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## REEXAMINING BASIC WRITING: LESSONS FROM HARVARD'S BASIC WRITERS

If you place the words basic writing and Harvard University in close proximity you are likely to attract attention.<sup>1</sup> When Harvard University's Expository Writing Program added a course in "basic writing" for a small number of first-year students who find writing especially difficult, the kind of attention the course initially received was not always easy to manage. It is hard to imagine a university where inaugurating a basic writing course might pose more of a public relations problem than it did at Harvard.

In the fall of 1985 when I joined Harvard's Expository Writing Program, along with my teaching I assumed responsibility for getting the new basic writing course off the ground. During my first weeks at Harvard, as coordinator of the new program, the greater part of my attention went into explaining the course to other faculty, to the students who were advised to take it and, not to be taken lightly, to *The Harvard Crimson*. I found myself repeating these responses to the frequently asked questions: "No, this is not a 'remedial' course"; "No, I do not think the students have 'serious problems with grammar'"; "Yes, the course will require at least as much writing as is required in other writing courses"; and "No, Harvard's admissions standards are not going down." I will return to these comments later because, with the exception of the word *Harvard* these are the same answers I give now at California State

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University, Northridge, where I direct a composition program that includes “developmental writing” courses for less accomplished, “nontraditional” students who are traditionally named “basic writers.”

At the end of the first year of Harvard’s program, those of us who taught sections of “Basic Writing” counted ourselves successful. The students who took the course—none of whom wanted to take it—gave it excellent reviews. When these students went on to their required semester of Expository Writing (Harvard has a one-semester freshman writing requirement) the instructors in the required courses reported on the success of nearly all of the former basic writing students. We even got good coverage from *The Harvard Crimson*. But what seems most important to me now is what I learned from working with Harvard’s “basic writers,” my changed understanding of the nature of basic writers’ problems, and the implications for other writing programs that the Harvard program suggests. At the outset I should say that when I use the term “basic writers,” Harvard’s or anyone else’s, I put these words—not necessarily literally so much as psychologically—in quotes, for I hope, eventually, to put these words to rest.

### **Basic is a Relative Term**

Because teachers in Harvard’s Expository Writing Program had long felt the need for an additional semester of writing for those freshman who finished the required one-semester course, still uncomfortable as writers, still struggling far more than their peers with writing assignments, the Expository Writing staff tried to identify such students by looking at writing on a placement exam. In the first year of the program, 48 students out of an entering class of around 1600 took the basic course, having been recommended for it based on their performance, relative to their peers, on the new placement test. Since every entering freshman at Harvard must take one semester of Expository Writing, there was no need for a placement test until the university added the additional course, called Expos 5. It is at this moment in a writing program’s history, when a placement exam is instituted, that the relativity of course designations is most apparent.

Before teaching at Harvard, I had taught basic writing courses at Queens College of The City University of New York and at the Santa Barbara and San Diego campuses of the University of California; now at California State University, Northridge, I administer a program of basic writing. As a widely travelled writing teacher, it is clear to me that *basic* is a relative term. The Expos 5 students at

Harvard were basic writers relative to their peers in their own university. Elsewhere, these students might have been in honors English; they often were advanced placement English students in their high schools or prep schools. *Advanced* is, of course, another relative designation. I can find myself at one university teaching students in a basic course who are more advanced than the advanced students I had in another university's advanced course.

In "Defining Basic Writing in Context," Lynn Quitman Troyka illustrates this relativity with sample essays collected from basic writing students at sixteen colleges. The range of writing in Troyka's samples serves as a convincing reminder to basic writing teachers and researchers that *basic* is a shifting categorization. The fact that Troyka, from her perspective as editor of *Journal of Basic Writing*, sees the need to demonstrate the relativity of the term *basic*, suggests how often in the profession *basic* poses as an absolute designation. As Troyka notes, when Mina Shaughnessy in 1975 suggested *basic* as a less pejorative term than *remedial*, Shaughnessy also cautioned that these are relative categories.

