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ASSIGNMENTS FOR BASIC WRITERS: UNRESOLVED ISSUES AND NEEDED RESEARCH

In the late nineteenth century, Alexander Bain, professor of rhetoric, logic, and mental philosophy at the University of Aberdeen, charged that what his profession knew about effective writing assignments was only at the level of the "infant school." After detailing many of the problems and inequities inherent in essay assignments, Bain concluded that "there are very strong objections to Essay or Theme writing" as the basis of writing assignments (*Education* 351). In particular, Bain ridiculed the inane topics, such as "On Spring Flowers," that were often favored by teachers of the time. In place of such "futile exercises," Bain offered a number of alternatives. The assignment that "seems to me to comply best with the requirements of composition," he says, is the critical explanation of good writing. In such an assignment, the "pupil's mind . . . is wholly bent upon the ways and means of expression; and I scarcely know any other exercise that is equally recommendable. . . ." (353). In his textbooks, Bain practiced what he preached: His numerous assignments provide students with the "subject matter" and ask them to analyze the given prose and to explain their analyses to the teacher.

But Bain's notions of what constituted effective writing assignments were far from universally accepted. Rather than follow

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Bain's analytic model, many nineteenth-century teachers asked students to write original essays on general topics (e.g., "On Honor"; "Whether liberty can exist in a monarchy"; "On Spring Flowers"). In his introductory lecture to his incoming students, for example, William E. Aytoun eschews Bain's advice and argues for original essay writing as the heart of a course in composition and rhetoric (Lunsford, "Essay Writing").

Late nineteenth-century textbooks also reflect the wide disparity in writing assignments and, incidentally, go a long way toward deserving Bain's "infant school" label. Adams Sherman Hill's rigidly prescriptive *The Foundations of Rhetoric* published in 1892 ignores writing assignments completely, as do many other texts. John Genung's *Outlines of Rhetoric* published in 1893, on the other hand, included "Exercises in various processes and planning" and "Exercises in developing parts of a plan," which eventually culminate in an assignment such as this: "Give accounts of one of the following things, choosing the means of exposition that seem most needed: a ballad, a man of letters, a trolley electric car, a ferret, what a chameleon is like, the passion flower, a drama compared with a novel, a touchdown. . . ." (266). Other contemporary texts simply included a list of essay topics "for writing" at the end of each chapter.

My purpose in this essay is not to survey nineteenth-century writing assignments, but rather to suggest that the current uncertainty over what constitutes an effective assignment has a long, interesting, and largely ignored history. Indeed, in some respects we may still be in "infant school" when it comes to our knowledge of how best to craft writing assignments, particularly those for basic writers. Certainly we have achieved no more consensus over parts of this vexing question than had our nineteenth-century ancestors. A look at three unresolved issues related to writing assignment design will exemplify the uncertainty surrounding this crucial aspect of composition studies and pose questions researchers must help us answer.

In "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal," Mike Rose charges that the writing assignments in these courses, "while meant to be presumably relevant and motivating and, in their simplicity, to assist in the removal of error—in fact might not motivate and might not contribute to the production of correct academic prose (109). In particular, Rose argues that exclusive use of simple, personal-topic writing assignments does not prepare remedial students to respond effectively to more complex topics and assignments. The issue Rose raises is, of course, one of mode: should college writing assignments, particularly those intended

for basic writers, emphasize writing in the academic argumentative mode or expressive mode? Rose calls attention to what he feels is a false dichotomy between these two modes and their potentialities. He argues against the notion that “to write in a voice other than one’s most natural is to write inauthentically, to master and use strategies like comparing and contrasting is to sacrifice freedom, to write on academic topics that don’t have deep personal associations is to be doomed to mechanical, lifeless composing, and to write expository, extensive academic prose is to sabotage the possibility of reflexive exploration” (119–20).

