

# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

**FALL 1988**

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## CALL FOR ARTICLES

We welcome manuscripts of 10–20 pages on topics related to basic writing, broadly interpreted.

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 basic writing and must add substantively to the existing literature.* We seek 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 issue, 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.

## EDITOR'S COLUMN

With this issue, my three years as editor of the *Journal of Basic Writing* end. Issues under my editorship began with Fall 1986, though I started with *JBW* in mid-1984 when reorganization plans got underway. Now that *JBW* enjoys fine health and the promise of a secure future, I need to turn once again to my own research and writing. The privilege of working with *JBW*, a journal rich with history and mission, has surely taught me more than I have given. And because this is my final "Editor's Column," I am taking more space than usual so that I report recent news and share some parting thoughts about journal editing and academic writing, before I comment on the contents of this issue.

First, I want to thank you, dear readers, for your support of *JBW*, as demonstrated by your subscriptions. Without you, no tangible, ongoing proof exists to demonstrate to legislators, administrators, and fellow faculty that many teachers and scholars in composition and rhetoric highly value the education of basic writers. To the *JBW* Editorial Board, I extend my gratitude for their steady devotion and for lending their names and expertise to our referee process. Without such distinguished, energetic participation, *JBW* could not have thrived in recent years. To colleagues who generously offered their writing to *JBW* goes my deepest appreciation. Because *JBW* has room for only about ten percent of the manuscripts received, many more people deserved a hearing than *JBW* could provide. All authors whose writings were selected by *JBW*'s rigorous review process—and often who were imposed upon to revise for the sake of limited space on our pages—have contributed importantly to an expanded vision of basic writing and basic writers.

Next, I am pleased to report that the transition at *JBW* has gone very smoothly. Two key people will continue their indispensable association with *JBW*. Ruth Davis, Associate and Managing Editor, will continue to grace *JBW* with her extraordinarily professional attention to all phases of production, advertising, subscriptions, and

daily operations. Marilyn Maiz, Associate Editor (who has been with *JBW* since it was founded in 1975 by Mina Shaughnessy), will remain as official troubleshooter and guiding spirit. The most important news is that in June, 1988, a team of two was appointed to serve as coeditors of *JBW*: Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller, both of The College of Staten Island, CUNY. The first issue under their editorship will appear Spring 1989.

Professors Bernhardt and Miller were selected by Harvey Wiener, CUNY University Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and Director of the CUNY Instructional Resource Center—the institutional sponsor of *JBW*. The appointments came after a CUNY-wide search for a new editor, meetings of a search committee, and interviews with a number of finalists. *JBW* is in very fine hands indeed. Professors Bernhardt and Miller bring to *JBW* twenty years' experience teaching basic writing, freshman and advanced composition, reading, and English as a second language in two- and four-year colleges. They have been writing directors at The College of Staten Island, CUNY, conducted graduate courses in the teaching of writing, published articles in basic writing, and coauthored *Becoming a Writer* (St. Martins, 1986).

Professor Bernhardt has taught at Reed College, Fisk University, the University of Keele in England, Staten Island Community College, and Hebei Teachers University in the People's Republic of China. He is author of *Just Writing* (Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1977). Since 1985, he has been coordinator of The College of Staten Island/High Schools Collaborative Project in Language Arts. Professor Miller was a reporter for *Newsday* on New York's Long Island before beginning his teaching career. For the past five years, he has been senior college chair of the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors. He is coauthor, with Leon Chang of St. John's University in New York, of *Introduction to the History of Chinese Calligraphy* to be published by the University of Chicago Press in 1989.

Now I would like to discuss two parting observations based on having read hundreds of manuscripts and referee reviews. I want, first, to endorse heartily the idea and practice of the manuscript referee system, instituted at *JBW* starting with the 1986 issues. Without reviews, authors would not have multiple perspectives, and editors (or at least this editor) might develop tunnel vision. I surely can understand why, for example, *College Composition and Communication* (*CCC*) and *College English* (*CE*) became refereed journals in the last few years. Still, I see a potential danger. Because composition studies only now is emerging as a discipline, our profession has fewer senior scholars and recognized experts than it

will have in another ten years. Often, therefore, leading people generously agree to serve on multiple editorial boards. While the referee pool of *CCC* and *CE* is huge, a number of new journals—welcome new outlets for scholarship—start up each year and understandably often call upon the same invaluable small group of leading people for endorsement and reviews. Were I today a graduate student or new faculty member choosing composition studies as one of my specialties, I might perceive that the circle is tight and closed.