Writing research that focuses on errors may suggest that absolutes can be applied to writing levels. When researchers label as *basic* features of student texts, or when a placement test identifies specific textual features as indicative of a student's need for a basic writing course, it may appear, for example, that a certain kind of sentence construction or gap in coherence is a distinguishing mark of a basic writer. But the decision to label a specific feature *basic*, like the decision to label a whole text, depends on the makeup of a particular writing sample. Cutoff lines for basic courses are always dependent on the range of writing in a given population and, on something even less absolute, the availability of funding and course allotments. At Harvard, in a real sense, we had no "basic writing" students until we created a course of basic writing.

And yet, in spite of the absolute relativity I observe in the term *basic writing*, my experience at Harvard convinces me that there are such things as writing problems, that there are some common denominators among students in basic courses at all levels.

### **Identifying Basic Writers' Problems**

One of my goals at the beginning of the basic writing program at Harvard was to learn what I could from Harvard students about the nature of writing problems. In other student populations, poor writers may be poor students generally, but at Harvard, the students' difficulties, whatever they might turn out to be, would not be tied to poor motivation or general lack of affinity for academic work. I

thought that I might be able to view writing problems in isolation, to identify what, specifically, students find most difficult about writing. At the end of two years, I did find myself able to do this, but not, as I had expected, because of the differences between Harvard's basic writers and the less accomplished basic writers I had taught at other schools, but because of the similarities.

The kinds of problems Harvard's basic writing students had were different in degree but not in kind, both from problems of basic writers elsewhere, and from those most student writers have from time to time that even more experienced writers have in unfamiliar or difficult writing situations. Stated epigrammatically, I learned that *basic writers' problems are problems basic to writing*.

To locate writing problems it seems appropriate to examine writers' texts. Below are samples of writing from each of the two basic writing sections I taught in my first semester at Harvard. Both pieces were written outside of class during the first week of the term. For the first, students were asked to write a brief autobiography of themselves as writers. For the second, students paired up in class to interview each other and wrote up the interviews. In the second piece, the name of the interviewed student and of his prep school are fictionalized; no other changes were made.

#### *Harvard Basic Writer No. 1*

In the course of writing, I believe the best approach is the one which comes within the writer, reflecting his views, ideas, ideologies, and character. This is the attitude which I have attempted to pursue in my writings. If it is to analyze some sort of work, then I prefer to analyze and describe the work as I have conceived it in my head on the basis of my personal ideas, rather than based on the notions or conceptions of another.

I believe some of the best writings have come from authors who have written based on their personal views. For example, George Orwell, in *Animal Farm*, criticized a political theory by conjuring his personal metaphors which he believed would describe the absurdity of such a theory. In addition, Mark Twain, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, satirically detailed his conceptions of religion, and in general, of life.

In the course of my writing, I have attempted to portray what I feel about, or how I picture, a situation with conceptions of my own based on my character. Thus, in

addition to submitting a critique of the writing itself, I have also added or displayed a characteristic of myself.

*Harvard Basic Writer No. 2*

The story of John Baxter is one of interest. His ideas about the future seem to be paradoxical in nature. John has many goals encompassing various areas, yet he seems to know where these goals will lead him. It appears to be a contradiction in terms, but after pondering this statement for a while one realizes that it is really a very logical and lucid point of view. John does have tentative plans for the future, but he is not staunch in their expression. He understands that Harvard will open many avenues for him to follow and he wishes to experience a good number of them. Only then can he make the career choice best suited for his own needs.

John's academic interests are multi-faceted. Although economics is of special interest, he also enjoys mathematics and other areas of study. After college, John hopes to attend business school. This hope, however, is very premature, as he would still like to explore other alternatives.

Extra-curricularly, John is interested in *health-oriented* sports such as jogging, soccer, and wrestling. John stated, "I think wrestling would take up too much time, and not allow me to concentrate on my studies, so I am going to pursue another interest of mine which is boxing at a more relaxed level." Although John does not plan to participate at Harvard, he will inquire about the club boxing program.

For John, college was a welcomed change from the rigid bureaucratic structure of the boarding school he attended. There was a curfew and no appliances save a stereo were tolerated. However, John did learn to be disciplined and was very well prepared for the rigors of a Harvard education. Also, Ridgecrest gave John a familiarity with the Boston area that takes most other Harvard Freshmen some time to achieve.

