

# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

**SPRING 1986**

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 1

Inventing the University  
**David Bartholomae**

The Conventions of Expository Writing  
**Myra Kogen**

Rhetorical Communities, the  
International Student and Basic Writing  
**Alan C. Purves**

The Reification of the Basic Writer  
**George H. Jensen**

A Dean's Dilemmas  
**Michael C. T. Brookes**

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# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

VOLUME 5

NUMBER 1

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## CALL FOR ARTICLES

We welcome manuscripts of 10–20 pages on topics related to basic writing, broadly interpreted. Lynn Quitman Troyka will serve as editor starting with the 1986 issues. Authors need not limit themselves to topics previously announced because *JBW* issues will no longer be devoted to single topics.

Manuscripts will be refereed anonymously. We require four copies of a manuscript. To assure impartial review, give author information and a biographical note for publication on the cover page *only*. One copy of each manuscript not accepted for publication will be returned to the author, if we receive sufficient stamps (no meter strips) clipped to a self-addressed envelope. We require the new MLA style (*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 1984). For further guidance, send a stamped letter-size, self-addressed envelope for our one-page style sheet.

*All manuscripts must focus clearly on BW and must add substantively to the existing literature.* We welcome manuscripts that are original, stimulating, well-grounded in theory, and clearly related to practice. Work that reiterates what is known or work previously published will not be considered.

We invite authors to write about matters such as the social, psychological, and cultural implications of literacy; rhetoric; discourse theory; cognitive theory; grammar; linguistics, including text analysis, error descriptions, and cohesion studies; English as a second language; and assessment and evaluation. We publish observational studies as well as theoretical discussions on relationships between basic writing and reading, or the study of literature, or speech, or listening; cross-disciplinary insights for basic writing from psychology, sociology, anthropology, journalism, biology, or art; the uses and misuses of technology for basic writing; and the like.

The term “basic writer” is used with wide diversity today, sometimes referring to a student from a highly oral tradition with little experience in writing academic discourse, and sometimes referring to a student whose academic writing is fluent but otherwise deficient. To help readers, therefore, authors should describe clearly the student population which they are discussing.

We particularly encourage a variety of manuscripts: speculative discussions which venture fresh interpretations; essays which draw heavily on student writing as supportive evidence for new observations; research reports, written in nontechnical language, which offer observations previously unknown or unsubstantiated; collaborative writings which provocatively debate more than one side of a central controversy; and teaching logs which trace the development of original insights.

Starting with the 1986 issues, a “Mina P. Shaughnessy Writing Award” will be given to the author of the best *JBW* article every four issues (two years). The prize is \$500.00, courtesy of an anonymous donor. The winner, to be selected by a jury of three scholars/teachers not on our editorial board, will be announced in our pages and elsewhere.

# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

VOLUME 5    NUMBER 1    SPRING 1986

The *Journal of Basic Writing* publishes articles of theory, research, and teaching practices related to basic writing. Articles are refereed by members of the Editorial Board (see overleaf) and the Editor.

LYNN QUITMAN TROYKA  
*Editor*

RUTH DAVIS  
*Associate & Managing Editor*

MARILYN MAIZ, *Associate Editor*

BARRY KWALICK, *Consulting Editor*

The *Journal of Basic Writing* is published twice a year, in the spring and fall. We welcome unsolicited manuscripts and ask authors to consult the detailed "Call for Articles" in this issue. Subscriptions for individuals are \$8.00 for one year and \$15.00 for two years; subscriptions for institutions are \$12.00 for one year and \$23.00 for two years. Foreign postage is \$2.50 extra per year. ADDRESS: Journal of Basic Writing, Instructional Resource Center, The City University of New York, 535 East 80th Street, New York, NY 10021.

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## JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

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## EDITOR'S COLUMN

To be appointed editor of the *Journal of Basic Writing* is to become custodian of a symbol as well as a publication. When *JBW* was founded by Mina Shaughnessy and her colleagues at The City University of New York in 1975, it helped signal the emergence of basic writing as an uniquely important field within English studies. Each issue published since then has reminded us of the continued evolution of that field. I am delighted, and very honored, to assume the editorship of *JBW* and thus help sustain the extraordinary tradition started a decade ago.

With this issue, *JBW* inaugurates a number of changes. Our new cover symbolizes the start of our second decade of publication. Designed to give our readers easy reference to an issue's contents, it reflects our new policy of moving away from issues with a single theme to issues on various topics, thus giving us the flexibility of being able to publish new material quickly.

*JBW* is now a refereed journal. After passing through an initial screening process for general suitability, all articles (except invited essays) are reviewed by at least two members of our Editorial Board or, when needed, by external reviewers. Authors and reviewers remain anonymous, and authors receive copies of all reviews when a final decision is reached. Thus, although we cannot publish all the manuscripts sent to us, we can surely promise expert guidance for newer and experienced authors alike.

*JBW* has an enlarged Editorial Board. The names are listed on our masthead. This outstanding group of teachers, scholars, and researchers in basic writing and other areas of composition and rhetoric, honors *JBW* with their willingness to serve. As you read this, each person will have served one year of a three-year term, working actively as a reviewer and advisor.

Starting with our 1986 issues, a \$500 prize, the "Mina Shaughnessy Writing Award," will be given to the best essay in *JBW*

every two years (four issues), thanks to an anonymous donor. The judges will be independent of the Editorial Board. I hope that this prize will stimulate many fine contributions to our pages.

No reorganization such as *JBW* has undergone in the last year would have been possible without the energies and personalities of key figures at The City University of New York. Marie Jean Lederman, then University Dean for Academic Affairs, invited me to serve and has facilitated my work ever since with patience and vision. Marilyn Maiz, our Associate Editor, is not only our resident *JBW* historian but also our executive producer, somehow finding time in her already crowded schedule to work out myriad details while remaining always unflappable and warmly supportive. Ruth Davis, our Associate and Managing Editor, combines her extensive experience with academic journals and academics with a rare and lively ability to attend to exquisite detail that daily amazes the rest of us.

With this as background, I invite your attention to this issue. To assure that *JBW* would get off to a strong start in 1986, I invited seven outstanding people to write about their current concentration as it relates to basic writing. The result, I think, is fascinating. The authors teach at diverse colleges and did not collaborate on their plans, yet what emerges is a surprisingly cohesive collection that suggests fresh views for scholarship and research in basic writing, ideas that clearly launch basic writing into its second decade of life.

Essays by David Bartholomae and Myra Kogen open the issue with careful analyses of complete passages of student writing to challenge us to notice with fresh eyes how basic writers handle the conventions of academic written discourse. Bartholomae's intriguing insights come from his study of 500 essays on a single topic; Kogen's cogent argument leads us away from a "deficit model" of the basic writer toward reading between the lines of student writing to find strengths of discourse upon which to build.

The conventions of academic writing are next discussed from an international perspective by Alan C. Purves who draws on his landmark five-years' research in national writing styles in 15 countries. Knowing that ESL students are often part of basic writing classes, Purves offers student samples to counsel us wisely, and with sensitivity, to crucial international differences in interpretive and rhetorical communities. Diversity is also the concern of George H. Jensen who shows us compelling evidence for the learning strengths of basic writers. Using carefully gathered data based on the personality theory of Carl Jung, operationalized in the personality inventory of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator,



Jensen makes clear why no longer can we accept research on basic writers that ignores their assets and their heterogeneity.

Michael C. T. Brookes switches our focus from students to teachers, offering us a touching portrait of himself as a head academic dean at a CUNY college who volunteered to teach a class in basic writing. By narrating his experience and sharing excerpts from his journal, Brookes is refreshingly candid about himself, his perceptions of his students, and his revised perspectives as an administrator.

Essays by Marilyn Sternglass and Andrea Lunsford on assignments for basic writers complete this issue. Sternglass uses student samples to argue convincingly that when basic writers make a personal "commitment" to a writing task, they engage in more complex thinking and demonstrate less dependence on source texts. Lunsford traces the history of writing assignments, draws skillfully on a wealth of sources to review the literature on current controversies over what constitutes an effective assignment, and then offers concrete and challenging guidance by giving us a list of six characteristics that typify good assignments for basic writers.

I commend this collection to you. Much here will likely strike our readers as controversial or worthy of comment, for new territory is being explored. We invite for possible publication your responses (500–750 word limit) or letters to the editors, but most of all we invite your essays to our pages.

*Lynn Quitman Troyka*

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**Correction:** Frank Parker, whose article on dyslexia appeared in our Fall 1985 issue, was incorrectly identified. He is currently Professor in the Interdepartmental Linguistics Program of Louisiana State University.

David Bartholomae

## INVENTING THE UNIVERSITY<sup>1</sup>

*Education may well be, as of right, the instrument whereby every individual, in a society like our own, can gain access to any kind of discourse. But we well know that in its distribution, in what it permits and in what it prevents, it follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it.*

Foucault, "The Discourse on Language" (227)

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like History or Anthropology or Economics or English. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. Or perhaps I should say the various discourses of our community, since it is in the nature of a liberal arts education that a student, after the first year or two, must learn to try on a variety of voices and interpretive schemes—to write, for example, as a literary critic one day and an experimental psychologist the next, to work within fields where the rules governing the presentation of examples or the development of an argument are both distinct and, even to a professional, mysterious.

The students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they

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David Bartholomae is Associate Professor of English and Director of Composition at the University of Pittsburgh. He has served on the executive committees of CCCC, WPA, and the College Section of NCTE. He has just been elected Assistant Chair of CCCC. He has written extensively on basic writing and basic writers.

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were easily and comfortably one with their audience, as though they were members of the academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists; they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language. Or they must dare to speak it, or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is "learned." And this, understandably, causes problems.

Let me look quickly at an example. Here is an essay written by a college freshman, a basic writer:

In the past time I thought that an incident was creative was when I had to make a clay model of the earth, but not of the classical or your everyday model of the earth which consists of the two cores, the mantle and the crust. I thought of these things in a dimension of which it would be unique, but easy to comprehend. Of course, your materials to work with were basic and limited at the same time, but thought help to put this limit into a right attitude or frame of mind to work with the clay.

In the beginning of the clay model, I had to research and learn the different dimensions of the earth (in magnitude, quantity, state of matter, etc.) After this, I learned how to put this into the clay and come up with something different than any other person in my class at the time. In my opinion, color coordination and shape was the key to my creativity of the clay model of the earth.

Creativity is the venture of the mind at work with the mechanics relay to the limbs from the cranium, which stores and triggers this action. It can be a burst of energy released at a precise time a thought is being transmitted. This can cause a frenzy of the human body, but it depends of the characteristics of the individual and how they can relay the message clearly enough through mechanics of the body to us as an observer. Then we must determine if it is creative or a learned process varied by the individuals thought process. Creativity is indeed a tool which has to exist, or our world will not succeed into the future and progress like it should.

I am continually impressed by the patience and good will of our students. This student was writing a placement essay during freshman orientation. (The problem set to him was, "Describe a

time when you did something you felt to be creative. Then, on the basis of the incident you have described, go on to draw some general conclusions about 'creativity'.") He knew that university faculty would be reading and evaluating his essay, and so he wrote for them.

In some ways it is a remarkable performance. He is trying on the discourse even though he doesn't have the knowledge that makes the discourse more than a routine, a set of conventional rituals and gestures. And he does this, I think, even though he knows he doesn't have the knowledge that makes the discourse more than a routine. He defines himself as a researcher, working systematically, and not as a kid in a high school class: "I thought of these things in a dimension of . . ."; "had to research and learn the different dimensions of the earth (in magnitude, quantity, state of matter, etc.)." He moves quickly into a specialized language (his approximation of our jargon) and draws both a general, textbook-like conclusion ("Creativity is the venture of the mind at work . . .") and a resounding peroration ("Creativity is indeed a tool which has to exist, or our world will not succeed into the future and progress like it should.") The writer has even, with that "indeed" and with the qualifications and the parenthetical expressions of the opening paragraphs, picked up the rhythm of our prose. And through it all he speaks with an impressive air of authority.

There is an elaborate but, I will argue, a necessary and enabling fiction at work here as the student dramatizes his experience in a "setting"—the setting required by the discourse—where he can speak to us as a companion, a fellow researcher. As I read the essay, there is only one moment when the fiction is broken, when we are addressed differently. The student says, "Of course, your materials to work with were basic and limited at the same time, but thought help to put this limit into a right attitude or frame of mind to work with the clay." At this point, I think, we become students and he the teacher, giving us a lesson (as in, "You take your pencil in your right hand and put your paper in front of you."). This is, however, one of the most characteristic slips of basic writers. It is very hard for them to take on the role—the voice, the person—of an authority whose authority is rooted in scholarship, analysis, or research. They slip, then, into the more immediately available and realizable voice of authority, the voice of a teacher giving a lesson or the voice of a parent lecturing at the dinner table. They offer advice or homilies rather than "academic" conclusions. There is a similar break in the final paragraph, where the conclusion that pushes for a definition ("Crea-

tivity is the venture of the mind at work with the mechanics relay to the limbs from the cranium . . .”) is replaced by a conclusion which speaks in the voice of an Elder (“Creativity is indeed a tool which has to exist, or our world will not succeed into the future and progress like it should.”).

It is not uncommon, then, to find such breaks in the concluding sections of essays written by basic writers. Here is the concluding section of an essay written by a student about his work as a mechanic. He had been asked to generalize about “work” after reviewing an on-the-job experience or incident that “stuck in his mind” as somehow significant.

How could two repairmen miss a leak? Lack of pride? No incentive? Lazy? I don’t know.

At this point the writer is in a perfect position to speculate, to move from the problem to an analysis of the problem. Here is how the paragraph continues however (and notice the change in pronoun reference):

From this point on, I take my time, do it right, and don’t let customers get under your skin. If they have a complaint, tell them to call your boss and he’ll be more than glad to handle it. Most important, worry about yourself, and keep a clear eye on everyone, for there’s always someone trying to take advantage of you, anytime and anyplace.

We get neither a technical discussion nor an “academic” discussion but a Lesson on Life.<sup>2</sup> This is the language he uses to address the general question, “How could two repairmen miss a leak?” The other brand of conclusion, the more academic one, would have required him to speak of his experience in our terms; it would, that is, have required a special vocabulary, a special system of presentation, and an interpretive scheme (or a set of commonplaces) he could use to identify and talk about the mystery of human error. The writer certainly had access to the range of acceptable commonplaces for such an explanation: “lack of pride,” “no incentive,” “lazy.” Each would dictate its own set of phrases, examples, and conclusions, and we, his teachers, would know how to write out each argument, just as we would know how to write out more specialized arguments of our own. A “commonplace,” then, is a culturally or institutionally authorized concept or statement that carries with it its own necessary elaboration. We all use commonplaces to orient ourselves in the world; they provide a point of reference and a set of “prearticulated” explanations that are readily available to organize and interpret ex-

perience. The phrase "lack of pride" carries with it its own account for the repairman's error just as, at another point in time, a reference to "original sin" would provide an explanation, or just as, in a certain university classroom, a reference to "alienation" would enable a writer to continue and complete the discussion. While there is a way in which these terms are interchangeable, they are not all permissible. A student in a composition class would most likely be turned away from a discussion of original sin. Commonplaces are the "controlling ideas" of our composition textbooks, textbooks that not only insist upon a set form for expository writing but a set view of public life.<sup>3</sup>

When the student above says, "I don't know," he is not saying, then, that he has nothing to say. He is saying that he is not in a position to carry on this discussion. And so we are addressed as apprentices rather than as teachers or scholars. To speak to us as a person of status or privilege, the writer can either speak to us in our terms—in the privileged language of university discourse—or, in default (or in defiance), he can speak to us as though we were children, offering us the wisdom of experience.

I think it is possible to say that the language of the "Clay Model" paper has come through the writer and not from the writer. The writer has located himself (he has located the self that is represented by the *I* on the page) in a context that is, finally, beyond him, not his own and not available to his immediate procedures for inventing and arranging text. I would not, that is, call this essay an example of "writer-based" prose. I would not say that it is egocentric or that it represents the "interior monologue of a writer thinking and talking to himself" (Flower 63). It is, rather, the record of a writer who has lost himself in the discourse of his readers. There is a context beyond the reader that is not the world but a way of talking about the world, a way of talking that determines the use of examples, the possible conclusions, the acceptable commonplaces, and the key words of an essay on the construction of a clay model of the earth. This writer has entered the discourse without successfully approximating it.

Linda Flower has argued that the difficulty inexperienced writers have with writing can be understood as a difficulty in negotiating the transition between writer-based and reader-based prose. Expert writers, in other words, can better imagine how a reader will respond to a text and can transform or restructure what they have to say around a goal shared with a reader. Teaching students to revise for readers, then, will better prepare them to write initially with a reader in mind. The success of this

pedagogy depends upon the degree to which a writer can imagine and conform to a reader's goals. The difficulty of this act of imagination, and the burden of such conformity, are so much at the heart of the problem that a teacher must pause and take stock before offering revision as a solution. Students like the student who wrote the "Clay Model" paper are not so much trapped in a private language as they are shut out from one of the privileged languages of public life, a language they are aware of but cannot control.

Our students, I've said, have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they were easily or comfortably one with their audience. If you look at the situation this way, suddenly the problem of audience awareness becomes enormously complicated. One of the common assumptions of both composition research and composition teaching is that at some "stage" in the process of composing an essay a writer's ideas or his motives must be tailored to the needs and expectations of his audience. A writer has to "build bridges" between his point of view and his readers. He has to anticipate and acknowledge his readers' assumptions and biases. He must begin with "common points of departure" before introducing new or controversial arguments. There is a version of the pastoral at work here. It is assumed that a person of low status (like a shepherd) can speak to a person of power (like a courtier), but only (at least so far as the language is concerned) if he is not a shepherd at all, but actually a member of the court out in the fields in disguise.