That perception would be incorrect. Having had a front row seat to the referee process at *JBW*, I can bear witness to the welcoming encouragement—indeed, the joyful response—given by senior people to new scholars and researchers. What, then, might be done about the danger of misperception? I have three suggestions: Editors of journals and leaders can acknowledge the situation openly and pledge to remain conscious of it, especially by insisting on—and publicizing the fact of—“blind” reviews; editors can strive for a mix of recognized and new people on their editorial boards, sometimes by enlarging the boards; and editors can, when feasible, assign each manuscript to at least one new and one established person.

My second parting observation has to do with writing for academic journals. Given the statistics of acceptance at *JBW*, I have read many more manuscripts that were not accepted than were. Many almost made it. What seems to make the difference to reviewers and to an editor? Because so many colleagues have generously sent *JBW* their work, I want to offer in return my observations—limited severely by my personal biases, of course—gleaned from my work with *JBW*. To start with, *audience matters*: authors unfamiliar with the journal to which they are sending material usually miss the mark in assumptions about reader expertise as well as features of the “genres” a journal prefers. *JBW* receives quite a few manuscripts with little or no relation to basic writing—even in light of the expanded definition implied by the range of topics in recent issues. *Purpose matters*: when a line of reasoning calls for citations of prior work, manuscripts need to stand in the traditions of scholarly writing by acknowledging foundations in the literature. Equally important, references must be current. For *JBW*, surprisingly few manuscripts include references other than to several standard citations—excellent though they may be—five or more years old. At the least, work sent to *JBW* should reflect an awareness of recent *JBW* issues and of the 1987 *Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers* edited by Theresa Enos, published by Random House. Another aspect of purpose involves intention. Effective material has an embedded sense of what the

writer hopes the reader will take from the material, such as a fresh perspective, a refined attitude, or a new teaching strategy.

*Ideas matter:* a large number of manuscripts synthesize well but do not add significantly to ideas that have long been around, such as conferencing with students, the process approach to writing, etc. Here again, lack of familiarity with the literature can hurt a manuscript. *Topic matters:* *JBW* has received more essays on spelling than on any other topic (a comment in itself, but that's another matter), so I had to set a limit. The chances of topic saturation diminish with the significance or freshness of a topic, especially in a journal with limited space. *Sensitivity to readers and the reading process matters* (here my personal bias is particularly evident): essays need a clearly stated or implied thesis, preferably early enough in the essay so that the reader does not have to cast about for a point. And the reader wants the promise of a thesis fulfilled, not merely repeated. Among the most frequent comments from reviewers was "this seems to be two essays; the second half is unrelated to the first."

My list reads, I realize, as a rehearsal of a typical rhetoric. My list evolved inductively, however, not from gospel. Therefore because most authors already know the principles, I have two concrete suggestions. Ask colleagues for readings before you submit manuscripts. I cannot endorse too strongly the value of collaboration. Few writers can "see" all that they need for clear communication; the fresh, dispassionate eyes and inquiring minds of helping readers are invaluable. The review process at a journal comes after such collaboration, rather than in place of it. Also, don't given up. What one journal cannot use, another might embrace. The May 1988 issue of *CCC* includes our profession's equivalent of *The Writer's Market*: "Journals in Composition: An Update," a superb resource compiled by Chris Anson and Hildy Miller (pp. 198–216).

I turn now to a preview of this issue. We start with five accounts of research, rich in topic and in variety of method and sample size. JoAnne Liebman draws on theories of contrastive rhetoric to invite students to become her coresearchers and thereby to suggest an innovative strategy for teaching. Gail Stygall traces history and descriptive data concerning a programmatic switch in basic writing at a large university from a traditional to a process-centered curriculum. Janice Hays discusses developmental research by reporting data on the analysis of student writing from the perspective of the Perry Scheme of socio-cognitive development. *JBW* readers might recall Professor Hays' debate with others in recent *JBW* issues; because her present essay adds data to that debate, we have allotted more pages than usual to appendices so

that our readers can sample primary source material. Cheryl Armstrong examines student texts to question assumptions about basic writing by comparing Harvard University's basic writers with others she has taught. Gesa Kirsch presents a case study of how one student became more successful at interpreting writing assignments.

The next two essays relate directly to classroom practice. Irvin Hashimoto takes on the demonic, crooked little mark we know and love as the *apostrophe* (don't miss *The New Yorker* cartoon, a *JBW* first). James Deem and Sandra Engel establish a basis both theoretical and practical for using a variety of methods of transcription with basic writers.

