

E.D. Hirsch, Jr.

## CULTURE AND LITERACY

When I was so richly honored by receiving an invitation to speak at this conference, I searched for a subject that might do justice to my deep admiration for Mina Shaughnessy. It should be a subject, I thought, that has an Arnoldian ring to it, which is why I chose the title “Culture and Literacy” with its allusion to Arnold’s great book *Culture and Anarchy*. For, as Mina lives in my memory of her, she is an Arnoldian figure—a poet, essayist, critic, even an inspector of schools, and at the same time a person who integrated all these roles not just in service of a powerful cultural mission, but also in exemplification of literate culture at its best: social purpose, integrity, eloquence, and something very Arnoldian—a sense of style. But Mina also had a powerful streak of common sense and she would certainly have advised me against trying to adopt in this talk the inauthentic posture of an Arnoldian sage. “Stick to your last,” she would have said, and in fact she did say something like that to me the last time we met. I was then in New York City trying to break into the convention world of composition experts who were meeting at a conference, and I was not making much progress in this political maneuver. I took the day off to go visit Mina. When she heard what I was up to she said something like this—or possibly, *exactly* like this, since her words are graven in my memory: “You are wasting your time, Donald,” she said. “It’s not your style. Go back to Virginia and get your grants, do your research, and write your books.” The moment she said it, I knew she was absolutely right, and what I am going to talk about on this occasion will be, at least in part, a consequence of following Mina’s advice. I will focus on her main interest, the teaching of writing, and I will bring to bear some of our recent research at Virginia. These subjects will also lead out naturally to some of the larger social and cultural issues that deeply concerned Mina Shaughnessy.

The act of writing and the teaching of writing are so complex and elusive that we sometimes neglect their most important dimensions just

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because those aspects *are* so obvious and elementary that we take them for granted. Shocked recognition of this has fostered, for instance, the back-to-basics movement with its renewed emphasis on spelling, motor skills, traditional practice in usage, and so on. The main subject of my talk today concerns another basic aspect of writing, one so fundamental and obvious, that it too has suffered neglect. I mean the cultural aspect of writing. It is a dimension that I myself have neglected in my own work, and one that we writing teachers have often ignored in teaching, because the sheer craft of writing makes so many immediate demands upon our students. That is why virtually all that is written about composition devotes itself to the craft of writing—to coherence, to pre-writing, organization, syntax, sentence variety, and the like. Certainly for those who, like Mina, teach basic writers (and so many of our students everywhere these days are basic writers), the *craft* of writing must be at the center of our concern.

But in the past few months, and in the light of our recent large-scale experiments at Virginia, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, I have begun to realize that the craft of writing is only half the story. This realization has come to me with a shock of revelation, and so I hope you will be tolerant if, still reeling from my newest conversion, I speak with some of the one-sidedness that new converts are all too apt to exhibit. Such one-sidedness may be just what is needed at the moment, since the craft approach to writing is so powerfully in the ascendant. Specialists in the craft of composition are in great demand for teaching posts. Money for composition research is easy to come by. And even now, as I write, Yale University is pondering ways of spending a grant of 1.25 million dollars to improve the writing abilities of Yale undergraduates. Special research grants, special job descriptions, and lots of money are being thrown at the problem. And all of this effort is certainly going to improve instruction in the craft of writing, if only because we are again paying attention to the problem instead of neglecting it. But I should like to suggest in this talk why this laudable effort can only be partly successful so long as it is narrowly oriented to writing as a craft which can be even more efficiently taught, as research uncovers ever more efficient ways of teaching it.

I said that the craft-approach neglects the cultural dimension of writing. Alternatively, one could say that we have stressed the process and product of writing at the expense of the huge domain of tacit knowledge which is never written down at all, but which, though quite invisible, is just as operative as the visible written word. A writing task could be compared to an iceberg whose visible tip is arrangement, syntax, rhetoric, spelling, coherence and so on, but whose much bigger invisible base is tacit cultural knowledge—not just linguistic knowledge, and knowledge about the topic,

but also, and most important, knowledge of what others also know and expect about the topic, about the form, about the writer, and about the world. In short, the cultural dimension is that whole system of unspoken, tacit knowledge that is shared between writer and reader.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of this tacit dimension in the teaching of literacy, though we have paid scant attention to it. Only very recently have psycholinguists begun to deal with this invisible and inaudible dimension of speech. In 1972 there were published some experimental results which clinched the point I am making—even if on a very primitive level—yet making it all the more persuasively, since the experimental tests were so obvious and elemental. The tests concerned whether we perceive and remember what a sentence says as a linguistic trace, or whether we perceive and remember, instead, what the linguistic traces invisibly entail. One of the experiments used the following two sentences:<sup>1</sup>

1. Three turtles rested on a floating log, and a fish swam beneath them.
2. Three turtles rested on a floating log, and a fish swam beneath it.

Half of the subjects were given sentence 1, and half sentence 2, along with appropriate control sentences. But in recognition tests the subjects simply identified whichever sentence they were shown. Psychologically the two sentences were absolutely identical. For the subjects, the inference that the fish were underneath both the turtles and the log was actually *stated* by the sentence and was remembered as being explicitly, linguistically stated even though it was not. While I cannot imagine anyone being surprised by this result, this and many similar experiments finally put to rest the theory that the perception and memory of sentences is merely a perception and memory of linguistic traces. Readers also understand and remember an invisible, culturally shared component which many linguistic model-builders now put into a box labeled “knowledge of the world.”