Writers who can successfully manipulate an audience (or, to use a less pointed language, writers who can accommodate their motives to their readers' expectations) are writers who can both imagine and write from a position of privilege. They must, that is, see themselves within a privileged discourse, one that already includes and excludes groups of readers. They must be either equal to or more powerful than those they would address. The writing, then, must somehow transform the political and social relationships between basic writing students and their teachers.

If my students are going to write for me by knowing who I am—and if this means more than knowing my prejudices, psyching me out—it means knowing what I know; it means having the knowledge of a professor of English. They have, then, to know what I know and how I know what I know (the interpretive schemes that define the way I would work out the problems I set for them); they have to learn to write what I would write, or to offer up some approximation of that discourse. The problem

of audience awareness, then, is a problem of power and finesse. It cannot be addressed, as it is in most classroom exercises, by giving students privilege and denying the situation of the classroom, by having students write to an outsider, someone excluded from their privileged circle: "Write about 'To His Coy Mistress,' not for your teacher, but for the students in your class"; "Describe Pittsburgh to someone who has never been there"; "Explain to a high school senior how best to prepare for college"; "Describe baseball to a Martian."

Exercises such as these allow students to imagine the needs and goals of a reader and they bring those needs and goals forward as a dominant constraint in the construction of an essay. And they argue, implicitly, what is generally true about writing—that it is an act of aggression disguised as an act of charity. What they fail to address is the central problem of academic writing, where students must assume the right of speaking to someone who knows Pittsburgh or "To His Coy Mistress" better than they do, a reader for whom the general commonplaces and the readily available utterances about a subject are inadequate. It should be clear that when I say that I know Pittsburgh better than my basic writing students I am talking about a way of knowing that is also a way of writing. There may be much that they know that I don't know, but in the setting of the university classroom I have a way of talking about the town that is "better" (and for arbitrary reasons) than theirs.

I think that all writers, in order to write, must imagine for themselves the privilege of being "insiders"—that is, of being both inside an established and powerful discourse, and of being granted a special right to speak. And I think that right to speak is seldom conferred upon us—upon any of us, teachers or students—by virtue of the fact that we have invented or discovered an original idea. Leading students to believe that they are responsible for something new or original, unless they understand what those words mean with regard to writing, is a dangerous and counterproductive practice. We do have the right to expect students to be active and engaged, but that is more a matter of being continually and stylistically working against the inevitable presence of conventional language; it is not a matter of inventing a language that is new.

When students are writing for a teacher, writing becomes more problematic than it is for the students who are describing baseball to a Martian. The students, in effect, have to assume privilege without having any. And since students assume privilege by



locating themselves within the discourse of a particular community—within a set of specifically acceptable gestures and commonplaces—learning, at least as it is defined in the liberal arts curriculum, becomes more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention and discovery.

What our beginning students need to learn is to extend themselves into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals, gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions, and necessary connections that determine the “what might be said” and constitute knowledge within the various branches of our academic community. The course of instruction that would make this possible would be based on a sequence of illustrated assignments and would allow for successive approximations of academic or “disciplinary” discourse. Students will not take on our peculiar ways of reading, writing, speaking, and thinking all at once. Nor will the command of a subject like sociology, at least as that command is represented by the successful completion of a multiple choice exam, enable students to write sociology. Our colleges and universities, by and large, have failed to involve basic writing students in scholarly projects, projects that would allow them to act as though they were colleagues in an academic enterprise. Much of the written work students do is test-taking, report or summary, work that places them outside the working discourse of the academic community, where they are expected to admire and report on what we do, rather than inside that discourse, where they can do its work and participate in a common enterprise.<sup>4</sup> This is a failure of teachers and curriculum designers who, even if they speak of writing as a mode of learning, all too often represent writing as a “tool” to be used by an (hopefully) educated mind.

Pat Bizzell is one of the most important scholars writing now on basic writers and on the special requirements of academic discourse.<sup>5</sup> In a recent essay, “Cognition, Convention and Certainty: What We Need to Know About Writing,” she argues that the problems of basic writers might be

better understood in terms of their unfamiliarity with the academic discourse community, combined, perhaps, with such limited experience outside their native discourse communities that they are unaware that there is such a thing as a discourse community with conventions to be mastered. What is underdeveloped is their knowledge both of the ways experience is constituted and interpreted in the academic dis-

course community and of the fact that all discourse communities constitute and interpret experience. (230)

One response to the problems of basic writers, then, would be to determine just what the community's conventions are, so that those conventions can be written out, "demystified," and taught in our classrooms. Teachers, as a result, could be more precise and helpful when they ask students to "think," "argue," "describe," or "define." Another response would be to examine the essays written by basic writers—their approximations of academic discourse—to determine more clearly where the problems lie. If we look at their writing, and if we look at it in the context of other student writing, we can better see the points of discord when students try to write their way into the university.

The purpose of the remainder of this paper will be to examine some of the most striking and characteristic problems as they are presented in the expository essays of basic writers. I will be concerned, then, with university discourse in its most generalized form—that is, as represented by introductory courses—and not with the special conventions required by advanced work in the various disciplines. And I will be concerned with the difficult, and often violent, accommodations that occur when students locate themselves in a discourse that is not "naturally" or immediately theirs.

I have reviewed 500 essays written in response to the "creativity" question used during one of our placement exams. (The essay cited at the opening of this paper was one of that group.) Some of the essays were written by basic writers (or, more properly, those essays led readers to identify the writers as "basic writers"); some were written by students who "passed" (who were granted immediate access to the community of writers at the university). As I read these essays, I was looking to determine the stylistic resources that enabled writers to locate themselves within an "academic" discourse. My bias as a reader should be clear by now. I was not looking to see how the writer might represent the skills demanded by a neutral language (a language whose key features were paragraphs, topic sentences, transitions, and the like—features of a clear and orderly mind). I was looking to see what happened when a writer entered into a language to locate himself (a textual self) and his subject, and I was looking to see how, once entered, that language made or unmade a writer.

Here is one essay. Its writer was classified as a basic writer. Since the essay is relatively free of sentence level errors, that

decision must have been rooted in some perceived failure of the discourse itself.

I am very interested in music, and I try to be creative in my interpretation of music. While in high school, I was a member of a jazz ensemble. The members of the ensemble were given chances to improvise and be creative in various songs. I feel that this was a great experience for me, as well as the other members. I was proud to know that I could use my imagination and feelings to create music other than what was written.

Creativity to me, means being free to express yourself in a way that is unique to you, not having to conform to certain rules and guidelines. Music is only one of the many areas in which people are given opportunities to show their creativity. Sculpting, carving, building, art, and acting are just a few more areas where people can show their creativity.

Through my music I conveyed feelings and thoughts which were important to me. Music was my means of showing creativity. In whatever form creativity takes, whether it be music, art, or science, it is an important aspect of our lives because it enables us to be individuals.

Notice, in this essay, the key gesture, one that appears in all but a few of the essays I read. The student defines as his own that which is a commonplace. "Creativity, to me, means being free to express yourself in a way that is unique to you, not having to conform to certain rules and guidelines." This act of appropriation constitutes his authority; it constitutes his authority as a writer and not just as a musician (that is, as someone with a story to tell). There were many essays in the set that told only a story, where the writer's established presence was as a musician or a skier or someone who painted designs on a van, but not as a person removed from that experience interpreting it, treating it as a metaphor for something else (creativity). Unless those stories were long, detailed, and very well told (unless the writer was doing more than saying, "I am a skier or a musician or a van-painter"), those writers were all given low ratings.

Notice also that the writer of the jazz paper locates himself and his experience in relation to the commonplace (creativity is unique expression; it is not having to conform to rules or guidelines) regardless of whether it is true or not. Anyone who improvises "knows" that improvisation follows rules and guidelines.

It is the power of the commonplace (its truth as a recognizable and, the writer believes, as a final statement) that justifies the example and completes the essay. The example, in other words, has value because it stands within the field of the commonplace. It is not the occasion for what one might call an “objective” analysis or a “close” reading. It could also be said that the essay stops with the articulation of the commonplace. The following sections speak only to the power of that statement. The reference to “sculpting, carving, building, art, and acting” attest to the universality of the commonplace (and it attests to the writer’s nervousness with the status he has appropriated for himself—he is saying, “Now, I’m not the only one here who’s done something unique.”). The commonplace stands by itself. For this writer, it does not need to be elaborated. By virtue of having written it, he has completed the essay and established the contract by which we may be spoken to as equals: “In whatever form creativity takes, whether it be music, art, or science, it is an important aspect of our lives because it enables us to be individuals.” (For me to break that contract, to argue that my life is not represented in that essay, is one way for me to begin as a teacher with that student in that essay.)

I said that the writer of the jazz paper offered up a commonplace regardless of whether it was “true” or not, and this, I said, was an example of the power of a commonplace to determine the meaning of an example. A commonplace determines a system of interpretation that can be used to “place” an example within a standard system of belief. You can see a similar process at work in this essay.

During the football season, the team was supposed to wear the same type of cleats and the same type socks, I figured that I would change this a little by wearing my white shoes instead of black and to cover up the team socks with a pair of my own white ones. I thought that this looked better than what we were wearing, and I told a few of the other people on the team to change too. They agreed that it did look better and they changed there combination to go along with mine. After the game people came up to us and said that it looked very good the way we wore our socks, and they wanted to know why we changed from the rest of the team.

I feel that creativity comes from when a person lets his imagination come up with ideas and he is not afraid to express them. Once you create something to do it will be original

and unique because it came about from your own imagination and if any one else tries to copy it, it won't be the same because you thought of it first from your own ideas.

This is not an elegant paper, but it seems seamless, tidy. If the paper on the clay model of the earth showed an ill-fit between the writer and his project, here the discourse seems natural, smooth. You could reproduce this paper and hand it out to a class, and it would take a lot of prompting before the students sensed something fishy and one of the more aggressive ones might say, "Sure he came up with the idea of wearing white shoes and white socks. Him and Billy White-shoes Johnson. Come on. He copied the very thing he said was his own idea, 'original and unique'."

The "I" of this text, the "I" who "figured," "thought," and "felt" is located in a conventional rhetoric of the self that turns imagination into origination (I made it), that argues an ethic of production (I made it and it is mine), and that argues a tight scheme of intention (I made it because I decided to make it). The rhetoric seems invisible because it is so common. This "I" (the maker) is also located in a version of history that dominates classroom accounts of history. It is an example of the "Great Man" theory, where history is rolling along—the English novel is dominated by a central, intrusive narrative presence; America is in the throes of a great depression; during football season the team was supposed to wear the same kind of cleats and socks—until a figure appears, one who can shape history—Henry James, FDR, the writer of the football paper—and everything is changed. In the argument of the football paper, "I figured," "I thought," "I told," "They argeed," and, as a consequence, "I feel that creativity comes from when a person lets his imagination come up with ideas and he is not afraid to express them." The story of appropriation becomes a narrative of courage and conquest. The writer was able to write that story when he was able to imagine himself in that discourse. Getting him out of it will be difficult matter indeed.

There are ways, I think, that a writer can shape history in the very act of writing it. Some students are able to enter into a discourse, but, by stylistic maneuvers, to take possession of it at the same time. They don't originate a discourse, but they locate themselves within it aggressively, self-consciously.

Here is one particularly successful essay. Notice the specialized vocabulary, but also the way in which the text continually refers to its own language and to the language of others.

Throughout my life, I have been interested and intrigued by music. My mother has often told me of the times, before I went to school, when I would “conduct” the orchestra on her records. I continued to listen to music and eventually started to play the guitar and the clarinet. Finally, at about the age of twelve, I started to sit down and to try to write songs. Even though my instrumental skills were far from my own high standards, I would spend much of my spare time during the day with a guitar around my neck, trying to produce a piece of music.

Each of these sessions, as I remember them, had a rather set format. I would sit in my bedroom, strumming different combinations of the five or six chords I could play, until I heard a series which sounded particularly good to me. After this, I set the music to a suitable rhythm, (usually dependent on my mood at the time), and ran through the tune until I could play it fairly easily. Only after this section was complete did I go on to writing lyrics, which generally followed along the lines of the current popular songs on the radio.

At the time of the writing, I felt that my songs were, in themselves, an original creation of my own; that is, I, alone, made them. However, I now see that, in this sense of the word, I was not creative. The songs themselves seem to be an oversimplified form of the music I listened to at the time.

In a more fitting sense, however, I was being creative. Since I did not purposely copy my favorite songs, I was, effectively, originating my songs from my own “process of creativity.” To achieve my goal, I needed what a composer would call “inspiration” for my piece. In this case the inspiration was the current hit on the radio. Perhaps with my present point of view, I feel that I used too much “inspiration” in my songs, but, at that time, I did not.

Creativity, therefore, is a process which, in my case, involved a certain series of “small creations” if you like. As well, it is something, the appreciation of which varies with one’s point of view, that point of view being set by the person’s experience, tastes, and his own personal view of creativity. The less experienced tend to allow for less originality, while the more experienced demand real originality to classify something a “creation.” Either way, a term as abstract as this is perfectly correct, and open to interpretation.

This writer is consistently and dramatically conscious of herself forming something to say out of what has been said and out of what she has been saying in the act of writing this paper. "Creativity" begins, in this paper, as "original creation." What she thought was "creativity," however, she now calls "imitation" and, as she says, "in this sense of the word" she was not "creative." In another sense, however, she says that she was creative since she didn't purposefully copy the songs but used them as "inspiration."

The writing in this piece (that is, the work of the writer within the essay) goes on in spite of, or against, the language that keeps pressing to give another name to her experience as a song writer and to bring the discussion to closure. (Think of the quick closure of the football shoes paper in comparison.) Its style is difficult, highly qualified. It relies on quotation marks and parody to set off the language and attitudes that belong to the discourse (or the discourses) it would reject, that it would not take as its own proper location.<sup>6</sup>

In the papers I've examined in this essay, the writers have shown a varied awareness of the codes—or the competing codes—that operate within a discourse. To speak with authority student writers have not only to speak in another's voice but through another's "code"; and they not only have to do this, they have to speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom; and they not only have to do this, they have to do it before they know what they are doing, before they have a project to participate in and before, at least in terms of our disciplines, they have anything to say. Our students may be able to enter into a conventional discourse and speak, not as themselves, but through the voice of the community. The university, however, is the place where "common" wisdom is only of negative value; it is something to work against. The movement toward a more specialized discourse begins (or perhaps, best begins) when a student can both define a position of privilege, a position that sets him against a "common" discourse, and when he can work self-consciously, critically, against not only the "common" code but his own.

The stages of development that I've suggested are not necessarily marked by corresponding levels in the type or frequency of error, at least not by the type or frequency of sentence level errors. I am arguing, then, that a basic writer is not necessarily a writer who makes a lot of mistakes. In fact, one of the problems with curricula designed to aid basic writers is that they too often

begin with the assumption that the key distinguishing feature of a basic writer is the presence of sentence level error. Students are placed in courses because their placement essays show a high frequency of such errors and those courses are designed with the goal of making those errors go away. This approach to the problems of the basic writer ignores the degree to which error is not a constant feature but a marker in the development of a writer. Students who can write reasonably correct narratives may fall to pieces when faced with more unfamiliar assignments. More importantly, however, such courses fail to serve the rest of the curriculum. On every campus there is a significant number of college freshman who require a course to introduce them to the kinds of writing that are required for a university education. Some of these students can write correct sentences and some cannot, but as a group they lack the facility other freshmen possess when they are faced with an academic writing task.

The "White Shoes" essay, for example, shows fewer sentence level errors than the "Clay Model" paper. This may well be due to the fact, however, that the writer of that paper stayed well within the safety of familiar territory. He kept himself out of trouble by doing what he could easily do. The tortuous syntax of the more advanced papers on my list is a syntax that represents a writer's struggle with a difficult and unfamiliar language, and it is a syntax that can quickly lead an inexperienced writer into trouble. The syntax and punctuation of the "Composing Songs" essay, for example, shows the effort that is required when a writer works against the pressure of conventional discourse. If the prose is inelegant (although I'll confess I admire those dense sentences), it is still correct. This writer has a command of the linguistic and stylistic resources (the highly embedded sentences, the use of parentheses and quotation marks) required to complete the act of writing. It is easy to imagine the possible pitfalls for a writer working without this facility.

There was no camera trained on the "Clay Model" writer while he was writing, and I have no protocol of what was going through his mind, but it is possible to speculate that the syntactic difficulties of sentences like the following are the result of an attempt to use an unusual vocabulary and to extend his sentences beyond the boundaries that would be "normal" in his speech or writing:

In past time I thought that an incident was creative was when I had to make a clay model of the earth, but not of the classical or your everyday model of the earth which consists of the two cores, the mantle and the crust. I thought of these



things in a dimension of which it would be unique, but easy to comprehend.

There is reason to believe, that is, that the problem is with this kind of sentence, in this context. If the problem of the last sentence is a problem of holding together these units—"I thought," "dimension," "unique," and "easy to comprehend"—then the linguistic problem is not a simple matter of sentence construction.

I am arguing, then, that such sentences fall apart not because the writer lacks the necessary syntax to glue the pieces together but because he lacks the full statement within which these key words are already operating. While writing, and in the thrust of his need to complete the sentence, he has the key words but not the utterance. (And to recover the utterance, I suspect, he will need to do more than revise the sentence.) The invisible conventions, the prepared phrases remain too distant for the statement to be completed. The writer must get inside of a discourse he can only partially imagine. The act of constructing a sentence, then, becomes something like an act of transcription, where the voice on the tape unexpectedly fades away and becomes inaudible.

