, they know that this writer/reader transaction actually takes place because they have had ample opportunity to participate on both sides. The class becomes a repertory company in which each member gets his turn to experience every aspect of staging the production.

Many writing teachers know that to be a good writer you must be a good reader, and you must understand the relationship between the two. Administrative decisions to isolate these two functions academically in separate buildings or separate departments, shortages of time and money, and other discouragements have sometimes impeded our ability to act on what we know. Perhaps, the practical application of Norman Holland's "new paradigm" to the teaching of freshman composition (and to courses in media and technical writing) is an effective solution. Ideally, it will produce writers who truly view writing as an act of self-expression and who truly view the reader as an "Other" who makes necessary, reacts to, and fulfills each effort.

## CALL FOR ARTICLES

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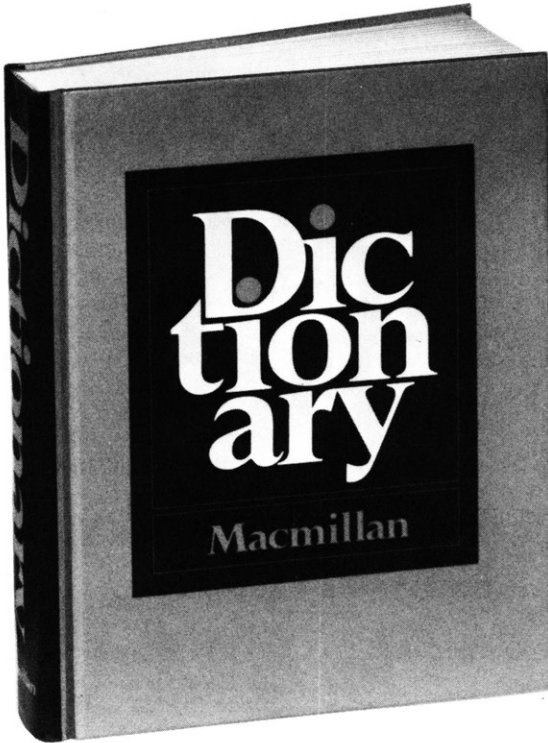
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