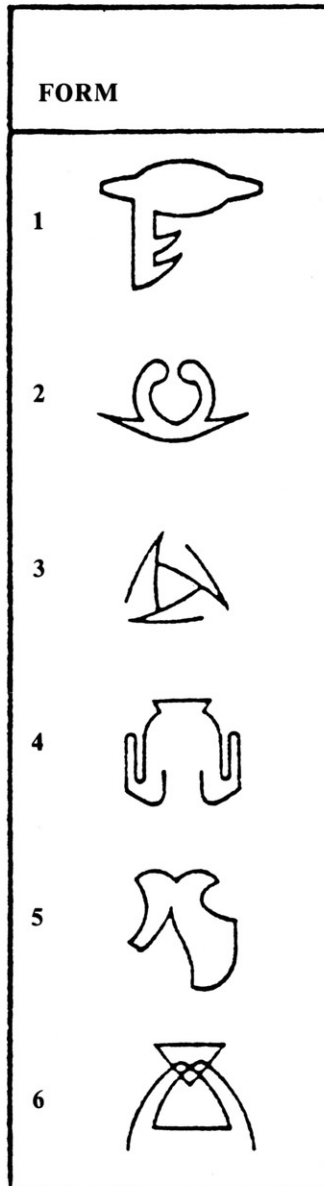
This extra-linguistic dimension was approached from another angle in some experiments reported by Kraus and Glucksberg. I've chosen these particular ones because they are relevant to the special demands of writing, and also because they were accompanied by some convenient illustrations from *Scientific American*.<sup>2</sup> In the experiment a physical barrier is placed

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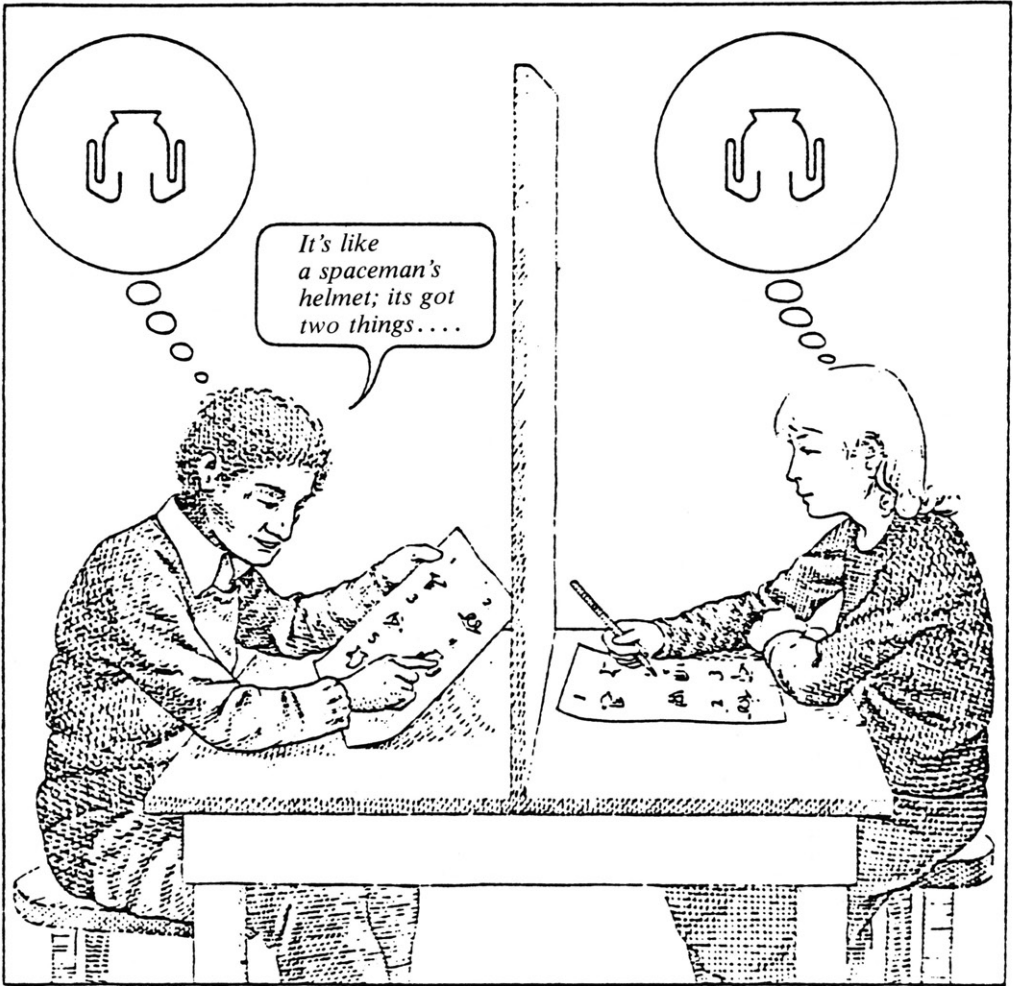
<sup>1</sup> J.D. Bransford, J.R. Barclay, and J.J. Franks, Sentence Memory: A Constructive Approach,” *Cognitive Psychology*, 3, 1972, 193-209.

<sup>2</sup> R.M. Krauss and S. Glucksberg, “Social and Nonsocial Speech.” *Scientific American*, 236 (February, 1977) 100-105. Line drawings reproduced by permission.

between two subjects so that they cannot see each other. Communication has to take place, as in writing, through words alone. And, again as in writing, only one person is allowed to speak, while the other has to interpret what is spoken. The communicative task was to explain to the other subject how to order a series of unfamiliar shapes. This is what the shapes looked like:

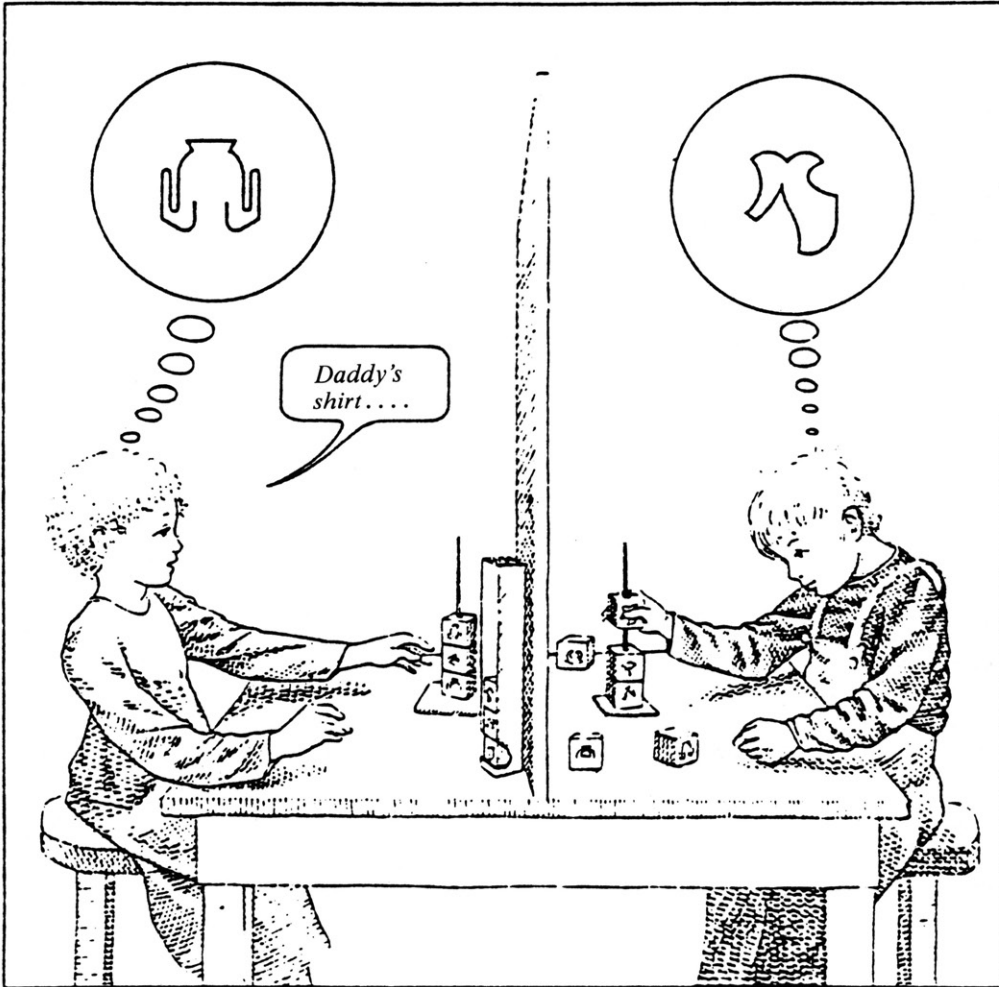


Now when this task was performed by two literate adults, it turned out to be extremely easy. In fact, among the subjects used by Kraus and Glucksberg, the adults always managed to score 100 per cent on their first try. And one noteworthy feature of this adult performance was that, compared with children, adults tended to be very prolix in their descriptions, as though they realized that the shapes would be unfamiliar to the other person, and would therefore have to be carefully related to other shared and familiar shapes. Here is a picture of the adults at their task:



In the illustration there is not enough room to give a full example of the number of words used for each adult description.

Here by contrast is an illustration of a typical performance by children. When the children were of nursery school age, that is, about age four, they could not complete a single error-free trial no matter how often they tried. Kindergartners, age five, performed no better than nursery school children. First graders through fifth graders, that is, ages six through nine or ten, could not complete an error-free trial at first, though they did improve with



practice. Seventh graders, age twelve, did only about as well as fifth graders. And ninth and tenth graders, age thirteen to fifteen, took seven to nine trials before they began to get perfect results.

Developmental psychologists will have their own explanations of the performances of the very young children. What fascinates me is the poor performance of the fifteen year-olds. The American fifteen-year-old subjects chosen by Kraus and Glucksberg were the products of eight or nine years in our school systems. They were *not* trapped in egocentricity, but they *were* deficient in a task which closely approximates the writing task. And what they clearly lacked was not vocabulary, or grammar, or syntax. What they lacked was a sense of the other person's range of knowledge and expectations. They lacked, that is, a good sense of what the other person knew. This, you remember, is how I defined the invisible cultural dimension of writing—a knowledge of the reader's knowledge—a range of knowledge tacitly shared. I believe that there is no developmental reason why a 15-year-old should be culturally illiterate to this degree. Indeed one of the defects in these elegant experiments was the apparent cultural homogeneity of the subject populations. No mention was made of pairing a semi-literate White, Northern adult with a semi-literate Black, Southern adult. No tests were run, apparently, with pairs of highly literate fifteen-year-olds, who were at once practiced readers and proficient writers. Such fifteen-year-olds do exist, and such adults do exist in our culture. And I will wager that the results in such cases would be precisely reversed. My point is, of course, that good education is the specific antidote to cultural illiteracy, and that improvements in literate education would affect performance in this kind of experimental task, which is so analogous to a writing task.

I feel fairly safe with my wager. Kraus and Glucksberg, you remember, found that adults tended to be more prolix than children in performing this task, and this fact is highly reminiscent of Bernstein's sociolinguistic distinction between elaborated and restricted codes—which is a technical version of the distinction between prolixity and conciseness. Culturally literate adults know how to talk to strangers.<sup>3</sup> Knowing what the stranger probably does and does not know, they sense when they must be prolix and when they can be brief. In the experimental task above, prolixity *was*

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<sup>3</sup> Basil Bernstein, "Social Class, Language, and Socialization," in *Language and Social Context*, ed. P.P. Giglioli (New York: Penguin, 1972). Like many others, I decline to accept Bernstein's correlation of restricted code with lower class speech. All social classes use both kinds of codes. Nonetheless, Bernstein's terminological distinction is a useful one.

required, but in another task, it might not have been. That is why cultural literacy (knowledge of what others know) is so essential to competence in the domain of writing.