The polarization reflected in this dichotomy exists in many basic writing classrooms. As a result, when basic writers get a chance to write sustained discourse, they often write on narrative and “personal interest” topics. Those in more advanced courses and in other disciplines, on the other hand, find themselves almost universally required to produce argumentative or expository “academic” prose on abstract subjects. The use of narration in basic writing courses seems to rest on a belief that narrative is developmentally prior and hence “easier” to produce than other modes of discourse. We have very little research, however, on which to base such beliefs. A recent study by Burleson and Rowan, for example, challenges the assertion and argues instead that “there is no relationship between social cognitive ability and narrative writing skills” (38). These researchers further suggest that definitions of “narrative” may differ radically from teacher to teacher or discipline to discipline.

Additionally, as all those who have tried it can attest, effective narration is extremely difficult to produce. Indeed, Bain pointed out in his 1887 text for teachers of English that narrative is a highly complex mode placing tremendous cognitive demands on the writer, who must often juggle multiple temporal sequences or manage a “story within a story” or another basic “frame.” But even if basic writing students learn to write effective narrative, research conducted by Ed White in connection with the California State University Advance Placement Examination indicates that very little correlation exists between a student’s performance on an essay requiring narration and one requiring argument.

Based on the work of James Moffett, the programs developed for basic writing by David Bartholomae and his colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh advocate moving slowly from personal narratives to tasks demanding more analysis and generalization, arguing that such a sequence allows students to build on their strengths and eventually come to see themselves as competent writers (Lees 145). In spite of Bartholomae’s work, however, many

basic writing courses continue to limit student writing to small units such as the sentence or the paragraph and to the brief narrative or personal-experience essay. Thus the issues of what mode(s) to emphasize, in what sequence, and at what levels in our basic writing assignments is far from settled. Such questions urgently require answers, and they point the way to a number of sorely needed research studies.

A second unresolved issue relating to basic writing assignments has to do with the presentation of the assignment. Should our assignments build in full rhetorical situations for student writers, should they provide only a moderate level of information about the situation, or should they offer only a general, unadorned topic and leave the task of conceptualizing a rhetorical situation up to the students? Recent studies by Gordon Brossell at Florida State University have attempted to provide tentative answers to this question. In one study, researchers provided topics phrased at "three different levels of 'information load' or degrees of specification of rhetorical context," as in the following example:

- Level 1 (low): Violence in the schools.
- Level 2 (moderate): According to a recent report in the news media, there has been a marked increase in incidents of violence in public schools. Why, in your view, does such violence occur?
- Level 3 (high): You are a member of a local school council made up of teachers and citizens. A recent increase in incidents of violence in the schools has gotten widespread coverage in the local news media. As a teacher, you are aware of the problem, though you have not been personally involved in an incident. At its next meeting, the council elects to take some action. It asks each member to draft a statement setting forth his or her views on why such violence occurs. The statements will be published in the local newspaper. Write that statement, expressing your own personal views on the causes of violence in the schools (166).

A major finding of this study is that "essays written at Level 2, the 'moderate information load,' had a higher mean score and a greater mean length than essays written at Levels 1 and 3" (172).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, on the other hand, has consistently favored full rhetorical situations in writing tasks for its examinations. Their judgment is supported by scholars such as Lee Odell, Linda Flower, and Janice Lauer, who argue that knowledge of the rhetorical situation and the audience have a significant effect on writing performance. According to this line of reasoning, the more information students have on their intended audience and the rhetorical situation, the better will be their response. Yet providing a full rhetorical context may make too many demands on students, particularly basic writers, and thus constrain them in unproductive ways. Other researchers advocate more loosely structured topics for basic writing students.

A study by William Smith and his colleagues further confirms the complex nature of topic design. The investigators found that the structure of a writing assignment does "make a difference in quality, fluency, and total error, but not in error ratios" (83). In this study, students wrote in response to a topic framed in three different ways: an "open structure" which simply announced the topic; a "response structure based on one reading" which asked students to address the topic after reading the one passage; and a "response structure based on three readings." The basic writers in this study received the highest mean score on the response based upon three readings and wrote almost as many words in response to it as they did to the "open response" topic and significantly more words in response than to the "response based on a single reading" (84).