Mina Shaughnessy speaks of the advanced writer as a writer with a more facile but still incomplete possession of this prior discourse. In the case of the advanced writer, the evidence of a problem is the presence of dissonant, redundant, or imprecise language, as in a sentence such as this: "No education can be *total*, it must be *continuous*." Such a student Shaughnessy says, could be said to hear the "melody of formal English" while still unable to make precise or exact distinctions. And, she says, the pre-packaging feature of language, the possibility of taking over phrases and whole sentences without much thought about them, threatens the writer now as before. The writer, as we have said, inherits the language out of which he must fabricate his own messages. He is therefore in a constant tangle with the language, obliged to recognize its public, communal nature and yet driven to invent out of this language his own statements (19).

For the unskilled writer, the problem is different in degree and not in kind. The inexperienced writer is left with a more fragmentary record of the comings and goings of academic discourse. Or, as I said above, he often has the key words without the complete statements within which they are already operating.

It may very well be that some students will need to learn to crudely mimic the "distinctive register" of academic discourse before they are prepared to actually and legitimately do the work

of the discourse, and before they are sophisticated enough with the refinements of tone and gesture to do it with grace or elegance. To say this, however, is to say that our students must be our students. Their initial progress will be marked by their abilities to take on the role of privilege, by their abilities to establish authority. From this point of view, the student who wrote about constructing the clay model of the earth is better prepared for his education than the student who wrote about playing football in white shoes, even though the "White Shoes" paper was relatively error-free and the "Clay Model" paper was not. It will be hard to pry the writer of the "White Shoes" paper loose from the tidy, pat discourse that allows him to dispose of the question of creativity in such a quick and efficient manner. He will have to be convinced that it is better to write sentences he might not so easily control, and he will have to be convinced that it is better to write muddier and more confusing prose (in order that it may sound like ours), and this will be harder than convincing the "Clay Model" writer to continue what he has begun.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

1. This article represents an abridged version of a chapter in *When A Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing Problems*. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: The Guilford Press, 1985.

2. David Olson has made a similar observation about school-related problems of language learning in younger children. Here is his conclusion: "Hence, depending upon whether children assumed language was primarily suitable for making assertions and conjectures or primarily for making direct or indirect commands, they will either find school texts easy or difficult" (107).

3. For Aristotle there were both general and specific commonplaces. A speaker, says Aristotle, has a "stock of arguments to which he may turn for a particular need."

If he knows the topic (regions, places, lines of argument)—and a skilled speaker will know them—he will know where to find what he wants for a special case. The general topics, or *commonplaces*, are regions containing arguments that are common to all branches of knowledge. . . . But there are also special topics (regions, places, *loci*) in which one looks for arguments appertaining to particular branches of knowledge, special sciences, such as ethics or politics. (154-155)

And, he says, "The topics or places, then, may be indifferently thought of as in the science that is concerned, or in the mind of the speaker." But the question of location is "indifferent" only if the mind of the speaker is in line with set opinion, general assumption. For the speaker (or writer) who is not situated so comfortably in the privileged public realm, this is indeed not an indifferent matter at all. If he does not have the commonplace at hand, he will not, in Aristotle's terms, know where to go at all.

4. See especially Bartholomae and Rose for articles on curricula designed to move students into university discourse. The movement to extend writing "across the curriculum" is evidence of a general concern for locating students within the work of the university; see especially Bizzell and Maimon et al. For longer works directed specifically at basic writing, see Ponsot and Dean, and Shaughnessy. For a book describing a course for more advanced students, see Coles.

5. See especially Bizzell, and Bizzell and Herzberg. My debt to Bizzell's work should be evident everywhere in this essay.

6. In support of my argument that this is the kind of writing that does the work of the academy, let me offer the following excerpt from a recent essay by Wayne Booth ("The Company We Keep: Self-Making in Imaginative Art, Old and New"):

I can remember making up songs of my own, no doubt borrowed from favorites like "Hello, Central, Give Me Heaven," "You Can't Holler Down My Rain Barrel," and one about the ancient story of a sweet little "babe in the woods" who lay down and died, with her brother.

I asked my mother, in a burst of creative egotism, why nobody ever learned to sing my songs, since after all I was more than willing to learn theirs. I can't remember her answer, and I can barely remember snatches of two of "my" songs. But I can remember dozens of theirs, and when I sing them, even now, I sometimes feel again the emotions, and see the images, that they aroused then. Thus who I am now—the very shape of my soul—was to a surprising degree molded by the works of "art" that came my way.

I set "art" in quotation marks, because much that I experienced in those early books and songs would not be classed as art according to most definitions. But for the purposes of appraising the effects of "art" on "life" or "culture," and especially for the purposes of thinking about the effects of the "media," we surely must include every kind of artificial experience that we provide for one another . . . .

In this sense of the word, all of us are from the earliest years fed a steady diet of art . . . (58–59).

While there are similarities in the paraphrasable content of Booth's arguments and my student's, what I am interested in is each writer's

method. Both appropriate terms from a common discourse about (art and inspiration) in order to push against an established way of talking (about tradition and the individual). This effort of opposition clears a space for each writer's argument and enables the writers to establish their own "sense" of the key words in the discourse.

7. Preparation of this manuscript was supported by the Learning Research and Development Center of the University of Pittsburgh, which is supported in part by the National Institute of Education. I am grateful also to Mike Rose, who pushed and pulled at this paper at a time when it needed it.

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Myra Kogen

## THE CONVENTIONS OF EXPOSITORY WRITING

A number of composition researchers in the past few years have come to the conclusion that students cannot think. Not the day-to-day thinking of ordinary life—it is admitted our students can get along there. But the abstract formulations and analytic conceptualization required for academic discourse are said to be beyond them.

As the basis for such assumptions, composition researchers have turned to the cognitive theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, both of whom developed schemes to describe the growth of concept formation in young children. According to these schemes, children move from sensory-motor operations to concrete operations to higher and higher levels of abstracting and synthesizing, until, at the age of puberty (ages 11 to 13), they reach the stage when they can carry out sophisticated problem-solving operations.

The problem, as some see it, is that our students have never attained the abilities that Piaget and Vygotsky predict will be achieved by early adolescence. Thus, Annette Bradford questions why “a large number of college freshmen have not acquired an ability which theorists link with ages eleven through thirteen” (19). Andrea Lunsford asserts that basic writers “have not attained that level of cognitive development which would allow them to form abstractions or conceptions” (38). Elaine O. Lees finds in

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student writing "an absence of generalization, an apparent inability to go beyond talk of specific incidents and experiences to conclusions based on them" (145). And Marilyn Goldberg speaks of "the emptiness of [student] generalizations and the poverty of their supporting knowledge" (39).

I would like to take a step back from such categorical assumptions of inability and inadequacy. It is all too easy to conclude that those who do not do, or who do not wish to do, what we seem to be able to do are deficient and underdeveloped. But, more important, such assumptions about reasoning and its role in discourse are not borne out by experience. In this paper I wish to challenge the notion that students, including basic writers, cannot think abstractly. First, I will briefly question the underlying assumptions behind the deficit model; second, I will look closely at student writing samples to show that students are not inept thinkers but simply insufficiently familiar with the conventions of expository discourse; and, last, I will apply these insights to a prominent piece of research which purports to demonstrate that students are poor thinkers.

In concluding that students are cognitively undeveloped, composition researchers are assuming that the conventions of argumentation characteristic of expository discourse are absolute and universal. They take for granted both that the analytic patterns of academic discourse are equivalent to modes of thought and that the chains of reasoning characteristic of expository writing are the only forms of analytic thought. As the work of Walter Ong and others have shown, however, in other cultures other forms of argumentation can be viewed as persuasive (*Interfaces of the Word and Rhetoric, Romance and Technology*). Ong has found that primitive and nonliterate people are capable of developing intensely rich and complex forms of language based on oral traditions (forms based on rhapsodic patterns which employ ritualistic expressions, epithets, and proverbs).

Ong believes that modern society, enveloped as it is by the mass media, often exhibits a kind of secondary orality. As an illustration, Ong describes a teacher asking a class of Black inner-city students what they think of Nixon's actions in Cambodia, and being told by one student, "I wouldn't vote for that Turkey. He raised his own salary" ("Literacy and Orality" 4). Ong points out that, annoying as this comment may have been to the teacher, it shows the ability of the student to think analytically in accordance with the conventions of an oral culture which places primary emphasis on the *deeper issues of life*: "The highly oral student handled the instructor's query as a rhetorical example,

as a concrete instance referring to something at a higher, more generalized level of abstraction" (4).

What Ong's analysis is pointing to, I think, is that college freshmen are not retarded at an early stage of thought development but that, in learning to write, they are falling back on other, less academically oriented forms of reasoning. David Bartholomae makes a similar point about the syntactic difficulties of basic writers:

If we begin [by studying basic writing], we will recognize at once that "basic" does not mean simple or childlike. These are beginning writers, to be sure, but they are not writers who need to learn to use language. They are writers who need to learn to command a particular variety of language—the language of a written, academic discourse—and a particular variety of language use—writing itself. The writing of a basic writer can be shown to be an approximation of conventional written discourse; it is a peculiar and idiosyncratic version of a highly conventional type, but the relation between the approximate and the conventional forms is not the same as the relation between the writing, say, of a 7th grader and the writing of a college freshman . . . [basic writing] is a variety of writing, not writing with fewer parts or more rudimentary constituents. It is not evidence of arrested cognitive development, or unruly or unpredictable language use (254).

When basic writers try to argue, reason, develop ideas in academic discourse, they have the same difficulties that Bartholomae notes concerning syntactic fluency. Teachers reading the essays of these writers find the ideas messy, undefined, undeveloped; the writing seems overly general, or at the other extreme, too specific and personal. The points seem foolish or immature or unrealized.

These difficulties are attributed to a lack of ability on the parts of students to reason, to think analytically. However, the patterns of reasoning we have come to expect in academic writing are not inherent forms of thinking but conventional modes. These forms are so familiar that we conceive of them as natural and inevitable. Our students bringing other, more colloquial forms of reasoning to their writing, are also convinced of the superiority of academic argumentation. They struggle to employ it in their essays but they have learned the systems imperfectly so their attempts seem inadequate and immature.

It would help immeasurably if we could understand exactly what the conventions of argument in academic discourse really



are. Unfortunately, such understanding is difficult to achieve because conventions, by their very nature, are instinctual and automatic. As Douglas Park has pointed out, writers are usually not aware of the conventions that govern a piece of writing; more often it is merely a matter of "being on sure ground," of feeling comfortable with one's voice, and knowing intuitively that a piece is proceeding in accordance with one's own and the readers' expectations (254).

Once we look at the patterns of argumentation used by our students, it becomes clear that whatever their backgrounds may be, in school they are trying to employ the usual modes of reasoning of academic discourse—trying but not totally succeeding. The writing is characterized by conventional patterns that are imperfectly used and only marginally realized. Interestingly, the ideas themselves often seem reasonable enough but connections between ideas are often weak, generalizations needed to link minor and major ideas are often missing, supporting explanations may be only vaguely suggested or even entirely omitted. This lack of adherence to characteristic patterns of argumentation is evident not only in the development of ideas but also in the use of tone or voice.

For example, in an essay titled "My Strengths as a Student," a student in one of my basic writing classes wrote:

The only way I can accomplish what I want to in life is to have strength as a student. I want to do some kind of technical work with my hand, and if I don't finish my degree, I'll never accomplish what I set out to do.

With all the changes I went through with when I came to Register, I feel showed some strength of determination. My Job didn't help matters in fact they add to the confusion. I was told I would get a transfer and at the last minute they couldn't do it. I was left running around trying to get all the classes I needed to be a full-time student.

Now I am in school and I feel I can finish once and fore all if I keep my head in the books which shouldn't be too hard.

Aside from errors in spelling and syntax, or, more probably, partly as a result of these, the passages seemed scattered and irrational. While paragraphs one and three can be said to make some sense, paragraph two seems to have only a vague kind of connection to the other two—something about registration, something about a promised transfer (job transfer?) that did not come through. Readers might ask: How do the sentences on registration relate to the topic? Why is the transfer mentioned?

Actually, the sentences on registration are about the confusion and difficulty of registering for the first time (a confusion experienced by many freshmen). For this student the difficulties of registering were compounded by his not having received a promised job transfer that would have provided better working hours and placed him closer to the college. The argument my student is constructing, then, is that he has already shown great strength as a student—first, because he successfully negotiated the difficulties of registration and, second, because he got through these difficulties in spite of a hampering job situation.

As the ideas appear in the original passages, they seem run together, connections are tenuous, a very important piece of information (what the job transfer meant) is omitted. But the passage is not lacking in sense. In fact, once translated it makes fine sense and, once understood, forms a convincing argument. The first sentence in paragraph two offers the proper generalization for the argument (what I have already gone through to be a student shows that I have the “strength of determination” to succeed). The examples that follow properly support this point. This student simply lacks a sense of how arguments in expository discourse are characteristically developed, how a chain of reasoning is joined and filled in.

One convention of expository writing is that the audience must always be told more than it would need to be told in conversation. Mina Shaughnessy, exploring this difference between speech and writing, pointed out that speech, “looping back and forth between speakers, offering chances for groping and backing up and even hiding, leaving room for the language of hands and faces, of pitch and pauses” is “generous” in comparison to writing which requires more formal supports in accordance with “the rules of evidence” (238). Writers like my student, more attuned to the conventions of speech than writing, often omit information which a listener could supply from context, from tone or gesture, or from other conversational clues. Basic writers need to be helped to understand the limitations of the reading audience, the difficulties of making sense of text without contextual clues.

Even this analysis needs to be qualified, however, for it implies that the amount of information supplied by the writer is determined by the reader’s need to know. Actually, writers often supply much more information than readers actually need and convention permits that they do so. Take, for example, any feature article in the *New York Times* on the city’s beleaguered subway system which, as a matter of course, will describe in detail all the

unspeakable inconveniences that New Yorkers suffer daily. The newspaper's readers do not need this information; they know it only too well. These anecdotes are used not to provide information, but to evoke common feelings of anger and disgust. The extent to which a writer of expository discourse must draw out connections and provide background information, then, is not necessarily determined by the reader's need for knowledge.

In class, topics are often discussed at length by teachers and students before students write on them. No matter how much discussion takes place, however, convention requires that a writer provide some amount of background explanation for the reader even if it is unnecessary. Teachers familiar with the conventions of academic writing often feel that students are poor thinkers when they do not supply such background, forgetting that logic, in this case, is actually on the students' side. For example, a basic writing college class of mine was once asked to argue for or against a writing proficiency examination that had been proposed for the next year. As background, I described the plan for the examination to my students in detail. Nevertheless, I was very surprised when I received a whole set of essays that took for granted that the reader would know all about the proficiency test and its use. My students, as the following introductory paragraph shows, did not realize that convention required that they set the scene by giving known background information:

In my opinion, we the students of Queens Community College don't need this proposed requirement. We have already taken enough exams from the beginning to determine our proficiency in writing. Those who failed the placements tests, were penalized already by taken remedial courses. It would unfairly penalize then again.

The lack of explanation in this paragraph interestingly contrasts with the work of a second, more savvy freshman writer in another college, who was asked to evaluate the effects of an exam already in place:

There are many exams that students are given throughout their lives in order to evaluate their abilities and weaknesses. One such test is the proficiency exam in writing, which must be passed in order to graduate from Hofstra University. Many feel that this requirement should be done away with, but I do not agree. While this test may have its faults, it does measure a students ability to reason logically, put their ideas on paper, and also shows their level of vocabulary.

The first writer was totally unaware that the proficiency examination had to be briefly described in her paper, that the context had to be given. The second student is aware of the conventions and does describe the examination, but, interestingly, he does so with a certain degree of stiffness. He has not yet worked out ways to include unneeded information gracefully.

Aside from logical connections and the use of background information, academic writers also must be concerned with making clear the generalizations upon which their arguments hinge. In less stringent circumstances, for example in conversation, a point can be made swiftly in passing, without a detailed explanation of how it relates to the main theme. In expository writing, however, explicit statements are needed to relate supports to basic propositions. For example, in a passage taken from another paper on the topic of the proposed proficiency examination, the writer suggests a relevant well-reasoned point, but fails to offer a generalization to show how her point relates to her claim that proficiency examinations are an unfair measure of a person's writing ability:

Another point that I will like to make is that what if a person with an A average somehow does not do well on the essay and a person with a D average happens to do the essay well, it would be wrong not to give a degree to the A average person who work so hard to achieve an A average and get the degree and not get it and the D average to get the degree and not even had work that hard with the rest of the work.

The syntax is somewhat difficult to unravel, but the implied point is clear. Using an example, the student argues that the grade on a proficiency examination reflects achievement on one test whereas an overall grade point average reflects achievement in many courses over several years. Therefore, overall GPA is a fairer measure of writing ability and of a student's qualifications to graduate than a proficiency test. The point makes sense, it supports the writer's basic contention and it is neither unreasonable nor simplistic. The student, however, fails to express it explicitly. Basic writers often need help with this important step. They are not aware that convention requires that examples and supports be tied to generalizations with statements that explicitly explain the relationships between them. The student is aware of this relationship or she could not have come up with the example. She needs merely to be told about and given practice with the convention.

An opposite problem, generalization used without an appro-

ropriate elaboration, often appears as well. The following passage in which a student suggests ways of improving registration procedures is an example of this type:

To improve registration procedures they should have all the cards, computers, teachers, chairmen, etc. all in one room. In doing this they will avoid having students running all over the place.

The counselors are a great help but they really can't spend much time with each student. They should also have many more lines of teachers at each booth.

The suggestions for improving registration seem sensible. However, the student is not explaining or supporting his arguments. He is merely stating his ideas without backing them up. Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor have pointed out that cause and effect arguments are supported by the use of a ruling assumption called "agency." Since members of a society are likely to share a number of casual assumptions about human and physical nature, the extent to which the writer must articulate and explain the role of agency in argument is often a matter of judgment:

. . . whether or not we articulate agency in a casual argument depends largely on audience. For example, if we argue that a significant cause of teenage vandalism is violence on TV, the agency between these two is imitation. Since most audiences will readily accept imitation as a human motive, we would not have to stop and argue for it. But if we claimed that wearing a mouth plate can improve athletic performance (*Sports Illustrated*, 2 June 1980), we will certainly have to explain agency (25).