I'll give just one more experimental illustration of this principle before turning to our experiments at Virginia. In this experiment, undertaken by a clever Harvard undergraduate, the researcher goes out on the streets of Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a hidden tape recorder, and approaches passersby with the following question: "How d'ya get to Central Square?"<sup>4</sup> He is dressed like a native. He is carrying a copy of the *Boston Globe*, and he affects a strong Boston accent. Invariably, he gets a very brief reply to his question:

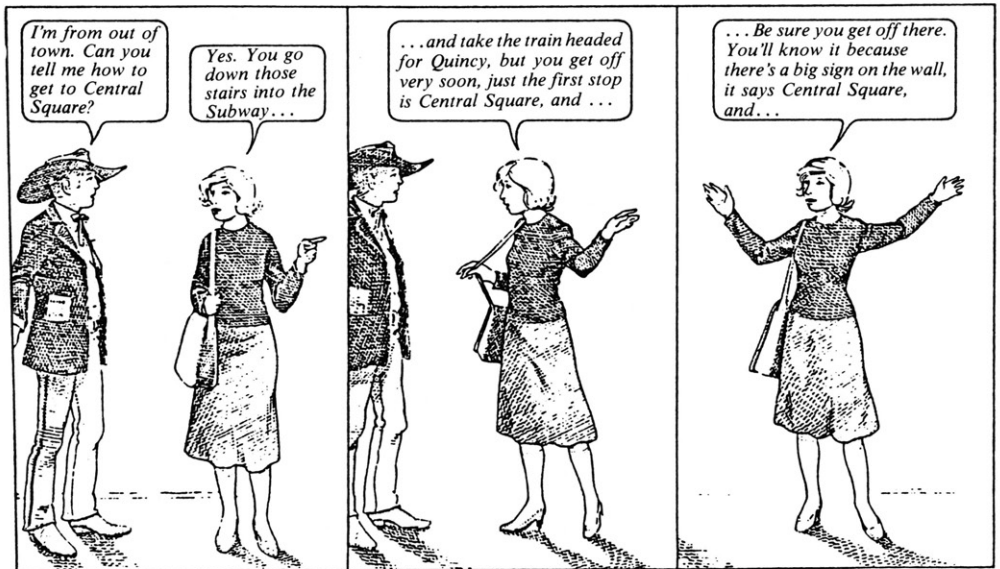


<sup>4</sup> Reported in Krauss and Glucksberg, 1977.



As you see, the typical adult respondent answers his question without breaking stride, using just five words which in some quarters would not pass as a complete sentence. For this answer to be adequate, consider just some of the knowledge which the dozens of passersby had to assume that the questioner also knew: where the subway is, which direction you go on the subway to get to Central Square, and also the convention that Bostonians do not use elaborate forms of courtesy when addressing unknown fellow Bostonians—and this is to mention just the most obvious assumptions about the knowledge the other person is assumed to have.

Now in the next phase of the experiment, the undergraduate goes back to the streets of Cambridge in a different get-up and prefaces his question with the statement “I’m from out of town.” After a time he discovered he could get the same results if he just signaled his out-of-townness by adopting a rural Missouri accent which is exotic enough in Cambridge to indicate “I’m from out of town.” In this second phase of the experiment, also repeated dozens of times, this was the typical sort of result:



You will notice that this response to a stranger is similar in its prolixity to the elaborated code used by adults to describe the strange shapes in the previous experiment. In both cases adults tended to use the elaborated codes typical of writing whenever they found themselves talking to strangers, or talking about strange things. For in writing we are rarely on truly intimate terms with our readers. On the other hand, our readers could not be radical strangers—Martians—if we expected to communicate at all. So, the strangeness-quotient in speech, whether of topics or persons, is a purely relative, or rather a purely cultural matter. And our prolixity or brevity will depend upon our degree of shared cultural knowledge. In fact we could state this principle as a universal law for all writers: The amount of information that must be made explicit in a piece of writing is inversely proportional to the amount of information that is already shared between writer and reader.

Before I turn to our Virginia experiments I want to expatiate on this point for a moment, since it bears upon the results of those experiments. A basic writer's lack of familiarity with the knowledge and expectations of his readers is to some degree a problem that faces all writers. None of us can know for sure what sort of people our readers will be, but we know how to make informed guesses, and in particular how to imagine an appropriate common reader for what we write. I say "appropriate" because most writing aims at a particular group of readers, and assumes in them a particular range of common knowledge. For instance if I were writing an article for the *Astrophysical Journal* I would posit a common reader for that journal.

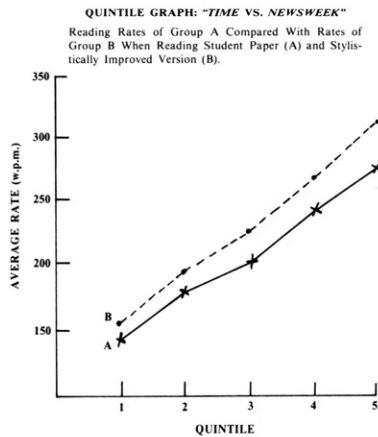
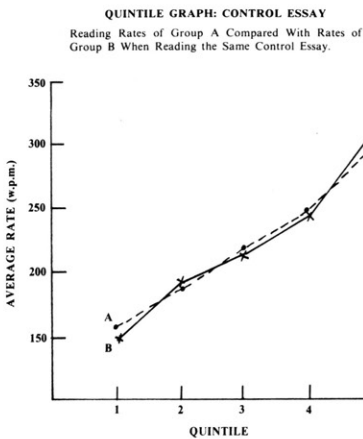
The term "common reader" goes back to the 18th century, to Dr. Johnson. "I rejoice to concur with the common reader," he remarked in his *Life of Gray*, "for by the common sense of readers must he generally decide all claim to poetical honors." And undoubtedly in Johnson's own day there did exist a commonality of literate people who shared much the same grammar school education, who had read many of the same ancient and modern authors, who continued to read many of the same periodicals, including Dr. Johnson's, and who could be counted on to have a certain range of shared knowledge and attitudes. This was the kind of shared culture that defined the common reader in Johnson's day. With much greater variation, it also defines the common reader in our own. The shared culture of the common reader is what one *means* by cultural literacy.