This issue concludes with an index to the last three years of *JBW*, including this issue (1986–88). This new index is a companion to the ten-year index (1975–85) in our Spring 1986 issue, the first under my editorship. The index suggests the diversity that points today to a larger definition of "basic writing." No index, however, can summarize my feelings of affection for *JBW* or can hint at the slight tug of regret I feel as I walk through the open door symbolized by my final *JBW* Editor's Column.

**Lynn Quitman Troyka**

JoAnne Liebman

## CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC: STUDENTS AS ETHNOGRAPHERS

Recently, the interests of teachers of basic writing and of English as a second language (ESL) have converged: theorists in both fields are arguing that the role of a composition course is to teach students the academic language common in American universities. Drawing on contrastive rhetoric—the study of how rhetorical expectations and conventions differ among cultures—theorists such as Patricia Bizzell, David Bartholomae, Myra Kogen, and Alan Purves argue that success in college involves learning a second language: the language of American academia. Whether a student’s first language is Japanese or nonacademic oral English, the problem is the same: the student “has to learn to speak our [academic] 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” (Bartholomae 4).

In the two-fold interest of exploring contrastive rhetoric and of helping ESL and native English-speaking (NES) students become more conscious, proficient participants in academic discourse communities, I recently conducted an ethnographic project involv-

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ing the study of contrastive rhetoric in two freshman composition classes, one ESL and one NES. Following the lead of researchers such as Sondra Perl, Dixie Goswami, and Lee Odell, I designed the project as a classroom ethnography in which I was both teacher and researcher, participant and observer. And following the lead of researchers such as Vivian Zamel and Shirley Brice Heath, I engaged the students as participant-observers as well, so that they too became researchers. As ethnographic researchers, these students became observers of their own participation in the community; at the same time, through their research activities of reading, writing, talking, and listening, they became more active and proficient participants in that community. This student ethnography project served, therefore, a double function. To me as a teacher-researcher, the project provided informative data about how students from different cultures write and perceive writing; to the student-researchers, the project provided an opportunity to develop academic writing and research skills.

### **Design of the Project**

This project was designed to investigate whether different communities have different rhetorics, and if so, how they differed. Thus, the project focused especially on some of the work done by Robert Kaplan (*Anatomy*, “Contrastive Rhetoric,” “Revisited”), who first proposed his contrastive rhetoric hypothesis twenty years ago in the essay, “Cultural Thought Patterns in International Education.” In that essay he argued that speakers of different languages organize written discourse differently, and he characterized these differences in the now-famous diagrams shown in Appendix A of this essay.

Although contrastive rhetoric is extremely interesting, much of the contrastive rhetoric research so far is disappointing because of its limited treatment of rhetoric: most contrastive rhetoricians focus exclusively on text structures, treating the rhetorics of different languages monolithically and narrowly (Koch; Hinds, “Contrastive Rhetoric,” “Japanese Expository”). English rhetoric, for example, seems for contrastive rhetoricians mainly to consist of deductive organized paragraphs, each one beginning with a topic sentence (Hinds, “Contrastive Rhetoric” 121–124).

Recent research in contrastive rhetoric has expanded beyond text analysis as a research methodology to explore contrasts in writing and reading processes as well as contrasts in finished texts (Carrell; Hinds, “Reader vs. Writer”; Jones and Tetroe). Other researchers (Mohan and Lo; Liebman) have used surveys to attempt

to reveal more subtle writing differences among speakers of different languages, especially differences that stem from the rhetorical instruction that speakers receive in their native languages. But experimental research and surveys cannot reflect what actually occurs when ESL and NES students write and talk about writing in natural settings. A student ethnography project, however, can.

This project involved two “Composition II” courses. Composition II is the second course in the two-semester freshman composition sequence at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Because the goal of this course is to help students develop the academic reading and writing skills they will need in their upper-level university classes, it is an especially appropriate course to employ a student ethnography approach. I believe, however, that such a project could certainly be applied to all levels; basic writing classes could provide a particularly suitable environment, especially because NES and ESL students often coexist in basic writing classes and because a supportive classroom community can help assure success for basic writers.

Because of this project’s focus on cultural differences, one class consisted of NES students, one of ESL students. The two classes met two days a week in adjacent seventy-five minute periods. The NES class consisted of 18 students, 9 male and 9 female. The ESL class consisted of 11 Arabic speakers, all male, and 10 Oriental speakers, all female. The Oriental students were from Japan (3 students), Malaysia (2 students), Cambodia (2 students), Hong Kong (1 student), Laos (1 student), and Taiwan (1 student).