As these conflicting opinions and findings demonstrate, we simply have no consensus on the important issue of assignment structure, nor do we have studies of the effect of various levels of rhetorical "information load" on writing done in nontest situations or on the job. And yet the evidence that we do have strongly suggests that the structure of an assignment has a definite effect on the writing students produce in response to it. In view of such evidence, we need research which will help us answer the questions posed by the debate over the optimum type of assignment for basic writers.

Peripheral to the question of assignment wording or structure is the issue of how best to prepare students for an assignment. Here again, strong opinions prevail. A number of teachers and researchers advocate freewriting and journal keeping as the best "prewriting" activities for basic writers, arguing that such activities build fluency and much-needed confidence. Others argue that much more structured discovery techniques are most appropriate for basic writers. In a paper delivered at the 1984 Modern

Language Association, James Reither urged teachers to forego a reliance on freewriting and journals and to concentrate instead on introducing students to the resources that currently lie beyond their grasp—in the library with its vast storehouse of knowledge, for instance. As Bartholomae notes in “Writing Assignments: Where Writing Begins,” assignments, and our preparation for them, reflect clear epistemological assumptions (35). The use of freewriting and journal keeping as the sole means of prewriting, for example, suggests that knowledge is something students already possess and that the purpose of the prewriting is to make that interior knowledge conscious or exterior. On the other hand, Reither’s argument suggests that knowledge is most often outside students, something they must discover in places like libraries or in interactions with other people. I believe that most basic writing teachers would opt for combining these two approaches. Even so, we face many unanswered questions: What prewriting activities most appropriately accompany an assignment calling for exposition, for instance, as opposed to narration or argument? Should prewriting activities be sequenced throughout a term, and if so according to what principles? Might the use of certain prewriting activities allow basic writers to perform more successfully on essay examinations?

A third issue related to basic writing assignments is arguably the most vexatious of the lot: Should basic writers be engaged primarily in assignments that call for drill in discrete sentence-level tasks or in assignments that call for composing whole pieces of discourse? Those favoring drill/workbook assignments argue that such a model allows students to concentrate on one concept at a time and that, eventually, all the small discrete gains will lead to major global improvements in student writing. This belief forms part of the basis for the huge market for workbooks that deal with usage and convention or with sentence structure and grammar. Although their avowed aim is to improve writing, the best that can be said for the workbooks is that they may teach students to recognize surface errors and that they provide moral support for teachers who are bewildered by the various infelicities in student writing. Most such texts take an atomistic approach: learn about parts of speech; then learn about phrases and clauses; then learn about sentences. Fill-in-the-blank exercises predominate. Faith in this approach persists for many faculty in spite of the research-based contention that grammar study in isolation does nothing to improve overall writing quality and that people do not learn in tiny, sequenced steps (Hartwell).

In Errors and Expectations, Mina Shaughnessy, in offering a

detailed profile of beginning writers, insists that our concern in teaching them should begin with intention and purpose. In such a context, errors become impediments to meaning. Errors, therefore, must be understood and learned from rather than be stamped out like infectious diseases. Lynn Quitman Troyka argues that, in fact, successful basic writing assignments must be “demonstrations,” rather than drills. Such demonstrations, she explains, offer “an occasion that totally engrosses the student to the point that all self-consciousness about learning temporarily dims because the material to be learned occurs as a natural part of the experience” (198). Drill exercises, of course, have never been known to engross students completely or to provide such demonstrations. David Bartholomae advocates a careful sequencing of assignments based on whole pieces of discourse, and in a forthcoming essay outlines an entire basic writing course which leads students through a carefully sequenced set of reading and writing assignments. In each case, student writers deal with how to create meaning in extended pieces of discourse (as both readers and writers). In the same way, Sara Garnes, former director of Ohio State University’s Basic Writing Workshop, insists that beginning writers must attend to the larger questions of meaning and form before focusing on discrete errors. In her research, in fact, Garnes demonstrates that basic writers make more errors as they take more risks and stretch for more complex syntactic structures. To focus on surface error, then, denies many students the opportunity for growth.