Now the idea of the common reader was one of the principles that governed the composition research we undertook a year ago at the University of Virginia. Our original purpose was to find out how much difference good writing versus bad actually made to the common reader of

our own day. We reasoned that if some consistent difference could be measured between the effectiveness of a well-written text and a poorly written one that conveyed the same meanings, then perhaps some aspects of paper-grading could be related to the real world, with attendant benefits to students, teachers and researchers. We also assumed that if we gathered about two hundred literate adults together in a room, we might get a statistical approximation of the common reader of our own culture and might therefore get highly duplicatable results.

In a typical presentation we did gather about two hundred people in a lecture room, in the front of which was a big digital clock that kept time in seconds. From this clock, the readers could set down the starting and finishing times of each task they performed. Then we distributed booklets, half of which contained an essay written by an inexperienced freshman, while the other half contained an expert rewrite of the same essay. Also included in both booklets were questionnaires about the content of the essays. And, of course, in all cases, we also included identical essays in both booklets as controls.

Our early results were highly promising, because we quickly demonstrated that a rewrite by an expert did indeed communicate more effectively than the original freshman piece, even when the length, meaning, and tone of the rewrite stayed as close as possible to the original. This was apparently the first time anyone had measured the global difference that good writing makes. Just how much difference is shown in the next figure.



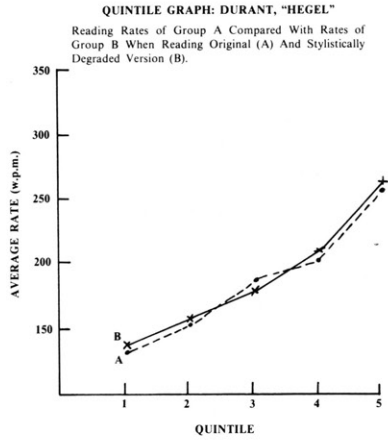
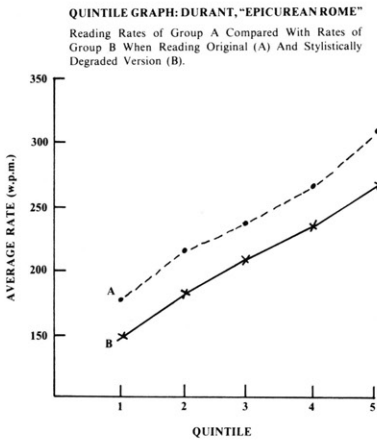
These two graphs placed side by side are called quintile graphs because the computer has divided readers of each booklet into five groups, according to their reading rates, with the lowest fifth labeled 1 along the base of the graph, the next fastest fifth labeled 2, and so on. The vertical line marks off reading rates. The *average* reading rate for each of these groups was then plotted above its quintile number and marked as a point or as an X to distinguish the groups. Then we drew a solid line between the X's and a dotted line between the points, thus giving a visual picture of the way our two groups of readers dealt with the two texts presented to them. For simplicity, these graphs leave out separate plots of accuracy scores. And in any case (because of our instructions to the audience), the difference in accuracy scores was rarely more than two percent.

Now this was really a very pretty result. The left-hand graph shows how the two groups performed when they read the same essay, and it shows quite convincingly that our shuffling of the booklets had paired off two very similar groups of readers. Since we always got this kind of result on the control essays, we were persuaded that our procedures were sufficiently reliable that differences in the performances of the groups would be highly informative about writing quality.

And so they proved to be, as you can observe on the right-hand graph. In this case, one half of the audience read the original student essay neatly retyped and properly punctuated, while the other group, indicated by the broken line, read an expert revision which contained only stylistic changes, such as those which composition teachers usually recommend. The expert version was, as you see, read and understood much more efficiently than was the original paper. Moreover, since the student paper was a rather good one—in the B-minus range according to most of our teaching staff—we had apparently developed a rather sensitive measure of the difference between good and bad writing. But what we had also developed, as we went on to discover, was an interesting measurement of some of the cultural dimensions that lie invisibly beyond style and rhetoric per se. It was the later discovery that germinated the subject of this present essay.

Before I discuss the next figure, I will describe the experiments that produced its results. In these experiments, instead of rewriting student essays, we decided to run some tests on well-written, published essays that had been stylistically degraded according to some specific rules. What we mainly did to degrade the essays was to change the order of clauses or words within the sentences so that the main idea was put in the middle instead of at the beginning or end where the original writer had put it. This also had the effect of interfering with the coherence of the original, by separating words that linked one sentence to another. But since we did not alter the actual words or the order of the sentences, the meanings of the two

versions remained essentially the same. The texts we used were passages from the multi-volumed *History of Civilization* by William and Ariel Durant, which could serve as an endless source of diverse materials, all written in a similar style, and all directed to the same readers. In the next figure you can see how our readers performed when they dealt with two essay pairs, one of them on a rather familiar topic for them, the other on an unfamiliar topic.



The essay on the left was a descriptive piece on everyday life in Ancient Rome, and it focused on the institution of the baths. The essay on the right was an explanation of Hegel's conception of logic as metaphysics. Remember that the styles are equally non-technical in both cases, and that the original versions (represented by the broken lines) were both degraded in exactly the same ways. The only difference was the familiarity of the topic for our readers.