One might say that to my student, the improvements he is suggesting are so obvious that they represent the kinds of casual connections that people in shared cultures can take for granted. The student needs to be made aware that the conventions of academic discourse require that he support or somehow detail his assertions. The extent to which propositions must be explained and supported, however, is a matter of judgment, since no argument can ever be said to be "proved" in this fashion, no matter how many examples or supports are provided.

In addition to lacking facility with the conventional strategies for reasoning and arguing, many students are also unsure about voice and tone. Related to this inability, I think, is the common perception of teachers that much student writing is too personal, too highly confessional and emotional. This perception, while it

seems to be about the treatment of the topic, often turns out to be about voice. Students are approaching topics in what is felt to be an unacademic and overly emotional way. For example, a student of mine, several years ago, wrote the following passages on Jimmy Carter, who was President at the time:

Our new president Jimmy Carter a peanut farmer from Plains, Georgia. My prediction is that frankly he is like the rest of those so-called Presidents down deep inside, corrupt, sinister, indignant, bombastic, malice.

Jimmy Carter is just a figment of speech not a figurehead, he really is Big Business.

Most academic readers would thoroughly disapprove of this passage. Admittedly, the arguments are not subtle, but advanced in a more measured tone, they could be perceived as more persuasive. For example, I think another one of my students, making similar points in the passages below, would be judged to be arguing at a higher level:

Lets look at Jimmy Carter as he was before the election as the governor of Georgia. Down in the south he owned a peanut plantation and became one of the most wealthiest men in the state, yet he plans to pass laws to help the common man, this doesn't seem possible, why wouldn't he pass laws to help his own business, does it make sense to help the common man and hurt himself, or to hurt friends who are in big business. If this question is not on your mind it should be if you take what happens in the government seriously.

There is a tacit agreement among readers of academic discourse that we live in a world of reason, understanding, and for the most part, good intentions. When a writer uses a tone that is consistent with this view—that is, measured, reasonable, non-accusatory—the reader feels confident and will consider the writer's arguments. However, if the writer resorts to bombast or emotional display, his or her ideas will be suspect.

Another convention of expository discourse is that self-interest alone is an unacceptable rationale for an argument. Even if self-interest is the real reason for an assumed stance, the writer must pretend otherwise. Equally important, the writer must signal that he or she is aware of the value system of the reader. For example, one of my students arguing against the proposed proficiency examination displays a fatal lack of awareness of his reader's value system:

In regard to the proposed writing proficiency exam, I fail to see why students already enrolled at this college should be subjected to it. The failure of this exam would deny a student his or her degree. I consider this highly unfair, because the students already attending this college would have a chance of coming out with nothing.

If the primary audience for the paper had been other students in the class, the writer's contention probably would have been accepted. However, the primary audience was actually to be the class's teacher, and for a teacher the major reason for attending college would likely be to acquire an education, not a degree. If the writers show themselves to be ignorant of the value system of their audience, their ideas are likely to be viewed as lacking substance. If they acknowledge the belief system of their audience, even if these beliefs are totally rejected, then their ideas can be taken more seriously.

In the following paper we see the arguments of a student who has learned to take the assumptions of her readers into account. Interestingly, this writer seems to have the same values as the student who wrote the previous paper. However, she has learned to mask this somewhat to appear more persuasive to an academic audience:

In regard to the proficiency examination, I do believe it is very strong in principal. We are in college to earn a degree. So I do think we should work a bit harder to get a wider and voluminous vocabulary and come out to the world with greater knowledge. However, this exam requires a great deal of perfection, "fewer than 5 errors in grammar and spelling" has a big meaning in a 500 word essay. However, if the rules or procedures could be changed to the official decision of a smaller essay and classwork it would be easier to accept as a better rule. I suggest it not take place next spring. We should wait and have another view of this matter.

The more writers show that they are aware of the value schemes of their readers, the more they can appeal to their audience's reasonableness.

The proper use of convention assures readers that they are being led through an argument by an educated and initiated person. Such use signals that the writer understands the tacit contract between reader and writer and can be trusted to carry it out. However, conventions are not the same as thought or

intellect. Those who are unfamiliar with expository conventions cannot be assumed to be lacking in subtlety or understanding.

As an interesting contrast to the ideas presented here, we can look at an article by Janice H. Hays, "The Development of Discursive Maturity in College Writers." Hays, pointing to the work of Piaget and others on the cognitive development of children, suggests that college students have difficulty in writing because they have not successfully negotiated the move from lower to higher stages of cognitive development. Using a scheme developed by William G. Perry, Jr., Hays suggests that the ability to conceptualize develops in nine stages—from the lowest in which "students perceive the world in dualistic terms of right and wrong, good and bad" to the highest in which students realize that "knowledge is contingent and all values relative" (128).

According to Hays, Perry's scale traces the evolution from "simple and concrete to complex, abstract thinking" (130). Hays uses student samples to show that those identified by her as poor writers also score very low on Perry's scale; in other words, Hays is asserting that poor writers have not developed the ability to think abstractly and conceptually. Looking at the same student samples, however, I wish to propose an alternate conclusion: freshmen writers certainly can think abstractly but they have not yet learned to present their ideas in accordance with conventional expectations.

First, Hays found that many of her freshman writers had a great deal of difficulty in responding to her assignment guidelines. The assignment asked students to pretend to be on a panel addressing an audience of community representatives on the subject of either abortion or marijuana; later, these talks were to appear in a local paper. Hays asserts that few of the writers showed any awareness that they were writing for a particular kind of audience, thus indicating low levels of cognitive ability. I maintain, however, that the assignment is quite complicated, involving both a speaking and writing context, neither of which corresponds to the real context, writing for a teacher who will be evaluating each essay. Students having difficulty with such a complex task need not be assumed to be at a lower stage of development, but merely less familiar with the very subtle academic conventions that would govern such a situation.

In Hays' scheme, discursive maturity is said to be attained when students create texts with "multiple perspectives," when they can argue from a more qualified and measured position that takes opinions other than their own into account. Judged by



Perry's scale, Hays identifies the following essay as being at a very low level of maturity:

. . . . If a woman has been raped or sexually abused or has been the victim of incest the woman should be able to decide on an abortion or not. There should be no legal hassles.

. . . I feel the woman who has control over her body should be able to make her own moral decisions of whether to have an abortion or not. There shouldn't be all this hassle with all these other feelings when it is the woman's own decision

. . . . (132).

Viewed from the perspective I offer, the student can be seen to be stating her views clearly and persuasively. If there is a problem with the writing, it is not with the ideas or the student's lack of understanding of opposing positions (in fact, Hays quotes an earlier passage in which the writer mentions that pro-life factions believe that abortion is equivalent to taking a human life). Rather, the writer lacks politeness. If it is a convention of expository discourse that the world is a place of reasonableness and good intentions, then emotional outbursts, even somewhat mild ones, will certainly seem out of place. What is needed here is more development of the author's generalizations, in a more measured tone, with the elimination of words like "hassle," which signal the reader that the writer is unaware of the vocabulary conventions of academic writing.

In another example from Hays' article, the following passage on the issue of marijuana is given as another instance of simplistic reasoning:

The Declaration of Independence states that all people are created equally and that this is a free country. The question is, is it? . . . it seems that the government is dictating what we can and cannot do. Instead of hiring policemen to chase after pushers they should be working to capture criminals (134).

In my view, the passage is making two relatively significant and persuasive points that should have been separated and developed—first, that marijuana laws might well be considered an infringement on other basic rights to freedom and privacy and, second, that the enforcement of such laws requires the expenditure of great numbers of resources that might better be employed in controlling other, more serious forms of crime. Actually, both arguments could be considered old standbys in the marijuana

debate and both have been used extensively in published articles. The problem with this passage is not with the ideas themselves but, instead, with the conventions of exposition, voice, and tone.

Overall, my use of Hays' article is to suggest that we should look more carefully at our judgments of student reasoning. Hays is suggesting that students do not have sufficient cognitive maturity to argue successfully in academic discourse. I am suggesting that our students have the ability to reason and think analytically, but that they lack a sense of how to apply this ability, lack a sense of how the conventions of written academic discourse must be used in order for readers to take their arguments seriously.

I think we should reconsider some of the conclusions that composition researchers are fast reaching about our students' lack of cognitive maturity. Such assumptions are not helpful; they lead to a lessening of insight and they are demeaning. Teachers must become more adept at reading the essays of their students with understanding so that they can show their students how to acquire the skills they need to make their arguments seem persuasive to their readers.

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Alan C. Purves

## RHETORICAL COMMUNITIES, THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT, AND BASIC WRITING

In a recent issue of *College English*, there appeared an article which opened with the following paragraph:

Teaching ESL composition in the university is a challenge—to our skill as teachers, to our creativity, our patience, our sensitivity, and our ability to interpret. Because of this it can be an exciting challenge, and not just the drudgery of myriad corrections. We accept an assignment to teach English composition to students whose native language is not English; very likely it is not even a language which uses our alphabet. We are expected to teach organization, rhetorical skills, graceful style, and argumentation to students most of whom have never learned these skills even in their native languages, who write outlandish, if charming, sentences and who still need help on the most basic elements of English. They may never have heard of Mozart, they may be convinced that the United States has the equivalent of the KGB because it has a “secret service,” and they may speak English only in their English class. But they may also be the brightest collection of students we have ever had in one classroom and may be better educated and more motivated than any other group of students to whom we have ever had to teach subject-verb agreement. (Oster 66)

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The article proceeds to report on the case of the Arabic-speaking student who gradually learned to write American academic essays. What fascinates me about this particular paragraph is its tone. One could imagine the author writing the same thing about a Black student twenty years ago or a Latino student ten years ago; were the writer a man even at the beginning of this century, about a woman. The tone of condescension about the student's past reminds me of expressed attitudes of past centuries or decades that we have come to abhor. It appears safe today for United States teachers to make such remarks about international students to United States audiences. Yet I would question whether such an attitude is either based on knowledge of other educational systems and their rhetorical standards or produces an atmosphere in which teacher and student can work well together. In this paper, I shall deal with the first issue and touch lightly on the second.

During the course of five years' research for the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IEA) which has examined the writing of students from fifteen countries in their native language, I have come to see that there exists within each culture or society at least one, if not several, "rhetorical communities." A counterpart to the interpretive communities of Stanley Fish (*Is There a Text?*)

Instruction in any discipline is acculturation, or the bringing of the student into the "interpretive community" of the discipline. And there is evidence that each discipline is also a "rhetorical community," which is to say a field with certain norms, expectations, and conventions with respect to writing. One can clearly see the differences among disciplines if one looks at the scholarly journals, even though language courses (being taught by humanistically trained teachers) often imply that the style of literary research is applicable to all other fields. Although any article has a beginning, a middle, and an end, the physical format will vary according to discipline as will the placement of certain kinds of material. In the humanities, the "review of research" comes either at the very beginning or, as is often the case, sprinkled throughout the text. In the social sciences, the review of research clearly is the second section in the article. In the sciences it occupies a minor role if it is there at all. Other obvious norms particular to disciplines exist in footnote style, in the use of external comment to the thesis, and the like. (Sometimes these norms are unknown to teachers of composition who therefore often do not adequately prepare their students for later work in other fields.)

If rhetorical communities can be defined by discipline, with

disciplines exerting their force across languages so that a scientific paper in Finland resembles a scientific paper in Chile, can we also say of less specialized writing that there are national rhetorical communities? From the very beginning, work on the IEA Study of Written Composition this question was pursued (Purves and Takala).

The idea of national styles of modes of writing is not a new one. Since the 1960s there has been an interest in "contrastive rhetoric," the study of differences in patterns of writing and organization. Most of that research, however, has examined the prose of writers learning a second language (Kaplan). Some studies have looked at literary styles as they change across geographical or temporal boundaries, but the IEA study provides a way of pursuing contrastive rhetoric using a systematically drawn sample of writing from an "average" population writing in the language of instruction.

In conducting this study, the first problem was to create a standardized set of descriptors that could be used for a cross-cultural look at writing in its relation to national style or national rhetorical communities. As an initial step, samples of essays were drawn in 1980 from secondary school students in Australia, England, Finland, Ivory Coast, Italy, Israel, Japan, Nigeria, New Zealand, Scotland, Thailand, and the United States. The students were generally able students from one or two classes. They were asked to write in class on the topic "My Native Town," a topic selected to be as nondirective as possible. If not written in English, the compositions were translated from the original language, the translator being asked to retain the style and flavor of the original and the translations being checked by bilingual teachers for fidelity to the original. If one were to examine the whole group of essays, one would notice a striking difference between countries and a striking similarity within countries. The following essays from Finland and Australia are to a certain extent exemplary of some of these differences: they have been selected as "typical" of a set of essays from one or two classes in each country (whether we are seeing class effects or national effects remains to be seen, although the whole Finnish sample came from two classes some 500km. apart—one rural, one urban).

#### Finland

##### My Home Country

My home village is Petajavesi which is situated in central Finland. Petajavesi has good connections by road to Keuruu,

Jyvaskyla, Multia and UUrainen. Petajevsi is a small church village with 4000 inhabitants. The people of Petajavesi have clean nature and waters, two beautiful churches, the new and the old, the older church has received much admiration and fame even from afar in the world. A little to the side of the center there is the old Lemettila farm where every now and then in the summer tourists come to see the old-fashioned house and the emotional values held within it.

Modern times are seen also in Petajavesi, one can buy almost anything in the stores of which there are more than ten. The Recreation Hall which was completed a few years ago, has facilities for meetings and for sports and a library. There are two schools in the church village, the lower level and the upper level which also includes high school. Among places for further education, let us mention the School of Home Industry in Petajavesi. Speaking of industry, Petajavesi has its own bakery, shoe factory, plastic plant and a free-time clothing factory which is being built.

There are not enough jobs, but this new factory needs many female workers and it might improve the employment situation in Petajavesi.

There are also opportunities for hobbies, there are many different kinds of clubs and societies, a new skating rink, sports field, ski tracks and two sports halls.

## Australia

### The Place Where I Was Born

The road in which I was born is still lined by the Norfolk Island pines of my childhood. Sixteen years has thinned the rows considerably, but far more evident is the mark that time has left on the house. The old fir tree that once dominated the front garden, has since made way for a rose garden, and the iron gates that had at one time been so good to swing on, now stood, rusting on their hinges, badly in need of oil and a coat of paint. Creeper now grows over the house, to such an extent that it covers the gutters, whilst the concrete driveway that had been laid long before my arrival, is now cracked and uneven with moss growing between the slabs of concrete. Such is the place where I was born.

Childhood memories paint a different picture; the house was still young and in its prime, with the noise of a growing family to cover that of the cars outside. In the dead of night

the ocean could be heard, pounding the rocks half a mile away. On a windy night the salty air would penetrate inside the house, and the smell would linger on throughout the next day.

The salt air is still apparent today, and the house murmurs of childhood noise. But the grass has grown long, and plans to widen the road threaten even the pines. But the ocean can still be heard, pounding the rocks half a mile away.

Clearly one needs to find some way of describing these differences and similarities as well as of providing a framework by which they could be compared as to quality. Carroll (1960) used the repertory grid technique and factor analysis to determine what aspects of prose readers noticed. He found six factors: 1) good-bad, 2) personal-impersonal, 3) ornamented-plain, 4) abstract-concrete, 5) serious-humorous, and 6) characterizing-narrating (or descriptive-narrative). Carroll's raters mingled evaluative and descriptive categories but, as he argues, factors 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 can be supported by evidence for particular aspects of the text.

The analysis of essays on "My Native Town" from Australia, England, Finland, Ivory Coast, Italy, Israel, Japan, Nigeria, Scotland, Thailand, and the United States suggests that some of Carroll's factors were noted by three independent judges who sought to describe the dimensions of the differences they noted:

*Personal-Impersonal.* This factor depends primarily on the frequency of references in the text to the writer's thoughts and feelings about the subject.

*Ornamented-Plain.* This factor may also be defined as "figurative-literal" and alludes to the amount of metaphor and other figures of speech in the text.

*Abstract-Concrete.* This factor is defined in terms of the amount of specific information, details, or references in the text.

Two of Carroll's factors, humorous-serious and characterizing-narrating did not appear in our analysis: the first because this factor contains an evaluative dimension; the second because Carroll's characterizing-narrating factor appears to apply primarily to texts other than the kind called for by the assignment which allows such modes as exposition or argument, though it is related to the two other factors that were identified in the essay analysis.



*Single-Multiple.* This factor refers to whether the text focuses on a single main point or is otherwise delimited, or whether it treats of several related topics or appears to contain a number of diverse points around a central theme.

*Propositional-Appositional.* This factor (not unlike Glenn's [1981] abstractive-associative) refers to its pattern of coherence to the types of connectives that hold the main propositions of the text together. A propositional pattern uses such structures as the hypothetical (if-then), cause-effect, comparison-contrast, and classification-definition. An appositional pattern may use a temporal or narrative structure, a spatial or descriptive structure, an associational structure, or an additive structure (an accumulation of ands), and it often omits connectives and appears digressive.

Clearly, compositions can be classified according to such a system, which was also successfully applied to a number of compositions on the topic "What is a friend?" If the classifications using these factors are stable within each country (as was the case), one might characterize the compositions on "My Native Town" from the ten countries as in Figure 1 (*such characterizations cannot yet be seen as definitive of national styles but as illustrative of the coding system*). Such a characterization must be seen as descriptive rather than evaluative. If a country's compositions on several topics were rated consistently (e.g., Australia—highly personal, figurative, single, and propositional; Finland—impersonal, plain, multiple and appositional), curriculum makers and teachers in that country might inquire whether such a style is to be desired or valued. The fact that the compositions come from "good" students suggests that these students have learned and are applying the norms of their rhetorical community. The question remains as to whether the virtues of each composition is desired. The purpose of the IEA study is to raise that issue, not to prescribe a set of values for all countries.