In my own work, I have suggested that isolated drills and exercises do not transfer effectively into improved academic discourse. Rather, they often lead students to focus on surface-level errors to the point that they cannot begin to say what they mean. My research suggests that basic writers’ difficulties with academic writing and reading relate more to their abilities necessary for conscious abstraction and inference drawing. Like all of us, student writers have great difficulty abstracting and inferring when faced with unfamiliar materials in unfamiliar situations.

Still, many teachers and texts persist in using and presenting the isolated drill model, particularly in basic writing courses. Anyone doubting that this practice is still a dominant one need only look at the sales figures for workbooks in the large basic writing market. We may pay lip service to the concept that beginning writers should deal with whole texts, but our textbook buying habits suggest otherwise. Of course, many basic writing teachers turn to handbooks and workbooks for one very pressing, very important reason: the high incidence of error in basic writers’

prose. Indeed, in spite of Shaughnessy's work, which first helped us realize the need to understand the complex reasons behind the errors produced by our students, we are still far from agreement on how best to deal with the whole issue of error. As Mary Epes notes in a recent study, "Not to teach grammar to nonstandard dialect speakers is inadvisable, but of course how to teach it without derailing the composing process is a knotty problem The way out of this dilemma is . . . to treat composing and editing for correctness as two completely different stages in the writing process, postponing attention to grammar . . . until they have finished drafting. However, simple exhortation to do this does not show basic writers how to do this, nor does writing theorists' lamentation over 'premature preoccupation with matters of correctness' show teachers how to show basic writers how to do this" (31). Epes is right, and while I believe that the case against the use of drill workbooks with basic writers is a very strong one, we still do not know how best to deal with persistent errors. On this question especially we need continuing and better research.

The controversy associated with each of the three major issues I have reviewed illustrates, if nothing else, the complexity involved in designing basic writing assignments. And we have some evidence at least that our students recognize this complexity. A 1985 study conducted by Lorraine Higgins-Hahey reports that "interpreting assignments is a major obstacle for novice writers" and that almost all students in the study "considered interpreting the assignment an underlying problem in their paper writing" (2). And yet many among us continue to treat assignments in a casual, off-the-cuff way, spending little time in constructing or planning for them. Ed Farrell notes that, in fact, he has "even observed a few intrepid souls risk instantaneous creation during the few precious seconds they were able to turn their backs on classes, chalk in hand, to scribble furiously before chaos triumphed" (428). We need to remember that assignments are at the very heart of a writing course, that they are, in fact, "where writing begins" (Bartholomae 35).

One of the earliest and most thorough discussions of the issues involved in designing effective assignments is Richard Larson's "Teaching Before We Judge: Planning Assignments in Composition." So thorough a challenge does Larson offer to teachers that his article deserves to be recalled in detail here. Larson suggests that an assignment "ought not to be given simply to evoke an essay that can be judged. Its purpose should be to teach, . . . to help the student think a little more incisively, reason a little

more soundly, and write a little more effectively. . . ." (209). Such assignments, however, are hard to create: They require that teachers plan every assignment with great care before presenting it to students, identifying the activities and operations of mind in which students must engage if they are to cope with the assignment (213). The remainder of Larson's essay offers a series of guidelines teachers should use in designing assignments, which I excerpt here:

1. Plan the course at least in broad outline for a term and possibly for a year in advance.
2. Consider what the student will need to know in order to do well on the assignment.
3. Decide what you must "teach" now in order to assure students a fair chance to do well on the assignment.
4. Prepare a full written description of the assignment.
5. Determine what your standards of evaluation on the assignment will be.
6. Explain the assignment to the students fully.
7. Allow time for student questions, and be ready to point out pitfalls and difficulties they will encounter as they work on the assignment.
8. In evaluating and commenting on papers, make special note of where the student has and has not succeeded in reaching the objectives of the assignment.
9. Discuss the assignments with students when you return them.
10. Ask students to revise or rewrite.

To this list, extensive as it is, we could of course add other steps, in particular the use of collaboration or peer group response and the chance for self-evaluation.