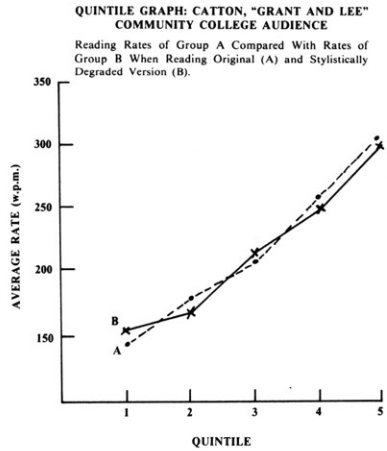
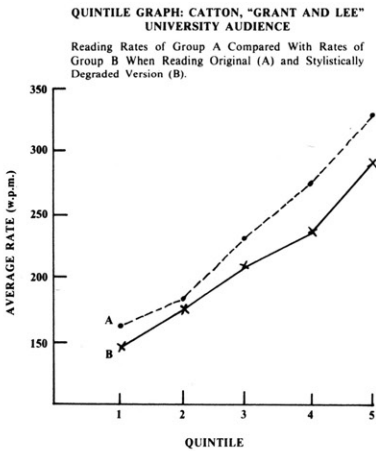
This was by no means an obvious or predictable result. In fact, one could imagine its going in just the other direction, with the double handicap of an unfamiliar topic *and* an incoherent style tending to widen the differences between the two essays on Hegel. What in fact happened, however, was that the topic itself required so much time and effort from the reader that the added effort induced by a poor style became irrelevant.

Or one could put the conjectured explanation in another way: the amount of pondering and dredging-up required to make sense of the linguistic surface was largely going on beneath the linguistic surface. Because the topic was unfamiliar, the assumptions behind the topic (even

though vaguely known to the common reader) had to be worked out explicitly in the reader's mind to make the linguistic surface meaningful. You will notice that the audience read the Hegel about fifty words-per-minute slower than the Roman baths—thus obliterating the magnitude of speed discrimination owing to style alone.<sup>5</sup>

One's first instinct is to say that the Hegel subject was *intrinsically* more difficult and abstract than the Roman subject, but that is probably quite wrong. The Hegel topic was harder for these readers simply because it was less familiar to them. If we had conducted our experiments at a convention of philosophers, it is highly likely that the two graphs on bathing and on Hegel would have looked very similar.<sup>6</sup>

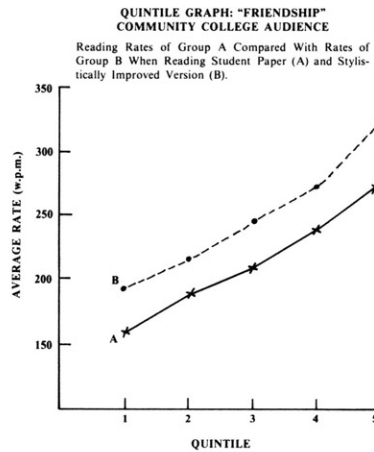
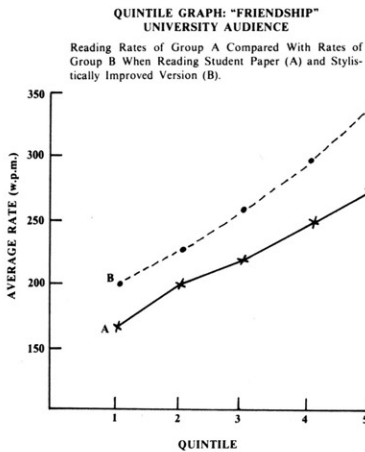
This interpretation is borne out by another experiment we conducted, again using systematically degraded texts. In this case our original text was a passage from Bruce Catton that contrasted the personalities of Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee. But instead of finding another, less familiar topic in Catton's book, we simply presented this same text to two different kinds of audience, the first consisting of about two hundred university students, the second of about two hundred community-college students who were in basic and intermediate writing courses. The next figure shows the results:



<sup>5</sup> This explanation assumes that there's a limit to the time and effort people are willing to expend in puzzling out the meaning of a text. The limit is probably a generous one in reading the short, 750-word texts which we used in our experiments. When texts are longer, reader tolerance may decline, and the effects of bad writing and hard subjects may be greater with these longer texts. This conjecture must, of course, be validated.

<sup>6</sup> This point must be validated by further empirical work.

You will quickly notice the similarity with the pairing of Hegel and the Roman baths. For our community-college subjects, reading about Grant and Lee was rather like reading about Hegel's logic in the earlier case. Community college students could do it, and could answer questions accurately, but they had to dredge up consciously so much unfamiliar, extra-linguistic material that the quality of the linguistic surface became irrelevant to them. To show that this interpretation is highly plausible, let me provide one last figure, in which the university audiences and the community college audiences are reading a simple student essay on friendship—along with its expert revision.



From this last example, it seems warranted to suppose that the quality of writing style only begins to make a significant difference when readers are culturally literate—when they have sufficient extra-linguistic knowledge to permit an easy competence in the linguistic sphere.

There is a famous anecdote about a Princeton matron who went to hear the great Einstein speak on the General Theory of Relativity. Her puzzled comment after the lecture was "I understood all of the words; it was how they were put together that baffled me." This is a pungent description of how an understanding of the linguistic surface of speech depends upon an extra-linguistic knowledge of the subject matter which the linguistic

surface treats. And just recently, I ran across a very clever and specific example of this phenomenon in the most recent issue of the *English Journal*. It was called "The Readability of an Unreadable Text," by Robert Gordon.<sup>7</sup> He took a published text whose readability score was only fourth-grade level on the Dale-Chall index. As you know, these readability scores are based on the familiarity of words, the average sentence length, and the number of syllables in a 100 word passage. Such indexes to readability work reliably on the average because short, familiar words are generally used in familiar ways, and short sentences are easy to process. But this was the passage Gordon chose:

"Well then," said Parmenides, "if there is a one, of course the one will not be many. Thus it cannot have any parts or be a whole. For a part is a part of a whole, and a whole means that from which no part is missing; so whether you speak of it as 'a whole' or as 'many parts' in either case the one would consist of parts and in that way be many and not one. But it is to be one and not many. Therefore if the one is to be one, it will not be a whole nor have parts." (137-d)

This is, in fact, a very easy passage for anybody who knows Plato and what he is getting at in *The Parmenides*, but that includes very few people, I suppose, and nobody in fourth grade. Yet the linguistic surface *is* normal in syntax and fourth-grade level in vocabulary. Psychologically speaking, one might say that the topic is strange to those who lack a well formed "schema" for metaphysical speculation, because they have not been exposed to other passages like this one. In Piagetian terms, they have difficulty in accommodating what is being said to schemata that they already possess. Thus an ordinary reader will need a great deal of time to work out ways of accommodating such a linguistic surface to more familiar schemata. Or, alternatively, the reader might need to get more words from an editor or commentator, in order to help him perform this accommodation. In either case, this simple linguistic surface from Plato will normally require a lot of processing time from a reader.