In the main IEA study, now going on, the actual compositions may produce descriptive data about ways that students have of responding to different tasks. The tasks used in the study are drawn from a variety of cells within the domain of school writing (Figure 2). The initial study of stylistic differences was limited to an expository-descriptive domain, but from the preliminary sample of compositions drawn from other domains, some additional dimensions of stylistic variation emerge.

For example, one set of tasks is designed to elicit what many

**Figure 1**

## F A C T O R

	Personal	Ornamental	Abstract	Single	Logical
<u>Country</u>					
Australia	High	High	Low	High	Low
England	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Low
Federal Republic of Germany	High	Low	Low	Low	Low
Finland	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Israel	High	Medium	Low	High	High
Italy	High	High	High	High	High
Ivory Coast	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Low
Japan	High	Low	High	High	Medium
Netherlands	High	Low	Low	Low	Low
New Zealand	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low
Nigeria	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Scotland	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Thailand	High	High	Medium	Medium	Low
United States	Low	Low	Low	Medium	High

call functional writing, that is the writing of notes and letters in specific contexts—such as a letter of application or a note to the head of the school postponing an appointment. From the latter task come two examples (both translated) which illustrate a clear difference in approach:

Mr. Principal!

I would hereby like to inform you that I regret to be unable to attend our agreed appointment at 2 o'clock due to an urgent private matter. It is the funeral of a distant relative of which I have only recently been informed. I hope that you will understand my situation.

Sincerely,

**Figure 2**  
THE DOMAIN OF WRITING AND SCHOOL WRITING

Cognitive Processing		REPRODUCE		ORGANIZE/REORGANIZE		INVENT/GENERATE	
		Facts	Ideas	Events	Visual images, facts, mental states, ideas		Ideas, mental states, alternative worlds
Dominant attention/purpose	Primary Audience						
	Primary Content						
To learn (metalingual)	Self			X			
To convey emotions, feelings (emotive)	Self Others			X			X
To inform (referential)	Others			X			X
To convince/persuade (connative)	Others			X			X
To entertain, delight, please (poetic)	Others						X
To keep in touch (phatic)	Others						
PRIMARY MODE OF DISCOURSE		DOCUMENTATIVE DISCOURSE		CONSTATIVE DISCOURSE Narrative Explanatory		EXPLORATORY DISCOURSE Interpretive Literary (Expository/Argumentative)	

Nonshaded areas include the primary cells of school writing instruction. An X indicates a cell included in the IEA Study of Written Composition.

Mrs. Headmistress:

Very respected madam, I write you to apologize myself for being unable to go to your office at the time you asked me to since something unexpected happened at home.

I will go to your office early tomorrow if you think it is appropriate like this, to give you the corresponding explanations.

With thanks,

At this point, identifying the country of origin might be misleading because the sample from which these examples come was drawn to illustrate a range of performance rather than typicality. Nonetheless, inspection of the samples from the countries represented by these two lectures indicates that the uniform practice in the first was to be rather direct and laconic, and in the second to be highly apologetic and almost obsequious. Certainly the second focuses more on the feelings of the reader and the first on the message of the writer. Such a pattern of differences also appears in a letter of application for a job written by students from the two countries. The pattern reflects the value differences of the countries of Hofstede's (1980), power-distance index.

To take another example, here are two compositions from two other countries in response to a task calling for a reflective composition on the generation gap (again both are translations):

Many young people of today think that it is difficult to talk to and understand middle-aged people.

How you have grown! What a good time you have. I only want to say that in my time . . .

When I was smaller that was my conception of older people. Perhaps it seems to be a narrow view but it was all one heard when grandparents came to visit. My generalization that all older people were the same, can depend upon that I did not come into contact with so many people from the older generation. I always thought that it was rather tiring when relatives came for a visit, because it meant that you were to sit outside and talk and be pleasant. Actually you wanted to be out on the grass and play football or skip with pals.

When I grew older and to a certain extent more mature I suffered from my childhood conception of older people. Now when I wanted contact and wanted to hear how it was earlier

then I had extremely difficult to get that mutual confidence which is necessary for a pleasant conversation. When I talk to an older person today I have a certain fear that it will be the same for me as I felt for them when I was smaller. In spite of this I have a much better contact with my grandparents than I had before. I regard them as any other ordinary people (apart from a certain reverence that you nevertheless feel for their age). Only a few months ago I have come closer to an older person than I ever have been before. My grandmother got cancer during the Christmas vacation. This was and is terribly awful, especially at the beginning before one understood the implication of the whole thing but one should of course see the positive side of everything that happens on this earth. The positive side is that my grandmother and I have become much closer to one another. Anyway I experience it like that. In and with that she can speak so openly about her illness and its outcome so she had something to talk about at the beginning. Seems terrible but it was a marvelous experience anyhow. Now we can talk about everything under the sun from love problems to finances. It is however rather sad that something like this should have to happen so that I should "learn" to talk to and understand older people.

This composition takes a personal note and is opinionated or emotional in addressing the topic. The writer uses personal experience to support the argument. The composition does consider various aspects of the subject and finds that the matter is not one of simple good or bad. The ending is a bit abrupt, but one might well imagine that the pressure of time forced a quick concluding sentence. The writer could have added a great many more examples without damaging the essay.

### Adolescents and Conversations, Manners Toward Middle-Age People

Teenagers are hot tempered, hard headed unteachable: They like to take a risk; are not considerate. They have problems. Adults are fussy, grumbling, irritable and they like to preach. Sometimes they like to use authority. Teenagers and middle-age people, thus, seem to move in the opposite direction. Their habits are incompatible. Age differences between these two groups of people is another cause for the problem.

Modern teenagers often refuse advice and preaching from others. It is hard to bring these two groups of people together. To familiarize teenagers with adults, we have to start at an early age and within the family. Because family is the first society of children. They will learn valuable things from families; from talking to manners, respects, and etiquettes. Parents with willing docile kids will find it easy to teach them also. But when they grow up, being in the teenage stage, the parents, will find it difficult to teach them. Teenagers reject adults as their enemies. Adults are frightening devils.

They do not want to get advice from adults. When they have no advice from adults, their actions often lack good ideas. They take actions on no reasons. This causes a lot of problems. At the end, adults are in turmoil.

Nowadays it is rare to find any teenagers who would like to see and consult with adults concerning education, finance, peer selection, or responsibilities. This is because adults often use authority, like to set up regulations and are too obsolete. Teenagers lack confidence in adults. They look at adults as having out of date ideas, living in a different era. Thus the teaching is not quite satisfactory. As a consequence, teenagers might turn to delinquency.

Modern teenagers should listen to advice from adults since they have good intentions. They consider us their off-spring. We should realize and think that we are growing up everyday. Such a matter is nothing if we are to be good leaders, have responsibility and are ready to give advice to off-spring in years to come. We should pay attention to adults now before there will be no adults to pay attention to.

This translated composition is certainly nicely written with its parallel introduction and its use of imagery. The composition is less personal than the first and more dispassionate. But its argument progresses in a circular fashion, repeating the sense of the first paragraph in the second, third, and fourth. It is more appositional and the first more propositional, but the second is a closed form to which little could be added, while the first is open and both expandable and contractable.

As we looked at other tasks in the preliminary set of compositions, we sensed that there may be other differences as well. In writing narrative, for example, students from some countries

tend to use dialogue much more than do students from other countries. This distinction may prove to be similar to Carroll's characterizing-narrating distinction.

One task that sought to capture directly these distinctions among national rhetorical communities asked students to write a letter of advice to a younger person coming to their school. The advice concerned how to do well in writing. In addition to being rated, the compositions are soon going to be analyzed for their content. A preliminary examination of that content analysis, however, indicated that students from different countries are more similar than they are different: their advice does not concern writing style and organization as much as it concerns manuscript form, spelling, grammar, and content—as well as such niceties as handing in the paper on time. Yet even the small sample also suggests some difference among groups of students. Students from one culture appear to stress originality, from another to stress impressing the teacher with fancy style, and from still another to stress using a simple style so as not to “get into trouble.”

It would appear that this task will probably inform us more than any other about how students perceive the rhetorical community in which they have passed the novitiate but are not yet expert. I suspect there will be points of commonality between national communities, such as the importance of correctness in mechanical aspects of writing and the importance of knowing the subject about which one is writing. But these points of commonality may well be overshadowed by the points of difference. Again, these differences likely will be multidimensional; they likely will encompass structure and style; the patterns of any one community likely will vary significantly from those of another in at least one dimension; and the differences among national communities likely will be sharper as they progress further through the educational system. Too, these differences seem to reflect important differences in the values and cognition styles of the culture (Glenn, Hofstede).

To me, the evidence from the IEA study as well as other studies of non-native writers, suggests that teachers like Ms. Oster need to reconsider their stance towards international students. Students have learned to become members of the rhetorical community that dominates their educational system; that is a part of their survival in that system. When they enter another system, they are asked to participate as full-fledged members of the second system without fully knowing what its rules and conditions might be. In the United States, most non-native students have learned

a good bit of the grammar and lexicon of English, but they have seldom been taught about the patterns of organization and style expected of academic writers in the United States. If they have studied patterns of discourse in the target language, most generally those have been patterns of oral communication—what to say in a restaurant or in an office. If they have studied at their university in a field which has a transnational pattern of discourse (particularly one of the sciences), they may have acquired that pattern; still they may not be sure of the pattern for discourse in other disciplines or general communication (such as the business letter). Furthermore, many non-native students report that once they do learn the United States pattern of discourse for general correspondence, they have to relearn their native patterns upon return to their native country.

In our study we have begun to specify the nature of these patterns (or structures) of discourse, with sets of continua such as those I have set forth in this paper. There may, however, be other dimensions such as an inductive-deductive dimension that would further differentiate rhetorical communities. In the meantime, I think it is important for the United States teacher of the non-native student to make clear to the students that what they are going to learn in a composition course is not the way to think and write (or in Ms. Oster's words, "organization, rhetorical skills, graceful style and argumentation"), but the particular form of these aspects of writing that is valued in the academies of the United States. This shift in posture acknowledges that with organization, style, and argumentation, one is dealing with convention, just as one is dealing with conventions of grammar and diction and punctuation.

That the academy of the United States has conventions has long been known; I happen to believe that it is useless to try to do away with them or to substitute other conventions—such as some writing teachers recommend. I also do not believe that one should advocate cynicism. I do believe that it is appropriate pedagogical behavior to deal with convention as convention and to acknowledge that these conventions are created by humans with all their wisdom and folly. As conventions, those that the United States espouses are no better or worse than those espoused in other cultures. Such an attitude combined with an eye that can analyze differences in writing without passing judgment on those who are not the same as us is the best way for the teacher to deal with the non-native student—in a basic writing class or in any writing class.



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George H. Jensen

## THE REIFICATION OF THE BASIC WRITER

In *The Mismeasure of Man* Stephen Jay Gould initiates his masterful debunking of intelligence testing with an explanation of what he terms the reification fallacy:

The argument (against the current practice of intelligence testing) begins with one of the fallacies—*reification*, or our tendency to convert abstract concepts into entities (from the Latin *res*, or thing). We recognize the importance of mentality in our lives and wish to characterize it, in part so that we can make the divisions and distinctions among people that our cultural and political systems dictate. We therefore give the word “intelligence” to this wondrously complex and multifaceted set of human capabilities. This shorthand symbol is then reified and intelligence achieves its dubious status as a unitary thing (24).

As Gould outlines it here, the process of reification begins—not with biology—but with political and social pigeonholes. In part to explain—at times, justify—why certain ethnic groups were found predominately in the lower socioeconomic classes, psychologists developed the concept of a “general factor” of intelligence, which could not by any means explain the complex nature of cognitive skills. The abstraction, Gould feels, was the

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first step toward reification. Once the specious, conceptually mushy, and reductionistic abstraction was formulated, it was reified. Psychologists, exhibiting all the vigor of lunatics pounding square pegs into round holes, struggled to locate "general intelligence" at a particular point of the brain or tie it to what they felt were "racial genes." A spuriously conceived abstraction became a concrete, palpable thing.

Though the comparison should not be pushed too far, the field of composition may be developing its own reification fallacy. As with intelligence testing, the reification of the basic writer begins with our cultural and political systems. Though the "underprepared student"—also called subfreshman, remedial student, developmental student, and nontraditional student—has perhaps always been with us, current notions about the college basic writer date to the early 1970s. As a large number of underprepared students entered colleges and universities, primarily an effect of open admissions and desegregation policies, faculty were faced with teaching what seemed to be an atypical group of students. As Mina Shaughnessy reflected in *Errors and Expectations*, "the essays these students wrote during their first weeks of class stunned the teachers who read them" (3).

Since these underprepared students (whether at Shaughnessy's CUNY or at other institutions) seemed academically, socially, and culturally apart from their peers, teachers and researchers naturally wanted to understand how and why they differed. They observed and studied the students in their classes and reported their findings. Shaughnessy, one of the first to characterize basic writers, wrote that they equate correct writing with good writing and that they feel an urgency "to meet their teachers' criteria" (*Errors* 8–9). Such "folk psychologizing," which is ultimately reductionistic and may lead to reification, was not typical of her work; she preferred to focus on the wide range of "styles to being wrong" (*Errors* 40). Even in a basic writing class, which might at first seem relatively homogenous, Shaughnessy found a range of errors and a diversity in the processes that produced them.

Rather than amplify Shaughnessy's most consistent message, that basic writers are a diverse lot, those researchers who followed seem more intrigued by her characterizations. They continued to peg isolated personality traits to the basic writer. Lunsford studied a number of basic writers and concluded in "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer" that "they have not attained that level of cognitive development which would allow them to form abstractions or concepts" (38). Perl investigated the writing processes of unskilled writers and felt in her report "The Composing

Processes of Unskilled Writers” that they frequently “began writing without any secure sense of where they were heading, acknowledging only that they would ‘figure it out’ as they went along” (330). They also, she found, tended to be so concerned about “error-hunting” that they broke the “rhythms generated by thinking and writing” (333). Pianko, after comparing ten remedial and seven traditional students in “Reflection: A Critical Component of the Composing Process,” concluded that the remedial students planned a shorter period of time before writing and paused less frequently (227). Sommers, after comparing the writing processes of an unskilled freshman writer and a skilled adult writer in “Intentions and Revisions,” stated that unskilled writers are most concerned about applying rules or filling in a set organizational structure while skilled writers are most concerned about the relationship between developing a structure and discovering meaning (48–49). More recently, in “Perspectives and Legacies and Literacy in the 1980’s,” Troyka tested nontraditional students, discovering that they, at least those in her sample, are field-dependent. They are holistic thinkers, highly gregarious and concerned about the social context or getting along with other people (256–261). Her article was unusual in that she actually tested her subjects for cognitive style, and, rather than point to their deficiencies as other writers had, she emphasized their strengths.

As can be seen from this brief overview of the literature, a gross characterization of the students in basic writing classes seems to be emerging. This composite characterization is of a gregarious writer who talks but does not think, who does not value planning, who has difficulty developing concepts, is overly concerned about correctness, likes to please the teacher, and prefers the basic five-paragraph theme. Such characterizations are dangerous in part because they lead to reification, which, as I will discuss later, can have adverse effects on how well we teach basic writers. Yet, the characterization of the basic writer should also be criticized in and of itself. It is simply too much of a portrait in broad strokes to account for the diversity among basic writers, and it too heavily emphasizes their faults.

In order to argue that basic writers are a diverse population, I will need to explain the personality theory behind the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a personality inventory used previously to discuss individual writing processes. The MBTI is based on Carl Jung’s belief that, at an early age, each individual begins to prefer and more rapidly develop one of a pair of opposite but equally valid and useful psychological processes. For example,

an individual may prefer to live actively rather than contemplatively, or vice versa. As Jung developed and Isabel Myers later refined the theory, four bipolar dimensions emerged, each of which reflects a set of equally valid, yet opposing, processes:

- Extraversion (E) .....Introversion (I)
- Sensing (S) .....Intuition (N)
- Thinking (T) .....Feeling (F)
- Judging (J) .....Perceiving (P)

Here is what the terms mean: Extraversion is dealing with the outer experience; introversion is dealing with the inner experience of contemplation and reflection. Sensing is concrete perception through the senses; intuition is an abstract perception through the imagination. Thinking types strive to make decisions objectively; in order to be objective, they tend to base decisions on a general principle or an objective criterion. Feeling types are less concerned about objectivity and more concerned about the personal issues in making decisions; they are more likely to base decisions on the personal values of those involved or on how to promote group harmony. Judging is approaching tasks with the primary concern of getting things done; perceiving is approaching tasks with the primary concern of doing them thoroughly. Individuals, the theory holds, have a preference on each of the four dimensions. Since these preferences interact dynamically, we can speak of sixteen possible personality types, each of which has talents and gifts.

In "Personality and Individual Writing Processes," DiTiberio and I reported our emerging observations about how personality type as defined by the MBTI relates to individual writing processes. Extraverts tend to generate ideas best when talking and prefer to leap into writing with little planning; introverts, on the other hand, need solitude to think best and prefer to plan extensively before writing. Sensing types tend to prefer prescribed organizational patterns, detailed directions, and factual topics; intuitive types prefer original organizational patterns, general directions, and imaginative, abstract topics. Thinking types have very patterned organizational structures, while feeling types tend to write best when they just follow the flow of their thoughts. Judging types tend to be overly exclusive writers, often writing very short essays, but perceiving types tend to be overly inclusive, often writing rambling, expansive essays. One of the pleasant outcomes of our investigation was that we began to appreciate the latent strengths associated with all-too-apparent weaknesses. For example, sensing types may, especially when still immature,

write essays that are full of nothing but factual data and concrete observations. Intuitive types, on the other hand, may write essays filled with vague abstractions. By viewing these writers through the lens of a personality construct, it is easier to see the strength and weakness of each approach to writing. The sensing type excels at accurately reporting factual data and concrete observations, which generally form the support for propositions, but they may fail to include inferences from the data, or the propositions themselves. Intuitive types naturally include the propositions but they may fail to explain or support their ideas.