Nutritionally, John enjoys pizza, cheese, meats, and potatoes. In fact, the foods John eats seem to be an extension of his personality. He is a "meat and potatoes" kind of guy. In other words, John is a very personable individual who knows the opportunities at Harvard and wants to get the most out of them.

The weaknesses as well as the potential of these essays will be evident to writing teachers.<sup>2</sup> These students look different on paper

from their fellow freshmen at Harvard and from the basic writers I have worked with at other schools. My spring semester sections of regular, nonbasic Expository Writing, included students who were the most sophisticated, articulate undergraduate writers I have ever taught. Here, for example, is an essay by a student in one of my basic writing sections of the special admissions SEEK program at Queens College, CUNY. This essay was written in class, during the first week of the semester. Students were asked to respond to a prompt that begins: "We are made up of many selves. Describe some of your various selves. . . ."

*Queens College Basic Writer*

We are all made up of many selves. When you are at work you are a different selve than when you are with family. I myself am of many selves. As for an example I am a courtetsy girl at a supermarket. Here I am very friendly with the coustomer. I am very descipline. I am always on time, never absence. I also try to be as mechture as I can be. Here I have to know what to say or what to do because I am beeing involve with people much older than I am. Therefore at the job my selve is of a mechture person.

Now as a student I am a little more relax. I act my age. I'm with people of my age. I laugh and discoest things with my friends. I feel more free. But of corse when it comes to class I have to settle down a little. Than is when my discipline comes in. I'am always on time never absence from class and try to do my work as best I can.

Comparing these two selves they have in common my discipline The respect that I have when comes to things that have to be done. I think this aspect I have in all my selves.

While it will not be difficult for writing teachers to identify the infelicities and weaknesses, what is wrong, missing, or inappropriate in any of these texts at either the essay or the sentence level, to do so will not provide a reliable guideline for teaching. To observe that the writing of Harvard Basic Writer No. 1 is incoherent, that it lacks development, clear argument, and convincing evidence; or that Harvard Basic Writer No. 2 has problems of diction and tone; or that the Queens College Basic Writer has the additional problems of usage and mechanics, does not in itself suggest a useful basic writing curriculum.

At California State University, Northridge, I often sit on interview committees for students who are in the teaching credential program in English. As part of the interview, the

credential candidate must respond to a piece of student writing. Some of the candidates start right in: they say, "This student needs to learn how to organize an essay," or "The writer has good ideas but doesn't know how to develop them." The stronger candidates, however, ask questions: "What was the assignment?" "Is this an early draft?" "Was there time for prewriting?" even, "Who wrote this?" The last, I think, is an excellent question, for an early draft by a professional writer, as Donald Murray likes to remind us, may look as incomplete and "basic" as a draft turned in by a basic writing student. The crucial difference between the two drafts would be the difference between the two writers' ways of viewing their own work. Problems for writers like those in Harvard University's basic writing course, or for the basic writers at Queens College, are not merely the infelicities and inadequacies of their texts, but the limitations of their approaches to writing tasks, what they think about their work, and what they know and do not know about the process of writing.

### **Problems Basic to Writing**

Starting with the work of Mina Shaughnessy, basic writing research has demonstrated the extent to which the texts that basic writers produce are misleading measures of the thinking these students are doing. Shaughnessy directed teachers to investigate the errors that students make precisely so that teachers might glean evidence of the thinking that basic writers' texts belie. By focusing on both cognition and error, Shaughnessy may be said to have launched basic writing research on two—at times opposing—paths. Investigations into cognitive processes including studies by Perl, Lunsford, Sommers, Rose, Troyka, and Hays have outlined some of the thinking strategies of basic (or, in Rose's study, blocked) writers. At the same time, work by researchers including Bizzell, Bartholomae, Epes, and Kogen has traced basic writers' problems to rhetorical issues, to an unfamiliarity with the language or conventions of academic prose.

In both cognitive and rhetorical investigations, however, there is an implicit assumption that by looking *through* students' writing it may be possible to identify students' difficulties. So, in coordinating a curriculum for basic writers at Harvard, I suggested that instructors resist the urge to tackle the problems in students' texts, that instead of addressing the flaws apparent in the students' writing, the basic writing course at Harvard attempt to address the underlying difficulties with writing the students experienced. Such

pedagogy is less guided by the question, “What is wrong with this prose?” than by “How did it get to look this way?”