It seems to me that these considerations have potential application to the teaching of writing. It suggests that there exists an unbroken continuum from cultural literacy, to literacy in reading, and thence to competence in writing. How could a person possibly write better than he or she can read? One has to read one's own writing, after all, in making the most elemental

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Gordon, "The Readability of an Unreadable Text," *English Journal*, 69 (March, 1980), 60-61.



stylistic choices. And how can one read one's own writing on a topic which is unfamiliar—or make guesses about one's reader's knowledge of such a topic? How would one know what to include or omit? Is it plausible to think that the basic writing students who found Grant and Lee to be unfamiliar topics for reading, would be able to write about Grant and Lee effectively? Surely they could do so only after long reading, in which they not only learned about Grant and Lee, but also learned what their own readers could be expected to know about Grant and Lee. One is led to the conclusion that advancement in cultural literacy is a firm pre-requisite for advancement in the skill of writing. This implies, of course, that there can be no quick fix to our students' shortcomings in writing. No amount of training in the skills of composition, in the writing process, and in the basics will by themselves convey the additional cultural information that underlies advancement in general literacy.

This (for me) newly-won insight fosters a certain skepticism about the practical importance of new researches into the writing process. I am strongly in favor of this research. We can never learn too much about the most efficient and successful methods of teaching the skills of writing. On the other hand, we also need a reminder that even in the domain of writing skill per se, the cultural element always obtrudes. Except for spelling, and the motor skills used in forming letters, all aspects of grammar, vocabulary, and habitual speech patterns are determined by the earlier cultural backgrounds of our students. In our diverse culture, every classroom is full of students with very different cultural starting points, and this makes it highly unlikely that we will find a single optimal technique of instruction in writing skills—unless it be the method of individual tutorial instruction.

This insight was the real point at issue in the recent, much-publicized court case in Ann Arbor where parents of Black children argued successfully that white teachers should learn the speech conventions of Black children in order to lead them effectively into the standard conventions. Because the cultural starting points of these Black children were non-standard, the techniques of acculturation should take that fact into account. That was the common sense behind the ideological rhetoric in the case; and that is surely why the Black parents won, and the School Board decided not to appeal. The whole incident points away from standardized methods of teaching writing, towards eclectic ones suitable to diverse classrooms. Most of us teachers in actual classrooms have learned that the most useful composition research has been the experience of our colleagues who teach the same sorts of students as we, in the same sort of cultural setting. Perhaps this fact explains the recent popularity of so-called "naturalistic" educational research.

My skepticism towards a pure skills-approach to composition applies also to our expropriation of findings from other disciplines such as semantics, linguistics, heuristics, psychology, psycholinguistics, and text-linguistics. Here again, I speak as a newly-won convert away from my earlier sanguine expectations. These fields are full of rich insights which add to our theoretical understanding of language. But their contributions are elementary and universal ones. Any teacher of Basic Writing is already dealing with cultural complexities of discourse that make the most sophisticated psycholinguistic experiments seem primitive. This was a conclusion that I reluctantly reached after immersing myself for five years in psycholinguistics, and then writing a chapter on the subject in my book on composition theory. I had to concede that every direct application of new findings from psycholinguistics was already well-represented in traditional textbooks, some of them going back to Hugh Blair's in the eighteenth century.

I hope I am not misunderstood in making these observations. I am not trying to suggest that the skills approach to writing has been overstressed. Anyone who writes knows that writing skills cannot possibly be overstressed or overtaught. My point is, rather, that the cultural approach, the imparting of essential information has been *neglected* as an integral part of our teaching of writing. I also hope I am not misunderstood when I stress that there can be no royal road, even paved with good research, to the teaching of writing. No *royal* road, but a road. There is a body of principles and maxims which successful and experienced teachers have acquired, and which constitutes a system of genuine practical knowledge. My skepticism has simply extended to the hope for a wonder drug that will quickly cure our students' threefold illiteracy in reading, writing, and in cultural knowledge. In short, the burden of my song is that writing competence is a deeply complex and far-reaching cultural acquisition, which has declined even where efficiency in teaching the skill of writing has advanced.

Having now made this point from several different directions, I will devote my last minutes to its positive and practical implications in moving us towards a literate democracy, the subject of this conference. My first inference concerns the unfortunate fragmentation of our teaching of literacy. I know from my own experience that this fragmentation has been accelerating at the college level since around 1950, when college English teachers divided themselves into two separate professional organizations—teachers of literature and teachers of composition—represented by the Modern Language Association on the one hand, and the Conference on College Composition and Communication on the other. The emphasis on composition in the past few years has accelerated this fall into disunity.

My own attitude to this division must be obvious from what I have been saying. It is a very unfortunate and regressive development. Every teacher of writing should ideally be also a teacher of literature in its broadest sense. The teacher of literacy needs also to be a teacher of cultural literacy. The worst of all worlds would be to have separate courses conducted by different technocratic specialists in reading, in writing, and in literature—that world towards which we are now moving. Teachers themselves should be culturally literate, and should be able to teach all dimensions of literacy.