Since the researchers who have characterized the basic writer have dealt with isolated personality traits rather than a humanistic personality construct, they frequently, with the exception of Troyka, see the faults but not the strengths associated with particular traits. The basic writer, as described in the literature, seems to be an extraverted-sensing-feeling type. Extraverts, when still immature, as basic writers often are, may be less reflective than introverts (Pianko to remedial students), but they are quite good at generating ideas by talking about their topics. Extraverts also tend to figure out what they want to say as they are writing (Perl to unskilled writers), a trait that, when applied to mature writers, Murray calls "writing as a process of discovery" (85-103). Sensing types, especially those who are cognitively immature, tend to have more difficulty developing concepts than intuitive types (Lunsford to the basic writer). They are often very concerned about following directions or fulfilling the teacher's expectations (Shaughnessy to the basic writer), and, when inexperienced as writers, they tend to equate correct writing with good writing (Shaughnessy). They also prefer prescribed organizational patterns, which help them to know what the teacher expects, over original patterns (Sommers to unskilled writers). If these descriptions were slightly reworded, they might describe a good technical writer. Sensing types usually stick to the facts, rather than make flighty hunches, attempt to follow directions accurately, and try to produce grammatically correct prose in a widely accepted format. Finally, feeling types, especially extraverted feeling types, are more likely to attend first to the social context, which Troyka saw as a personal strength. Even though it is unfortunate that most researchers characterize basic writers by their weaknesses alone, it is interesting that all of these isolated traits form a relatively accurate description of the faults of an extraverted-sensing-feeling writer. But does this composite personality of the basic writer accurately describe students in a basic writing program?

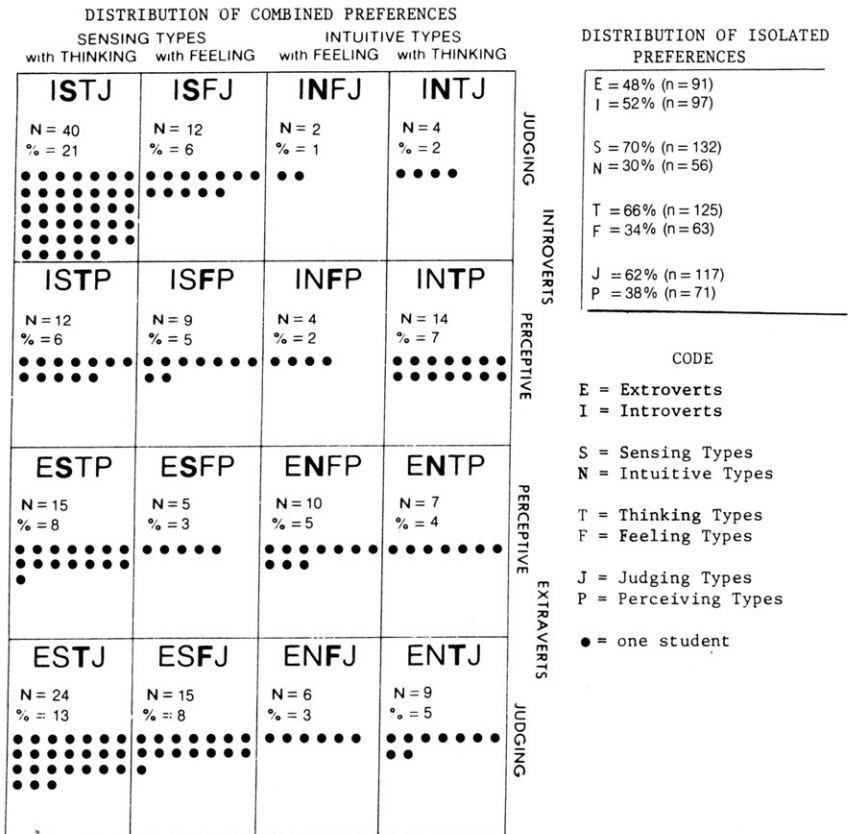
Figure One is a type table of 188 students in eleven composition

classes of the Developmental Studies program at Georgia State University. The type table illustrates how the four bipolar scales of the MBTI can combine into sixteen different personality types. It is especially useful as a visual depiction of the distribution of the personality types of individuals on a particular sample. Only a glance at Figure One will reveal that the sixteen possible personality types described by the MBTI are not equally represented in this sample. Introverts only slightly outnumber extraverts, but sensing types, thinking types, and judging types outnumber their opposites by about two to one. Given the preponderance of certain types, it is easy to understand how a teacher or researcher might characterize the group, rather than

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

Type Table

**FIGURE ONE**  
**STUDENTS IN DEVELOPMENTAL COMPOSITION**  
**GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
**(ELEVEN CLASSES, FALL 1982 TO WINTER 1985)**  
**N = 188**



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appreciate their diversity. Some of my colleagues have described the basic writer at Georgia State as being a concrete and very structured learner, which is typical of introverted-sensing-thinking-judging types (ISTJs) and grossly accurate of this population. It is also a description that would roughly, in a gut-level, first-impression way, fit what the literature reports as current notions about the basic writer. The only striking difference that a casual observer may notice would be that the typical Georgia State student—an introverted thinking type—would tend to be less social than the basic writer found in the literature—an extraverted feeling type. If, however, we demand more accuracy, the characterization of the basic writer found in the literature—an extraverted-sensing-feeling type—describes only those students in the ESFP and ESFJ cells of the table, or eleven per cent of the sample.

Figure Two is a type table of another population, students in a remedial composition class at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The rather small sample is somewhat different from the sample in Figure One. This class has slightly more extraverts than introverts and a predominance toward feeling types. The typical student in the Georgia State sample would, to a casual observer, seem more like an introverted-sensing-thinking-judging (ISTJ) type, and the typical student in the University of Illinois at Chicago sample would seem more like an extraverted-sensing-feeling-judging type (ESFJ). It is difficult to say, from this limited amount of data, whether or not the differences between the two tables reflect differences between the two programs. The class illustrated in Figure Two may simply be atypical of that program. With the limited data available, we can only say that differences exist, that it is unlikely that all basic writing programs will draw the same kinds of students and that all classrooms in each program will be exact microcosms of the program.

At the most fundamental level, the characterizations of the basic writer found in the literature are inaccurate because they are overgeneralizations from what seem to be biased samples. Perl's and Pianko's samples seem to have been predominately extraverts, Lunsford's and Sommers' predominantly sensing types. Since these authors are working with students at different institutions, each of which probably has its own criteria for placing students into basic writing programs, we should not assume that any abstractions of the basic writer generated from a biased sample will be an accurate description of the writers in all programs. Pianko's and Perl's comments about the basic writer cannot be generally applied to the students at Georgia State, who are more typically introverts. Rather than being unreflective, as Pianko found with



**FIGURE TWO**  
**STUDENTS IN REMEDIAL COMPOSITION**  
**UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO**  
**(ONE CLASS, FALL 1984)**  
**N = 14**

DISTRIBUTION OF COMBINED PREFERENCES						DISTRIBUTION OF ISOLATED PREFERENCES			
SENSING TYPES		INTUITIVE TYPES							
with THINKING	with FEELING	with FEELING	with THINKING						
<b>ISTJ</b> N = 0 % = 0	<b>ISFJ</b> N = 4 % = 29 ••••	<b>INFJ</b> N = 0 % = 0	<b>INTJ</b> N = 0 % = 0	JUDGING  INTROVERTS  PERCEPTIVE  PERCEPTIVE  EXTRAVERTS  JUDGING		E = 57% (n=8) I = 43% (n=6)  S = 64% (n=9) N = 36% (n=5)  T = 35% (n=5) F = 65% (n=9)  J = 57% (n=8) P = 43% (n=6)			
<b>ISTP</b> N = 0 % = 0	<b>ISFP</b> N = 0 % = 0	<b>INFP</b> N = 1 % = 7 •	<b>INTP</b> N = 1 % = 7 •			CODE  E = Extroverts I = Introverts  S = Sensing Types N = Intuitive Types  T = Thinking Types F = Feeling Types  J = Judging Types P = Perceiving Types  • = one student			
<b>ESTP</b> N = 0 % = 0	<b>ESFP</b> N = 1 % = 7 •	<b>ENFP</b> N = 1 % = 7 •	<b>ENTP</b> N = 2 % = 14 ••						
<b>ESTJ</b> N = 2 % = 14 ••	<b>ESFJ</b> N = 2 % = 14 ••	<b>ENFJ</b> N = 0 % = 0	<b>ENTJ</b> N = 0 % = 0						

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her sample, the Georgia State writer may be so reflective that he or she is distant from experience and produces a lifeless prose. Rather than leaping into writing with little planning, as Perl found with her sample, the Georgia State basic writer may plan too long.

At another level, the characterizations are inaccurate because they cannot adequately account for the diversity found in even a single program, class, or sample. Even though seventy percent of the students in Figure One are sensing types, thirty percent of them are intuitive types. Even though introverted-sensing-thinking-judging types—the program’s model personality type—comprise twenty-one percent of the population, every one of the

sixteen possible types is represented. Even when dealing with a single population, or a single class, it is dangerous, and more reductionistic than descriptive, to characterize basic writers.

Reification can naturally—almost unavoidably—occur when we begin to believe that our characterizations are accurate descriptions, when we begin to believe that our notions about the basic writer are more significant than individual differences among students, or that these notions embody a salient characteristic that separates them from their peers. Pianko, for example, seems to believe that basic writers are less reflective than traditional students. As stated before, I believe that her characterization of basic writers is reductionistic, just as Gould feels that the concept of a “general intelligence factor” fails to account for the wide range of human capabilities. Reductionistic abstractions are, Gould feels, dangerous in and of themselves, but, when they are reified, when they become a concrete thing, as when intelligence was tied to “racial genes,” the faulty abstractions assume more power over how we think and act (24). In the following passage, Pianko takes that extra dangerous step; she reifies the basic writer:

Although it is unlikely that a single teaching strategy or several strategies in concert will be able to immediately alter behavioral patterns already embedded in a student’s writing habits, there are certainly a few basic shifts in teaching emphasis which could simply and organically alter a student’s writing sense and consciousness (278).

Pianko seems to be saying that the basic writer (or, in her study, remedial writers) are innately, organically different from their peers. She suggests that teachers “organically alter a student’s . . . consciousness.” I believe that it is important for writing teachers to help their students to develop as writers, but it seems to me that organically altering their consciousness is a bit overzealous.

The reification can be more subtle, as in Sommers’ study. She compared one unskilled writer with one skilled writer. The assumptions behind her research design is that the differences between any basic writer and any professional writer are more significant than differences between their personality type or cognitive style. In the context of the MBTI, the two writers that Sommers describes seem to have different personality types. Rita, the unskilled writer, seems to be extraverted-sensing-feeling type, and Walter, the skilled writer, seems to be an extraverted-intuitive-thinking type. If this conjecture is accurate, Sommers may be describing the differences between a sensing-feeling writer

and intuitive-thinking writer, rather than the differences between an unskilled and skilled writer. Would her conclusions be the same if she compared an unskilled ESPF with a skilled ESFP, or an unskilled ENTJ with a skilled ENTJ?

Sommers asserts that her two case studies are “representative” of each cohort, but she goes on to state that the differences between the two writers are illustrative of “the fundamental differences between the revision strategies of unskilled and skilled writers (42–43). Yet, does not the fact that she can find what she feels to be a typical case to study imply that she has already reified the basic writer? Is not Rita, her unskilled writer, the concrete embodiment of her notions about how unskilled writers revise? Should we assume that all basic writers will write as Rita does? Should we teach all of our basic writers as if they were Rita?

My intention here is not to single out Sommers, whose research I respect, but to raise some questions about general research practices in our field. Other researchers have, like Sommers, used comparative designs to study the difference between high-apprehensives and low-apprehensives (Selfe, “The Predrafting Processes of Four High- and Four Low-Apprehensive Writers”) and high-blockers and low-blockers (Rose, *Writer’s Block: The Cognitive Dimension* 44–69). Researchers have also investigated the distinctive writing processes of advanced writers (Hairston, “Working With Advanced Writers”), good student writers (Stallard, “An Analysis of the Writing Behavior of Good Student Writers”), and an engineer (Selzer, “The Composing Process of an Engineer”). These studies would have been far more valid, and I believe more interesting, if the authors better understood the heterogeneity of their samples and populations. If a researcher were comparing the writing process of, for example, one Eskimo to that of one WASP, the probability that these two writers will have different personality types, and thus different cognitive styles, is quite high. If personality type affects how one writes, then a researcher would be uncovering the differences between the writing processes of two personality types rather than the differences between the typical Eskimo and the typical WASP. Even when researchers are using relatively large samples, the chance that these samples are biased in regards to personality type or cognitive style must be considered. We could compare the writing processes of thirty Eskimos to thirty WASPs, but, even if randomly selected, the samples would likely be biased. As data that Mary McCaulley presents in *Applications of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to Medical and Other Health Professions* illustrates, it is rare for any

group, whether it be nurses or surgeons, to have an equal representation of all personality types. For example, nurses are predominantly sensing-feeling types, and surgeons are predominantly sensing-thinking types.

Researchers may argue that a bias in their sample that reflects a bias in the population offers no threat to the validity of their studies. And they might be right if we taught only entire samples or populations. We do not; we teach individuals. We might, for example, want to determine what kind of topics are best for basic writers. We could then have a group of basic writers, who might be seventy percent sensing types, write on a selection of topics and find that the group wrote significantly better and with less anxiety when given concrete, factual, and detailed topics. We could then administer nothing but concrete, factual, and detailed topics, and about seventy percent of the population would be pleased with our decision. The intuitive types, who constitute thirty percent of the population, would be less pleased. They would probably prefer to write on more open-ended, abstract, and creative topics. If researchers would control for personality type, we would be able to understand better how the individual students in our classes tend to write best and how we might help each student develop.

Using personality or cognitive style theory to appreciate both the biased distribution and the diversity of basic writing classes may help us to avoid faulty inferences, but it also holds a danger. It may lead to yet another kind of pigeonholing and reification. We may begin to believe that the MBTI can explain all human behavior, which it cannot, or that those students who are called sensing types are somehow a different biological creature than those who are called intuitive types. The theory of the MBTI posits that people prefer certain psychological processes, not that they possess certain innate and unalterable personality traits. Sensing types may prefer concrete perception through their senses, but they also, like intuitive types, use their imagination to make hunches and explore possibilities. If misused, personality and cognitive style theories can be as reductionistic as "folk psychologizing." We certainly need to understand basic writers, but what we need to understand about them is more than their faults and limitations. What we need to understand far better are their individual strengths and potentials.

This plea for an appreciation of the diversity and strengths of students in basic writing classes is more an echo than a manifesto. In "Perspectives on Legacies and Literacy in the 1980's," Troyka

emphasized the strengths, rather than the faults, of basic writers. In *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy asked that teachers treat their students as individuals when she wrote about the different styles to being wrong. In "Basic Writing," Shaughnessy also warned that just because "teachers use the word 'remedial,' we cannot be at all certain that they mean the same thing by it" (137). Within one program, students will differ from class to class, and the composition of students in different programs will vary with admission and placement policies. We should not believe that there is any one way to define, signify, label, identify, or teach those students who are called basic, remedial, or developmental writers. Though, as Gould says, "the temptation to reify is powerful . . . , it is a temptation we must resist, for it reflects an ancient prejudice of thought, not a truth of nature" (252).

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Michael C. T. Brookes

## A DEAN'S DILEMMAS

*No wonder of it; Sheer plod makes  
plough down sillion/Shine*

Hopkins, The Windhover

We all know that Wolfe was not far wrong when he told us we can't go home again, but the temptation to try is often irresistible. I left my full-time position in English nine years ago and had not taught a writing course for some time but, after nearly two years as Dean of Academic Affairs at a large community college in The City University of New York, I very much wanted to teach a writing class again. Not out of nostalgia. My motivation was more complex than that.

I have great respect for the art of teaching and for those who practice that art with care and skill. As Academic Dean I wanted to show my respect by taking a class and doing a little of what faculty do a great deal of. I also believe in principle that academic administrators, especially those in community colleges, should teach regularly so that they do not lose sight of the primary purpose for the existence of their institutions and also to make them aware of what faculty really face. Moreover, teaching a course is the very best way to get a sense of the workings of a college.

It had been many years since one of our college's three deans

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Michael C. T. Brookes was born and educated in England. After receiving an honors degree in English at Oxford, he came to the United States, spent nearly 15 years in community colleges in Massachusetts, and came to The City University of New York in 1982 as Dean of Academic Affairs at Queensborough Community College. Two years later he moved to LaGuardia Community College, CUNY, as Visiting Professor to work on various special projects and to teach writing courses.

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had taught a course on campus and my decision quickly became common knowledge. I chose a noncredit basic skills writing course for my New York teaching debut because I saw it as presenting a stimulating challenge, and because CUNY has made a special commitment to basic skills and many faculty are involved in teaching basic skills courses. I wanted a ground-floor look at the kind of work they do and direct contact with the students for and with whom they do it.

Despite twenty years' teaching experience, I felt as nervous as a brand-new faculty member about tackling my first basic writing course, but I believed that the many other composition courses I had taught in the past would stand me in good stead. Besides, I had the comforting reassurance of top-notch resource people on and off campus; faculty members who had been involved in the teaching of basic composition for many years and who had a national reputation for their work and writing. They knew the challenges and pitfalls and had promised their help; they would not, I knew, let me down.