Here are some things the instructors of Harvard’s basic writing course noticed: Students in the basic course tended to write less than other Harvard freshmen. The papers they produced were frequently shorter, and it was apparent that these students were not used to writing multiple drafts. Some basic writing students did write copiously in an essay, but often by repeating points without elaboration.

Many of them were anxious writers or students who said they experienced “writer’s block.” At least as many, however, merely said they did not like to write. In my sections, none of the students had heard of freewriting.

In comparison to drafts by other Harvard freshmen, a draft by an Expos 5 basic writing student might appear to have been written by someone who had little concern for form or craft; however, conferences with the Expos 5 students revealed that they worried even less about meaning. They wanted to know whether a piece was “smooth enough,” whether it “sounded right,” and about whether the grammar was correct. On the other hand, the basic writing instructors noted that perhaps the most salient feature of the students’ essays was actually a missing feature: the lack of supporting evidence.

In conference the students seemed to have few worries about what they were going to say. Many of them described the process of writing as if content were predetermined by topic, as if writing were mostly a matter of transcription, so that their main problem was to get words to “flow” as effortlessly as they should. In general, the students in Harvard’s basic course can be described as having a limited view of writing and of themselves as writers. I identified nine basic writing problems among the Harvard basic writing students:

1. Lacking confidence in one’s ability to write.
2. Having trouble getting started on writing tasks.
3. Becoming easily discouraged during writing tasks.
4. Composing by what Peter Elbow calls “the dangerous method,” (39–46) trying to get it right, paragraph by paragraph or line by line, the first time.
5. Attempting to write a one-draft version of a paper.
6. Thinking of writing assignments as tests one will either pass or fail.
7. Trying to write down only what seems already clear or

known rather than using writing as an aid to learning or to discovering ideas.

8. Believing that one's writing problems are primarily the fault of poor vocabulary, inadequate style, difficulty with "grammar," or the inability to write quickly.
9. Having greater concern for form and appearance than for meaning in one's writing.

Although writing was obviously a weak subject for the students in Harvard's basic writing course, these were students who ranked, in other ways, among the most outstanding freshmen in the country. They had no marks of what Patricia Bizzell calls the "outlandishness" (295) of basic writers. They did not have trouble writing because they were unprepared for the university; many of them had been preparing for schools such as Harvard all their lives. They experienced the problems listed above for a variety of other reasons: because their strengths and interests were in other disciplines; because their past experience with writing made them see it as test taking; because until they entered the basic writing course at Harvard, they had not been encouraged to revise essays; mostly, perhaps, because writing is difficult.

The Harvard students' writing problems were ones I had seen before, and have seen since, while working with less accomplished students in basic courses in New York and California. I would find it hard to say that writers at any level of accomplishment have a monopoly on writing problems. Given a difficult task and the pressure of time, any of us may experience at least some of these problems. We may berate ourselves for not working quickly enough; we may lack confidence, feel we are not up to the task ahead of us; we may even find ourselves distracted from the meaning we are working toward by the fact that our essay does not sound polished enough. As better writers, we eventually remind ourselves to focus on what we are trying to say, to freewrite, for example, on the difficult parts, or to get response that may help us to continue. A writing course that would address the kinds of problems I have identified needs to provide students with the kinds of experiences that are more familiar to better writers.

### **Basic Writing Pedagogy**

The kinds of problems Harvard's basic writing students had suggests a pedagogy that focuses on meaning, on fluency, on revision, and by attention to these issues, on building confidence. Models for such pedagogy are readily available in the work of

Graves, Murray, Elbow, Moffett, and others. Therefore, I will only briefly mention a few of the assignments used in the Harvard course.