Another inference is that Back-to-the-Basics needs to be supplemented with Back-to-the-Classics: back to content, shared knowledge, cultural literacy. Cultural literacy implies, does it not, teaching shared knowledge about ourselves, our history and our world, our laws, our political, economic, and social arrangements, our classical texts from a great many domains including TV, the movies, and literature. The hope that an invisible hand will somehow integrate the fragmented knowledge that we convey in our schools is beginning to lose its appeal, as we infer from the reinstatement of required courses in the colleges. I hope that these are portents of an insight into the connection between cultural literacy and literacy per se. It is no accident that a report of declines in writing skills was accompanied by a report that forty-seven per cent of our seventeen-year-olds—students on the verge of being voters—do not know that each state elects two senators, have no notion of the fifth amendment, believe that the President appoints members of Congress.<sup>8</sup> We have all heard these horror stories, yet even as I write this, I read in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that a plan to assess the actual knowledge acquired by students in different school systems has been attacked by educators as inappropriate to our pluralistic society. In this context the word “pluralistic” begins to sound like a code word for evasion of responsibility.<sup>9</sup>

In my own mind there is a direct rather than accidental connection

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1978), Chapter 5, “The New Illiteracy.”

<sup>9</sup> Since writing this, I have had a chance to pursue some experiments with the kinds of tacit information required by articles in *The Reader's Digest*. The tacitly assumed information is signaled, usually, by the explicit words of the text. For instance, in the Grant and Lee text mentioned above, to be familiar with the words *Grant* and *Lee*, and what they signify in our culture, is already to have the requisite cultural information for reading the passage. Hence cultural literacy does not reside in knowledge of a canonical list of texts, but rather in the knowledge that is represented by having a wide linguistic repertory. To understand and know how to use words is to have also the shared information that lies behind their use. So long as a student achieves an adequate linguistic repertory, it scarcely matters how he got there. So a pluralistic attitude toward method and curricula is more defensible than a pluralistic (responsibility-evading) attitude toward educational aims.

between the new cultural illiteracy and the decline in writing competence. The decline is not altogether owing to TV, which in some respects is a force *for* cultural literacy. After I read one summer about three thousand freshman essays from university and community college students, I was persuaded that the decline in writing competence is real. But in most cases the decline is in the conventions and nuances of writing, more than in grammar and spelling. It seems connected with a decline in the amount of reading and writing students have done, but most of all, with the loss of a sense of membership in a literate community that provides an appropriate audience to which writing can be addressed. This new cultural illiteracy makes writing a strange and Kafkaesque activity for people who cannot possibly have a sense of a common reader to whom their writing could be directed.

There has thus arisen in exacerbated form the phenomenon of writing anxiety—comparable to math anxiety, but in some respects more disabling. Many of the most moving examples in Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* are examples of the writing anxieties of basic writers. And Professor Morris Holland of UCLA, a psychologist, has observed in basic writers the classical symptoms, including physical ones, of acute anxiety.<sup>10</sup> From interviewing such students, Holland found that the chief cause of their fear and disorientation is their uncertainty about how their writing will be responded to—not just how it will be graded, but how it will be understood and valued. The student is like K in Kafka's *Trial* who knows he has broken some law and is to be punished, but cannot say *which* law it might be. I think that much of this disabling uncertainty and anxiety is well-warranted, because there is, for these student writers, no dependable readership and no sense of membership in a literate community.

As teachers we want to introduce our students into this community. In this talk, I have argued that this means we must teach not just shared linguistic skills, but shared cultural knowledge as well. Finally, this raises the question whether this leads us logically to a Napoleonic sort of educational system in which everybody is taught exactly the same things as everybody else. I trust not. But we are led towards such a conception even if only to a limited extent. I have no doubt that there are some things we want every citizen to know—for instance, whether a U.S. senator is elected by the people or appointed by the President, and so on. Perhaps we could agree also that there are some texts or facts that we want everyone to share as a common inheritance.

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<sup>10</sup> Morris Holland, "Writing Anxiety," unpublished talk presented in Los Angeles, 1978.

But, beyond this agreed-upon, narrow core of knowledge, a totally regimented curriculum is quite unfeasible. The knowledge most needful changes over the years, and, in any case, educational regimentation is not going to be accepted in this diverse and independent-minded country. So, for us, the idea of cultural literacy must entail not just shared pieces of knowledge, but also shared *types* of knowledge. Even if all high school graduates do not read *Hamlet*, perhaps all of them could read one tragedy by Shakespeare? The cultural commonality would then partly reside in shared types of experience, and common *types* of knowledge is what cultural literacy partly means.

Psycholinguists have shown that these typical structures, called "schemata", are required for both reading and writing. Moreover, these schemata can be shared even when they are built up from similar rather than identical materials. Reading one nineteenth century novel is about as useful as reading another in building up these complex convention systems. Seeing one episode of MASH will be as useful as seeing another. The same holds true in building up the shared schemata needed for writing. Nonetheless, the teaching of cultural literacy cannot be haphazard. It will not take care of itself. It requires us to agree about the *kinds* of materials we shall teach, and also about some of the particular facts and texts we shall teach. It would certainly be useful to literacy if this idea of a central shared education were at least being discussed more widely than is now being done. I believe that no subject is more pressing for the advancement of literacy.<sup>11</sup>

So much, then, for my speculations on the extra-linguistic foundations of literacy. This is where Mina's advice has led me so far. I have been led from basic writing to Shakespeare by what seems to me an unbroken chain of implication. It has renewed my sense of the rightness of training composition teachers in subject matters, including literature, and the wrongness of sustaining a separate class of composition specialists who teach nothing else, and who come to think of writing as a craft and a subject in its own right. On the contrary, writing is a craft that is part of a much wider literate culture which the teacher should not only teach but also exemplify. The English teacher has an authentic double vocation in both literature and in literacy. Mina Shaughnessy exemplified this double tradition so brilliantly that she and her work will continue to be for us at once a reassurance and an inspiration.

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<sup>11</sup> But see note 9, above.