The spring semester was to begin in early February with my class scheduled to meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8:00 to 9:40 A.M. In December, I got copies of the texts most commonly used for the course, and by late January, after several anxious consultations with colleagues, I knew the objectives of the course, had a plan of action for the semester, and was equipped with a pocketful of tips, hints, and strategies. I remained nervous.

At one point the class had a paper enrollment of 27, but there were never more than 22 students really taking the course as two were transferred to other courses and three did no more than drop in two or three times during the first few weeks. We were, the 23 of us, a splendidly heterogeneous group. Most were 18-22 years old, but several were a good deal older. We included Hispanics, Black-Americans, and Italian-Americans as well as one Armenian, one Haitian, one Jamaican, and one expatriate Englishman. Such heterogeneity is now the rule rather than the exception in basic skills classes in CUNY's community colleges as the University's open admissions policy gives increasing numbers of minority and older students their first real chance to further their education. No fewer than nine students were repeating the course. This concerned me both as an administrator and as a teacher since no student wants or likes to have to repeat a basic skills course and the odds against student success, as the report of the 1984 CUNY Task Force on Student Retention and Academic Performance confirms, are in direct proportion to the number of times they attempt basic skills courses.



Practically every student, including the repeaters, expressed an earnest desire to pass the course. Many travelled for more than an hour to get to the campus, but they got there by and large on time for our twice-weekly 8 A.M. class. Yet sometimes it was a struggle to get the (to me) simplest things accomplished. In mid-March, almost halfway through the semester, I noted in my journal:

Everything's a struggle. At the first class I gave out a poop sheet explaining the course requirements, including what to bring to each class. For weeks not a class went by without someone saying, "I didn't know we had to bring that to every class." "I haven't got mine," or, "Do we have to bring this to the next class?" One student protested that the basic text was very heavy: too heavy to bring in twice a week!

Getting students to work together effectively in small groups also proved more difficult than I had anticipated. There were several needs and realities which had to be juggled and balanced: The one or two habitual nonworkers had to be kept apart as did those who actively disliked small group work and those who couldn't resist the temptation to socialize. It was also important to make sure that no group had only weaker students. It took me nearly half the semester to come up with groupings which took most of these variables into account but absences and lateness ensured that my formula was never fully tested. In any event some worthwhile work did get done in small groups from time to time, though they never became as powerful a learning mode as I had hoped they would. I find myself wondering whether collaborative learning is still too conventional a pedagogical technique for a class of predominantly nontraditional students. Or could it be just the reverse: are nontraditional students very traditional in looking to their teacher as the one source of learning and information? I am reasonably sure that the limited success of small-group work wasn't simply a matter of my not getting the right "mix." A research study on this subject would be useful.

Similarly, I saw the availability of a writing lab as a big plus. But some students I assigned to go there for tutorial help were upset and offended, reacting as though I had found them wanting and was punishing them.

No doubt many of these student behaviors had to do with that ambivalence about learning which is characteristic of many non-traditional students. But reading about that ambivalence had not prepared me sufficiently to deal with students experiencing it and expressing it through their behavior patterns. Handling these

behaviors was one of the first of my dilemmas. I did not always do well, sometimes reacting with annoyance or impatience when forbearance was called for. My journal records one such instance:

During the class someone got my dander up and we had a spat because I refused to accept a homework assignment he tried to complete in class.

— Will I get a zero? Does that mean you will give me a zero?

— Yes.

— Damn! That is really unfair.

It was worse than unfair. I knew that I should never have squabbled with the student in class. What's more, I knew that "getting a zero" for one assignment would not jeopardize any student's chances of passing the course. But the student didn't know this and I didn't tell him until we had a more productive exchange a little later. By the way, he was one of those who did pass the course.

On one very traditional point I was not prepared to negotiate: attendance. I made it quite clear early in the semester that here there would be no compromise: they *had* to be in class. If they had more than two unexcused absences, I would drop them. The point was reinforced by my calling the roll at the start of each class. They knew that I knew who was there and who was on time. By term's end, no student had been absent less than twice, but few had exceeded that number. On punctuality we compromised. I always got to class about five minutes early, and started right on time, but I stopped glowering at latecomers or commenting on their tardiness. My rationalization was that in most cases they couldn't control their travel time to within 5–10 minutes. For our 8 A.M. class, most left their houses between 6:30 and 7:00 A.M. Although one student lived only a ten-minute drive from campus, she left home at 7:00 because she had to get in line for a place in the college's pay-parking lot. She was frequently late.

After the initial classes, another dilemma made itself felt. My nervousness gave way to something approaching panic as I became aware of just how great the students' needs were. I felt inadequately prepared to offer the range and depth of help they needed. My journal returns time and again to this point.

*March 20*

On class days I frequently wake up at 3:00 or 4:00 A.M. feeling great anxiety about the course, considerable doubt about my adequacy to teach it, and a sense of almost overwhelming responsibility. Tuesday when I woke up I thought

I'd beaten the early-waking bugaboo. Then found, after I got up, that it was 4:45, not 5:45. Spent a long time (45 minutes) on the uses of the final *s*. I have no language to talk to the students about grammar. To say "possessive pronoun" or "third person singular" is to speak nonsense words to them. I wrote "to be" on the board and asked the class to give me the present tense. Silence. Fear. Anxiety. They know, of course, but they don't know they know. And when it was all over, the "s" as plural, as possessive, as third person singular, how many had really grasped it? How many will retain it next week?

Note: The inappropriateness of my demand that these students conjugate so irregular a verb struck me later. In retrospect I am embarrassed.

March 22

One student was terrified that I would "take off points" because he hadn't indented the paragraphs in the essay I collected. He waited for me in the corridor after class to ask that I give him the essay so he could correct it. His anxiety was palpable. During the class when I asked this same student to show me the verb in the sentence "The white shark can hear for miles," he pointed to "shark." I groan and wonder how I can help him.

March 29

Jayne (my wife) suggests that the students and I have more in common than is apparent. Like them, I have many anxieties about the course. Like them, I struggle to make each class, each assignment at least acceptable and would like each to be a success. I fret over my shortcomings; I have trouble sleeping on nights before class; I am oppressed by my growing awareness of the depth of the students' needs and the modest resources I can make available to them. The students, of course, have no sense of me as a fellow-struggler. To them I am the answer man: without fear of failure, and with immense power over them. And even though I *think* I understand something of what they are going through, I really have no more knowledge of the specifics of their struggles than they have of mine. Like two blind mice, we blunder about in a roughly defined terrain. With a lot of luck we may bump into one another and with even more luck the contact will prove helpful to the student. But in many cases that will not happen—look at all the students who have

already given up—and in other cases the contact will not be helpful.

As I look back, it seems to me that this dilemma of mine contained two separate strands. One clear, factual strand is that indeed I did not, objectively, have all the skills, knowledge, or resources the students needed. To take just one example: Three students in the class needed an instructor with some background in ESL and I have no such background. Other students had needs at a level at which I do not know how to function. For instance, I only know a few ways to explain the use of the apostrophe to show possession. Once I've run through those, I have no further resources to bring to a student's aid. Naturally, I tried to learn on the job.

I was twice blessed in my struggles. The secretaries in my office gave me extraordinary and top-notch support, typing and reproducing all manner of materials in remarkably little time. The course would have been a shambles without that dependable assistance. I wish I could believe that all faculty teaching basic skills could count on comparable secretarial support. And the steady stream of counsel and guidance from my two faculty "consultants" was of immeasurable value. At one point in the semester I stumbled upon an article about sentence combining. That may not be exactly a straw, but I felt that I was drowning and clutched it to me. At last, I thought, an approach which will really help me to help the students! As I was new to this technique I turned to one of my resources for advice. He spent about an hour with me, gave me a large folder of sentence-combining exercises and other materials he had gathered and prepared over the years, and then carefully explained why he no longer used this approach. He helped me understand that no technique is a panacea and that there is no quick fix in teaching basic composition. Even had I understood the technique completely it would have been disastrous to change direction so radically part way through the term. The straw was just a straw, not a lifeboat, and I let go of it and kept going.

The second strand in my sense of inadequacy was more subjective. Despite all my efforts some students were simply abandoning ship:

*April 3*

I took out the blue books students used during our first class two months ago. Of the initial group 6 have disappeared; 4 of the 6 withdrew unofficially (which means they disappeared) from the same course last semester.

*April 10*

When I came into the office this morning a withdrawal form was on my desk. I signed it but was sad. The student's choice was prudent in that her chances of passing weren't very good, but I am sorry she apparently did not feel it worth her while to continue attending. I feel, in fact, that I failed her.

Others, despite their and my best efforts, were making no discernible progress. At times my journal reflects frustration, anger, and even hostility towards the class.

*April 26*

I left class today feeling totally discouraged. This is certainly the hardest, least rewarding teaching I have ever done. No wonder faculty become stuck and insulated; no wonder they burn out. How can one survive full-time teaching, year after year, with students so devoid of either skills or discipline? Some have such massive insecurity that they want every sentence they grind out approved by me. Some are so much caught up in their own world that I can see no connection between what I have said—or rather assigned—and what they are doing. What are these people doing here? Or am I the misfit, the one who doesn't belong in that classroom? And so many are not willing to commit any time to the work. They are not willing to come and see me outside class; some even write their assignments in class. It's hopeless.

*May 7*

Continued to grade the students' latest essays. They are predictable; none have outdone themselves. For the first time this semester I did not return papers at the class following the one when I collected them. And I'm really having trouble ploughing through them so that they will be ready for tomorrow's class. Is it just end-of-year doldrums? Am I tired or bored? How must the students be feeling?

Sheer plod makes plough down  
sillion/Shine

Not always.

Mercifully, my emotional state was not one of unrelieved gloom. There were wonderful bonuses, like the first set of student journals. Even those which were not well done gave evidence of a willingness to try.

March 13

Fourteen students handed in journals. Several are little more than diaries. "At 6:00 A.M. I got up, left the house at 6:40 A.M. Only one class today." That sort of thing. But others were less inhibited, talking about their hopes and fears, boy-friends and girlfriends and about a range of quite unexpected things. In one case there was a startling glimpse into the student's life at home: "After work at 6:30, I go home and try to relax but in my house it's impossible. The only time you relax is when you sleep." An entry on Poe by a student who announced that he is a high school dropout ends: "I think he is the best spook author there was. Better than Hitchcock and all the others." A small number of entries caught me by their beauty.

Artists always interested me. I don't know why, maybe because it's beautiful to see someone draw. See the beginning and the ending.

and

The summer is like living somewhere else.

One student was touchingly conscientious, writing for exactly the prescribed 30 minutes each week and dating each entry. Another handed in a single page. A third is troubled by advances from her new young boss. A fourth explodes into a sudden rash of anger at what he experienced as an example of racial discrimination against him. In each case I found a comment or suggestion to make and, usually, a sentence to highlight as being in some (undefined) way "special." Overall, I am pleased and think requiring the journal was a good move.

The classes in which we got a piece of work accomplished were also a big "up" for me.

March 27

Today's class seemed good. I told the students that they had to finish their essay on "School Safety" during the period and hand it in. Then I put them in pairs with a handout of questions to ask about each paragraph and they were off. Whenever there was an unwarranted increase in noise, I squashed it firmly. When one student made to leave early, I pointed out a glaring weakness in his work and told him to go back and correct it. RESULT: The entire group (16 were present) worked steadily for the entire 100 minutes. Meanwhile, I had conferences and returned papers. The confer-

ences too went well. I believe I was able to be both supportive and very frank about shortcomings.

*March 29*

After a most restless night during which I reorganized my next two classes, I met the 5 students who made it through an awful snow/sleet/rain storm to be in class at 8:00 (5 more trickled in over the next 40 minutes). I was touched and impressed by their dedication—no, their earnestness—and tried, on the spur of the moment to come up with a third agenda for the period. I hope they felt their effortful journey was not unrewarded.

It occurs to me, and in my experience this is not typical at all, that it was the weaker students who showed up today. Only one of the stronger students was there, two of the weakest, and the others are borderline, i.e. they might make it but it will be close.

*May 3*

Once again, there is a relaxed atmosphere in class. We are beginning to get along together and to be aware of what each person's limits are. Perhaps I could have been less fierce, less inaccessible earlier, but I was too scared—afraid of doing a poor job and letting the students down.

When the end of the semester and the final exam rushed in on us, I think we were all a little surprised and would have liked just one more week. A sentimental wish since one or two more classes could have made no substantial difference to any student's chances of success.

Grading the finals presented me with one last dilemma.

*May 17–20*

There were no unexpected miracles or breakthroughs in the final papers. The two students who outdid themselves on the practice final dropped back to their customary level and one of the two who had underperformed pulled himself up nicely. For all our sakes I wanted as many students as possible to pass. There were several whom I couldn't decide on. A second reader saw one as an easy pass and this suggested that I might have been grading too hard. So I went over three other borderline cases once more. In two cases I decided to give the students a shot at the next course and passed them, but I could not do that for the third though I would have dearly liked to.

What were the results of that sixteen weeks of work? As my journal shows, I learned a great deal, as I had expected. Some information about the course comes from the eleven students who completed faculty evaluation forms. Two were strongly dissatisfied with my performance, but to my great relief the others were very positive. One wrote "I like him, he's cool" and I was absurdly pleased. Several commented that I was courteous and one called me caring. Almost all said that classes were worthwhile.

Another way of assessing the results is by seeing what happened to the students.

- 27 students were on the class roster at some point
- 2 transferred to other courses
- 4 were only in class a few times at the start of the semester
- 2 withdrew officially
- 6 disappeared
- 13 completed course: 6 passed, 7 didn't

These completion and pass rates were about average for spring sections of this course at that College (fall pass rates are higher).

What of my subjective reflections? Teaching this basic writing course did accomplish what I had expected it to. Now I really do know what it means to teach in a City University of New York community college. I have a sense of what basic skills faculty face each semester and of the wide range of knowledge and pedagogical skills they need in order to teach effectively. My awareness of the problems of those faculty and students is sharper and my respect for those who regularly teach basic skills is greater.

As an administrator, I learned or relearned a number of things. Above all, teaching that class reconfirmed my belief that it is important and healthy for academic administrators to teach. It may be best if they can tackle a basic skills course: certainly that will give them a better idea of what's happening on their campus than they could get by teaching an upper-level course (at least I am sure this is true in a community college). Next, I realize just how critical to faculty high quality, resources, and support are. When I reflect that I had only one class and full-time faculty have four, making sure that faculty have adequate secretarial support goes way up on my priority list. Support should also be available to basic skills teachers from faculty colleagues like the informal consultants whose help and counsel were so valuable to me. Despite my years of teaching other kinds of writing courses, it would not have been advisable or prudent for me to have tackled this project without the level of expert support my "con-



sultants" so generously provided. This means giving one or two faculty members release time so that they can serve as a resource and be available to share their experience and expertise.

At a higher level of difficulty (because it costs more) I see more clearly the need to keep class size down in all basic skills courses. My roster shows that, after the first three weeks, the number of students in class was never higher than 18. And that was plenty! Without pretending that it is an ideal size, it seems to me that no basic skills course should enroll more than 21 students.

Fourthly, as I mentioned earlier, my awareness of the skills basic skills faculty must have has been heightened, as has my respect for what they do. This has given me new determination to continue to work for greater recognition of those faculty who are excellent teachers. Proven teaching ability does not play a sufficiently large role in personnel deliberations. Excellence in the classroom should have a status equal to that of publications in reappointment, promotion, and tenure deliberations: certainly in community colleges, and probably in four-year colleges and universities too.

Lastly, I see the urgent need for faculty and administrators to accept their responsibility for developing criteria and procedures for handling those students who have no chance of succeeding in college. Such students fall into two distinct groups: the academically unable and the emotionally or motivationally unable. To take the latter group first: every one of the six students who in the fall semester had dropped out of a basic writing course and then signed up for what became my spring section of that same course, dropped out the second time too. Unless such students can demonstrate to a counselor that there were exceptional extenuating circumstances to account for their repeatedly "walking West," I believe they should not be allowed to register a third time for a place in the same basic skills course. Failure to deal firmly with this group of students has many negative results. Faculty are burdened with the thankless and often hopeless task of working with students sitting in a class for a third or even fourth time. The energy the faculty expend would be better conserved for students on their first and second attempts. Dealing with that group of students also wastes institutional resources and, in my experience, contributes to the pressure to increase class size. ("Why not put a couple more in each section? Half of them drop out anyway," is the argument, and it has a kernel of truth.)

The other group of students, those academically unable to acquire the skills necessary for survival in college cannot be

allowed to flounder until, finally, they are dismissed for failing to meet required minimum requirements (grade point average, course completion, or progress toward degree), or lose heart and give up. From sources such as the 1984 CUNY Task Force Report on Student Retention and Academic Performance, we know that, excluding exceptional circumstances, students who fail any basic skills course twice have virtually no chance of a successful college career. It is, I submit, a cruel hoax to allow students to continue to take courses once it is clear that they will not succeed. My class included no fewer than three such students. Every one had taken the same course at least once before; not one came even close to passing. One was clearly learning disabled, taking for the third time a course he could not possibly pass. What a terrible insult to that student's dignity and sense of self-worth! As professionals we have an obligation to protect those students by developing caring procedures for counselling them into nonacademic ventures, and doing so without harming their dignity.

We cannot take the sheer plod out of our ploughing, but we can at least reduce wasted effort as we strive to make sillion shine.

**Marilyn S. Sternglass**

## COMMITMENT TO WRITING AND COMPLEXITY OF THINKING

It has become a truism of composition research today to say that more than one piece of writing from a student needs to be examined before it is possible to make any meaningful assessment of the student's writing ability. What has not yet been explored in these analyses of multiple responses to a range of writing tasks is the effect that translating a general task into one that engages personal commitment by the writer has on the cognitive strategies employed to respond to that task.