Larson's article appeared in 1967, and the tenets he proposes have been echoed and amplified by others in the ensuing years (see Jordan, 1963; Jenkins, 1980; Lunsford, 1979; Sternglass, 1981). James Moffett's writings offer a rationale for and examples of the kind of assignments Larson called for. In addition, Lee Odell, William Irscher and others have stressed the fundamental importance of carefully created writing assignments and offered advice to teachers on how to develop assignments. In *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, Erika Lindemann argues that adequate assignments must be grounded in a rhetorical problem, thus providing a theoretical basis for assignment design. After demon-

strating the flaws in topics such as “My Home Town” or “Define Freedom,” Lindemann offers her own “Heuristic for Designing Writing Assignments,” a series of twenty-nine questions grouped under five major heads for teachers to ask themselves while preparing an assignment (203–209).

As this discussion indicates, our discipline has not reached consensus on issues related to the design of basic writing assignments. As I hope I have demonstrated, much more rigorous research needs to be carried out. Unfortunately, we do not have the leisure to wait for such research, faced as we are daily by classrooms full of struggling writers. Hence while I call for continued research I do not wish to end my essay on that note.

Indeed, the work I have just summarized suggests that while we do not have firm answers to all our questions, we do in fact know a great deal about how to design effective basic writing assignments. In spite of the contention surrounding the issues I have discussed, my study of basic writing assignments and my fifteen years of teaching basic writers urge me to a practical, and more positive conclusion. Here, then, are the characteristics which I believe are representative of our best basic writing assignments:

1. They relate speaking, reading, listening, and writing. A carefully sequenced assignment may thus begin with small group discussion and writing, move to full class discussion and note-taking, and culminate in a series of drafts to which group members will listen and respond.
2. They encourage collaboration. One of the most well-established principles of learning theory is that learning always occurs as part of an interaction, either between the learner and environment or, more frequently, between the learner and peers. Basic writing assignments should build on this principle by allowing for as much carefully structured group work as possible.
3. They should encourage risk-taking and meaning-making. Such assignments will follow Vygotsky’s advice to “march slightly ahead” of students, thus challenging them to reach beyond themselves. All too often, basic writers opt for the simple, the safe response to a writing task; they have been “taught” to do so by our subtle message that mechanical correctness is the *sine qua non* of good writing. Yet only when basic writers take risks, trying to express complex ideas and emotions in equally complex

- forms, will they get the necessary practice that will allow them to master those forms. In such assignments, then, errors become occasions for learning.
4. They teach usage conventions and deal with error in the context of the student's own writing. This principle grows naturally out of the one just presented and removes at least some of the pejorative connotations of "error."
 5. They provide continuous practice in perceiving, inferring, abstracting, and generalizing. These skills are crucial to mature writing, and we know that basic writers have difficulty applying them to academic writing tasks. A good basic writing assignment, then, engages students in conscious perceptual activities, using differences in what students "see," to lead to discussions of general and specific, abstract and concrete, and to the use of details to support observations—and then builds on these lessons as, for example, it asks students to infer a generalized thesis from a set of data.
 6. They engage students in choosing topics for discussion and for writing. Most basic writing teachers are agreed that basic writers need to learn to see themselves as writers, as part of the academy. To do so, they must become authors, to gain authority over their writing. Engaging students in the process of choosing and refining assignments is one good way to set them on the path toward authorship, toward owning their own voices and texts.

If I am at all accurate in identifying these six features as characteristic of excellent basic writing assignments, then the messages—and the challenges—to us are clear. Certainly we must engage in more and better research about the relationship between assignments and development in writing, if for no other reason than to avoid Alexander Bain's charge that our knowledge is only at the "infant school" level. But more immediately we must heed Bartholomae's advice to put assignments at the heart of what we do in basic writing courses, designing and sequencing them as carefully as we would a piece of important research. In the long run, as I have suggested, probably nothing reveals more about our theories of knowledge, our attitude toward students, and our attitudes toward learning to write than the assignments we create within that community we call the basic writing class.

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