In the early weeks of the semester and at the beginning of each writing assignment, the students concentrated on invention, on expressive and exploratory writing. For their first assignment, while they were experimenting with invention heuristics, students were asked to write 5,000 words in two weeks.<sup>3</sup> They were given a list of 50 topics and could write 100 words on each topic or 5,000 words on one topic or they could choose their own topics. They were not asked to revise this writing. The assignment allowed students to explore many kinds of writing, to dissolve much of their resistance to writing, thus demonstrating to them how much they could actually produce. By the time they came to the second assignment, a 3-to-5 page revised paper to be completed in the *next* two weeks, the students seemed more aware than they had been that to complete an essay it is necessary, and possible, both to draft material and to revise it.

Individual essay assignments attempted to engage students in the process of revision by requiring them to view material—a text, or an experience, or gathered data—from one perspective and then from another. For one assignment, students first wrote a narrative of a personal experience, and then after viewing the experience analytically, wrote a piece of analysis or persuasion.<sup>4</sup> In another assignment, students developed a collaborative understanding of a literary text by writing letters to each other; they then located questions in their letters from which to shape an interpretive essay. A final project was a version of Ken Macrorie's "I Search" (54–65) paper that included both a narrative of the process of researching and an analysis of original research.

Overall, the assignment sequence attempted to travel up James Moffett's scale of abstraction, keeping as an essential component a strict concentration on meaning. Most issues of form and expression were left to later stages of revision, in my sections, to the point at which a student was ready to publish a piece of work in a class anthology.

## **Upon Reexamination**

In the second year of the basic writing course at Harvard, the Expository Writing staff agreed that it was incongruous to call the course, "*Basic Writing*." A name and number change was needed. Expos 5 became Expos 10, where it fit in more comfortably with the rest of the Expository Writing sequence that is numbered 11 to 18.

The course title, “Basic Writing” became “Introduction to Expository Writing.”

These changes—and the reputation the course earned in its first year—had a remarkable, silencing effect on the kinds of questions I mentioned at the start of this essay that I needed to respond to when the program began, questions implying that the course or the students or both did not belong in the university. By the second year, the word was out that Expos 10, Introduction to Expository Writing, was a serious writing course, one where you had to write at least 5,000 words more than you had to write in other courses, and that being recommended for Expos 10 was something like being asked to take French 1 when you had expected to start in French 2, no more onerous than that. The second year, several students even volunteered for the course because they wanted the extra time to work on their writing.

Had I not been at Harvard during this period of transition for the basic writing program, I might be tempted to say, “Well, of course they volunteered, that’s Harvard; students are highly motivated.” But Harvard’s course, like basic writing courses anywhere, seemed to identify the students in it as, in some way, inadequate. Certainly no entering Harvard freshman would volunteer for such negative distinction. Given the status of Harvard, these misjudgments could not last long, and once the program was underway, I had only a few occasions to say to concerned faculty members in other departments, “If this course is remedial, this must not be Harvard.”

But there are only a few schools whose names resound, like Harvard’s, securely enough to counteract labels like *remedial*. At most schools, as Mike Rose discusses in “The Language of Exclusion,” such labels are unlikely to be seen as incongruous, and are likely to be damaging for students as well as misleading for faculty.

The pejorative connotations Mina Shaughnessy observed in the term *remedial* more than a decade ago, appear now to have overtaken the term *basic*. Moreover, if basic is a relative category, it may have also become, for pedagogy, an irrelevant one. I would propose for the sake of accuracy as well as for students’ self-esteem, that writing courses might simply be called *writing*. There is, after all, an egalitarianism about writing problems, and about writing potential. It is possible for nearly anyone faced with a difficult task to behave like a basic writer. And, given time and useful feedback, it is possible for even a beginning writer to revise a draft until readers can detect in it no traces of its history as basic writing.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Duncan Carter, Frances Winter, and Catherine Tudish, fellow instructors of Harvard's basic writing course, for sharing their many insights about writing and teaching, and Sheridan Blau for his invaluable responses to drafts of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> A detailed examination of texts by basic writing students at Harvard University is available in "Going Public: The Transition from Expressive to Transactional Discourse," a paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, St. Louis, 1988, by Duncan Carter, Portland State University, OR.

<sup>3</sup> This assignment comes from Sheridan Blau, who asks students at the University of California, Santa Barbara, to write the required number of words for the freshman course—6,500—in the first two weeks of the academic quarter.

<sup>4</sup> I outline this assignment in "Focusing Writing: So What?"

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