In this paper, I am reporting on one aspect of a study in which I examined the writing of basic skills and regular freshman composition students from three universities on the same three tasks, one calling for expository development, one calling for argumentative development, and the third calling for speculative development (Sternglass 16). I found that the degree to which the student writers transformed the generalized tasks into ones that were personally meaningful to them affected strongly their critical and creative thinking processes and their ability to utilize complex cognitive strategies in responding to the problems that they had posed for themselves.

Two types of changes occurred: (1) reading and writing were conceived of as meaning-making processes that gradually induced greater personal engagement on the part of the writer and thus

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fostered the display of more complex thinking, and (2) the writers changed in terms of their reliance on source texts in the essays they produced. Before exploring these points, I will describe briefly the cognitive model used to analyze the student papers. Then I will present a case study of one basic writing student to illustrate the changes that occurred.

The model used for analysis was one developed by Andrew Wilkinson and his associates in *Assessing Language Development* published in 1980. The Cognitive Processes aspects of this model reflects movement from concrete to abstract reasoning processes. The first two categories, Describing and Interpreting, are envisaged as concrete operational (in Piaget's terms), and the second two categories, Generalizing and Speculating, are seen as moving toward formal operational use, although the Generalizing category contains aspects of both concrete and formal operations. Mike Rose has wisely cautioned against labelling students too rigidly on Piaget's scale because it is important to examine those situations in which students can analyze and generalize, i.e. operate formally, and distinguish them from situations in which students cannot. According to Rose, the area of difficulty is the "unfamiliar web of reasoning/reading/writing conventions that are fundamental to academic inquiry" (127).

What I am attempting to explore in this paper is the range of cognitive strategies that are available to student writers when they are attempting to respond to tasks within academic constraints, especially different types of tasks that appear to call for different cognitive strategies, and the effect that engaging with the task has on the strategies employed. One issue often raised in composition research is that students have inherent abilities which they do not always demonstrate. This study then looks at two questions related to that issue: (1) Does the mode of the task influence in part the cognitive level drawn upon, and (2) Does a deeper level of commitment to the task encourage more complex thinking?

It was not surprising to me to find that more complex cognitive strategies were generated by the students as the task demands appear to become more complex, i.e. seemed to call for greater abstraction. What was surprising was the degree to which the individual students did or did not translate the generalized tasks into something personally meaningful to themselves and by so doing raised or lowered their level of commitment to the writing they were producing.

Since the three tasks were based on readings undertaken by all the class members and the instructors, that meant that there

was a great deal of information shared by the writer and his or her potential reader(s), whether they were the instructors or the classmates. This shared knowledge also meant that the degree to which the writer remained tied to the source readings and the class discussion determined whether the information or perspective introduced would or would not generate any genuine interest or enthusiasm for either the writer or the reader because it was possible that no new information or perspective would be included in the paper being produced.

What happened for the students was that many attempted to pose questions for investigation of the generalized topics that had the potential for original development, but often those questions were not fruitfully explored. To illustrate the relationship between commitment to the task and complexity of thinking, I will describe two aspects of the nature of response that one of the basic skills students produced: the degree to which she posed and responded to her translations of the generalized tasks, and the degree to which she relied on or freed herself from the source texts.

Joan was a basic skills student at the Bloomington campus of Indiana University. At this campus, basic skills students are identified as the weakest of the incoming freshman class in their language skills on the basis of a formula derived from their SAT-Verbal scores, Test of Standard Written English, high school grade point average, and relative high school class rank. For example, while the mean SAT-Verbal for all entering freshmen (in 1980 when Joan was a freshman) was 460, the mean score for basic skills students was 350. (The national mean SAT-Verbal for college freshmen in 1980 was 424.) Students having the lowest composite scores are then counseled into basic skills sections of freshman composition, but they are not compelled to enroll in them. (At the Bloomington campus of Indiana University, the basic skills sections replace the regular sections of freshman composition; they do not precede them.)

The first task, calling for expository development, was based on the reading of two personal essays. Students were directed to explore possible common ideas or perspectives displayed in the readings which dealt with two individuals describing similar experiences of professional success accompanied by separation from their families and heritages. The students were guided toward developing synthesizing ideas to relate the readings and then asked to select a particular emphasis or point of view to develop. Typical synthesizing topics included the following: "To Gain Yet Lose," "A Life With Two Roots," "Conflicts in Roles," and "Success and Happiness—An Intangible Pair." Most students

developed their papers through the expository approach of comparison and contrast. As can be seen from the nature of this generalized task, students appeared to be explicitly directed to stay close to the source materials and they were only peripherally encouraged to bring their own experiences into their analyses.

Joan titled her paper, "Career Choices: Are They Really Worth It?" She drew on a great deal of evidence from the source texts to develop the point that the authors of the personal essays were separated from their families because of their career choices, but she never addressed the question she posed, *was it worth it?* She apparently saw her task as the transfer of information from the source texts, rather than the transformation of that information into something she could analyze from her own perspective (Harste 1). Joan developed the cause and effect aspects of the issue she raised, but she failed to employ critical evaluative thinking skills that would have generated an original response to the question that she had raised in her title.

A brief excerpt from her paper captures the flavor of her presentation:

Both Rodriguez and Ullmann were somewhat separated from their families because of the career choices they had made. They had both decided at an earlier time in their lives that they wanted to have a higher standard of living as compared to what they would have had. Rodriguez wanted a better education and Ullmann wanted the wonderful life of an actress.

Even in the conclusion of the paper, no assessment is made of the implications of the individual's decisions.

The two stories do have quite a lot in common, but I think the main point that they convey is that they were both striving to have their own identity—and in the process they gave up something—their past lives and their families.

Thus, the writer comes so far—but no further. What has been given up by the authors of the essays she has read is articulated in her paper, but not the assessment of whether the gain was worth the loss, the question she had formulated. In this paper, then, Joan has started to transform a generalized task into a personally meaningful one by conceiving of the question, but she has failed to follow through and to fulfill the promise of that potential.

For the second task, an argumentative paper, students read a variety of essays on the value of a college education. They were

then instructed to develop a point of view and take a position on this general issue. They were directed to list the major arguments and counterarguments from the source texts so that they could be supported or refuted. As in the earlier task, students were told to look for ways to relate the arguments and counterarguments from the source materials. Prior to reading the source materials, the students participated in class discussions that centered on their own reasons for deciding to enter college, so it was hoped that they would bring their own experiences into their argumentative papers.

Once again, Joan formulated the title of her paper as a question, "Is education all it's made out to be?" She stated her hypothesis in entirely positive terms and selected evidence from the source readings to support that position. She supplemented the evidence from the source readings with examples from her world knowledge which she then assessed, two steps that had not occurred in her first paper. Furthermore, she questioned one of the assumptions found in the source readings, another cognitive strategy she had not demonstrated earlier. These new strategies likely reflect a cognitive potential that was already there, but not brought out by the nature of the response she made to the first task.

Two excerpts from her second essay illustrate these new strategies: In the first example, she brings in personal background knowledge and assesses it, and in the second example, she questions the assumption stated in one of the source texts that individuals only acquire values through the college experience.

For example, someone may have a degree for teaching, yet they may end up managing a small business instead. This job of which has some potential. There are also appealing jobs available that don't require a college education. For some occupations, such as skilled trades and some technical fields, special training can give one better credentials than a Bachelor's degree in liberal arts.

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My third and final argument is that the controversy over educational worth has moved beyond its monetary benefits to less tangible areas. Areas in personal development and life enrichment. For example, in theory a student is taught to develop their values and goals of themselves through college, but there's no assurance that going to college can affect anyone in this way, college alone cannot take all the credit. Most people have already acquired certain values before even going to college, it may just be a matter of strengthening these already acquired values.

This latter example demonstrates the inherent potential for independent analysis which Joan develops further in her third paper. It also illustrates Vygotsky's notion of a zone of proximal development (90) through which students are moved from their actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving to their level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. In other words, here Joan has been stimulated by an instructionally more challenging task and has started to respond by viewing reading and writing as the sources for original meaning-making (Harste 1-4; Tierney and Pearson 568-580). She has gone "beyond the information given" (to use Bruner's term) to begin to assert her own knowledge in the assessment of the conclusions drawn in the source readings.

In the third task, intended to be developed from a speculative perspective, students were asked to reflect on possible family structures in the year 2000. Perhaps because of the controversial nature of some of the source readings, in particular an excerpt from B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* and a description of an actual community modeled on Skinner's fictive one, a considerable number of students chose to critique the structures pictured by Skinner rather than construct their own. But Joan was virtually liberated by this task. In a rather dramatic breakthrough, she began to search her own world knowledge and experience to create new meanings, meanings unique to her on her topic, "Our Changing Sex Roles," the first generalized task truly transformed by her into one that was personally significant.

In this essay, Joan takes a position on the roles of women and proceeds to develop it with information from the source readings, from her personal experience, and from projections of her current knowledge, hence fulfilling the speculative demands of the task. She is no longer simply transferring information from the source texts, but she is creating an original synthesis and a new meaning for herself from the particular knowledge, background, and perspective she brings to bear on the topic. She has created a response that can be characterized as transactional from a reader-response perspective (Bleich 1978; Petrosky 1982). Petrosky has described such a response as "an expression and explanation of comprehension; and comprehension means using writing to explicate the connections between our models of reality—our prior knowledge—and the texts we recreate in light of them" (24-25). Thus, Joan has used the source texts as the basis for her own text in which she creates a moral stance about human relationships that she wishes to convey to her readers. Although her paper presents



an idealized view of such relationships, she draws on cognitive strategies that had been dormant and hidden in her earlier writing, but are released by her commitment to this new personal perspective. Some samples from her paper illustrate her engagement and the more complex thinking that accompanies it:

In today's society, a recent change in the traditional sex roles has developed; both in the home and in the community. Women are now allowed in job fields that were once only considered a masculine job, and more men are working in the home—helping with the housework and childrearing. Although these changes have come about, the family structure isn't actually hurt by them. There are some benefits: the married couple tend to share an unspecified and unlimited amount of obligations; the husband-wife bond is strengthened by equally sharing the work and other responsibilities; and the parents are more actively involved with their children.

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According to John B. Holland, the family is considered a type of group—one in which their concern is not with national calculations and limited obligations, but with flesh and blood people and their felt obligations to them. The married couple share an unspecified and unlimited amount of obligations. For example, the husband may be continuing his schooling, and in the process, his wife takes on a part-time job to help him through college. There is nothing in the marriage contract stating that the wife can, or cannot work. Another example could be that the wife's family goes into debt because they missed a \$200 rent payment. There is no written obligation on the husband or wife to meet their family's needs, but since they have intimate feelings for these particular relatives, they loan them the money with no questions asked. Neither of these obligations were written on paper, they were merely blanket obligations—which in the final analysis mean—an obligation on each of the marriage partners to help in whatever may arise in their common life together.

What I hope this discussion and these excerpts illustrate is the transformation of a basic writer who has become increasingly engaged with the topic areas proposed to her for writing about and who has increasingly used her personal resources to develop these topics. In the process, she has been able to demonstrate the use of appropriate cognitive strategies. Her resources include, of course, her increasing familiarity and comfort with the nature of academic tasks, practice in using source materials as evidence

and as initiators of material to use in her writing, and confidence that she can employ the increasingly complex strategies of explaining, inferring, assessing, deducing, abstracting, summarizing, evaluating, concluding, reflecting, classifying, hypothesizing, exploring, projecting, and speculating. Joan's papers demonstrate that perfunctory responses to generalized writing tasks draw on only a small range of these cognitive operations, while more engaged and committed responses foster increasingly complex thinking and writing.

One additional characteristic of Joan's writing reinforces the changes just described. As she moved through the tasks, Joan's reliance on the source texts dropped off markedly. Her first paper consisted primarily of a string of quotations taken directly from the source materials, loosely held together by transitional sentences (an all too familiar pattern for freshman compositions). Her second paper, while eschewing direct quotations, consisted primarily of material paraphrased from the source materials. Only with the third paper did Joan reconceive the way in which the source materials would be used, this time as a takeoff point for the development of her own ideas. Three brief excerpts illustrate this progression:

*Expository paper:* Rodriguez chose to further his education in an American way . . . "When I was beginning grade school, I noted to myself the fact that the classroom environment was so different in its styles and assumptions from my own family environment that survival would essentially entail a choice between both worlds." He obviously chose to go on and further his education, thus leaving his Chicano past behind.

There is no question that the selected quotation is germane to the point that Joan wishes to make, and she draws an inference from the quotation, but her extensive dependence on the exact language of the source texts reflects some uncertainty about analyzing the experiences of the writers whose lives she has been reading about. Stringing together a chain of direct quotations is a deliberate strategy, one often invoked by student writers who wish to avoid any deeper level of engagement with the materials being presented. Alternatively, this strategy is also frequently used by students who do not understand the source material well enough even to paraphrase it. As a writing strategy, direct quotation allows the writer to fulfill the demands of providing specific examples and details in support of her generalizations while at

the same time presenting only surface inferences to link the meanings together, if, in fact, any inferences are supplied at all.

*Argumentative paper:* One argument against college is that the salary differential between college graduates and other Americans is narrowing. According to the article about the value of a college diploma, which appeared in a 1975 *US News and World Report*, in 1969, full-time male workers with four years of college earned 53% more than male workers with four years of high school; in 1978 it decreased to only 40% more . . .

The argumentative demands of this task require Joan to marshal evidence to support her position. This she does, selecting details from the source readings and “plugging” them into the neatly laid out paragraphs of support. It becomes difficult to separate the inferences she draws independently from those drawn by the authors of the source texts. Only by observing the selections of points drawn from the source readings for inclusion in the paper do we gain any real insight into the mind of the writer. She is not drawing on complex cognitive strategies because, for the most part, she is not analyzing, interpreting, or evaluating the evidence from any original or personal perspective. In other words, she is still treating writing from sources as the transfer of information rather than its transformation.

*Speculative paper:* The husband and wife have an intimate relationship based on sentiment, for this is usually why they are united in marriage, because of the special feelings they have for each other. They are kept together by a bond, or a feeling of belonging. One aspect of this bond is the sharing of work and other responsibilities. The husband helps cook, clean and wash dishes, while the mother helps with the children, or vice versa. Or a situation could arise where the husband is out of work, so the wife supports the family with her job. The husband then takes care of the responsibilities in the home. Since jobs around the house are shared equally, the husband and wife have respect for each other’s feelings . . .

None of the ideas from the previous excerpt came directly from the readings in the class or from the class discussions. Rather, in this paper Joan has used the topic and the contextual cues as an opportunity to explore an aspect of her thinking hitherto unanalyzed. Although her analysis may appear unsophisticated,

it is evidence of her willingness to take risks in her writing that might have seemed impossible to anyone viewing her earlier writing in the course when she appeared to be completely boxed in by a reliance on the source texts and an apparent belief that writing was merely the transfer of information. She has freed herself from the bondage of the source texts, she has reconceived the generalized task into one that is personally meaningful for her, and she has liberated the cognitive strategies that lay dormant in her earlier writing.

Such an analysis vindicates the notion that multiple texts must be examined before it is possible to draw conclusions about a writer's ability and performance. Furthermore, it strongly suggests that a writer must be strongly encouraged to create a personally meaningful task from a generalized one if increasingly complex cognitive strategies are going to be exercised and fostered.

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Andrea A. Lunsford

## 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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## NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Regional Language Centre (RELC) will hold its 21st Regional Seminar April 21-25, 1986 in Singapore. The theme of the seminar is "Patterns of Classroom Interaction in Southeast Asia." For information and invitations, contact: Director (Attention: Chairman Seminar Planning Committee), SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, RELC Building, 30 Orange Grove Road, Singapore 1025, Republic of Singapore.

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The National Testing Network in Writing, The City University of New York, and Cuyahoga Community College announce the 4th Annual Conference on Writing Assessment on April 16, 17, and 18 in Cleveland, OH. This national conference is for educators, administrators, and assessment personnel and will be devoted to critical issues in assessing writing in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary settings. Discussion topics will include theories and models of writing assessment, assessing writing across the curriculum, the politics of testing, computer applications in writing assessment, the impact of testing on minority students and on ESL students, and research on writing assessment. The keynote speaker is Rexford Brown of the Education Commission of the States, and the closing speaker is Elaine Maimon of Beaver College. For information and registration materials, contact: Prof. Mary Lou Conlin, Cuyahoga Community College, 2900 Community College Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44115.

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*Teaching English in the Two-Year College* will publish a special issue on "Film, Television, and Video: New Directions for the Teaching of English" in December, 1986. Types of papers welcome are: reports on substantive research in the field; essays giving a theoretical framework for integrating visual media into the teaching of English; pedagogical descriptions of specific approaches (thematic, structural, rhetorical, linguistic, aesthetic) to the study of film, television, and video within the English curriculum. Authors are asked to use the MLA Handbook, 2nd ed. (1984), and submit two copies to: William V. Costanzo, Dept.

of English, Westchester Community College, Valhalla, NY 10595. For manuscript return, please include SASE. Deadline for submissions is April 1, 1986.

Southeastern Writing Center Association is holding its 6th annual conference April 17-19, 1986 in Mobile, AL. Its theme is "Beyond Basic Writing: What More Can Writing Centers Do?" Presentations will address the following topics: tutoring ESL and learning disabled students; competency testing; the writing center as the core of a writing across the curriculum program; using computers in the composing process; and ways to establish community outreach programs. For information contact: Renée Harper, Writing Lab, Bookstore Basement, University of South Alabama, Mobile, AL 36688.

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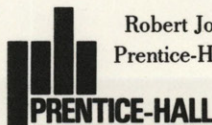
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