The same material was taught in both classes, and activities were designed to require students to interact and observe students from the other class. I taught the two classes myself, working as a participant-observer along with my students. In both classes, we took as our topic contrastive rhetoric, and we took as our data ourselves. That is, we researched ourselves, our own writing, how we expressed ourselves, and how we communicated with each other. Two major writing activities were involved:

1. Pen pal letters: students wrote letters three times a week all semester to an assigned pen pal in the other class. Each student used a notebook to write the letters, and every two weeks students exchanged notebooks with their pen pals.
2. A sequence of five formal assignments: student writing went through at least two drafts. The assignments led students, first, to consider their own experiences as members of “native” and “foreign” cultures, and then,

gradually, to research how different cultures communicate orally and in writing.

*Assignment 1:* Write about a personal experience in which you were a “foreigner.”

*Assignment 2:* Summarize “Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education,” by Robert Kaplan.

*Assignment 3:* Support or critique Kaplan’s theory, using at least two texts—of whatever sort—to support the hypothesis. “Texts” can include your own past papers, papers from other students in the class, published writing in English or in another language, letters you or other students have received from other people, translations into English of writing written in other languages, etc.

*Assignment 4:* Research an aspect of intercultural communication, using some aspect of either Peter Farb’s *Word Play* or Edward Hall’s *Silent Language* as theoretical framework. Employ some sort of non-textual data-gathering technique (for example, an experiment, an observation, or a survey).

*Assignment 5:* Interview someone from a different culture to find out about some aspect of that culture you didn’t understand before.

The course was designed to meet two educational objectives common to ESL classes—and frequently used in basic writing classes. First, the course was arranged developmentally, sequenced to encourage students to move from expressive to transactional writing (Britton et al.) and from dualist to relativist cultural perspectives (Perry; Hays). Second, the course was arranged to teach students the language of academia: reading, writing, and research.

Besides meeting these educational objectives, the course also met the research objective of providing ethnographic data about contrastive rhetoric. I observed myself and I observed my students, who in turn observed themselves observing their rhetorical contrasts. This examination from different perspectives provided the necessary “triangulation” that must occur in any ethnography. Such triangulation is one way to gain validity in descriptive, nonquantitative studies. To achieve triangulation, ethnographers often consider three perspectives: the culture itself, the natives’ self-perceptions of that culture, and the researcher’s perceptions of his or her impact on that culture (Kantor, Kirby, and Goetz). Each perspective functions to control the other perspectives and to explore them, so that the description that emerges is both in-depth—or “thick”—and without subjectivity.

By studying not only contrastive rhetoric, but also the context in which it was being studied, I hoped to expand Kaplan's original perceptions about cultural differences. In addition, I hoped to offer a critique of his original methodology, a methodology I believe to be limited because of the absence of triangulation: in his early work, Kaplan mainly considered only his own intuitions about the cultures he examined. Although many of these intuitions have proved to be quite accurate, they are subject to expansion and evaluation, as I learned when I asked my students to become researchers.

My discussion here centers on the students' third paper, the one in which students were most involved in the study of contrastive rhetoric. In this assignment, students either agreed or disagreed with Kaplan's hypothesis in "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education" and supported their contention by using at least two "texts." Students were ingenious in finding texts to use as resources. Some students worked deductively, developing their own hypotheses about Kaplan and then looking for texts to support their hypotheses. Most students worked inductively, however, locating texts and then trying to determine what these texts showed them about contrastive rhetoric.

What my students said in these essays about contrastive rhetoric is certainly not conclusive; indeed, with such a small sample, the results can at best be tentative. After all, "the ethnographer's task . . . is not to 'prove' anything, as much as it is to *understand* it" (Freeman, et al. 11). But what my students say is quite suggestive, for as "native" participant-observers, they offered many sophisticated insights not only about contrastive rhetoric but also about the difficulties of studying it. These insights supplement the understanding of contrastive rhetoric available from studying how texts are organized.

### **What the Students Said: Concurrence with Kaplan**

When the students agreed with Kaplan (for example, see Sample 1 in Appendix B of this essay), they went beyond simply noticing that Kaplan was correct to talk about the relationship of this text structure to the culture at large. The Japanese students, for example, noticed the relationship of indirect structures to attitudes about politeness that have been taught: "[the Japanese] prefer to be modest and polite, what we call an old-fashioned way" (Junko Tanaka, Japan). All three Japanese students in the class emphasized that indirection was *taught*, not inherent in the language: as Yoko Tago points out, "Our generation has been trained to be able to appreciate

our own feelings and an author's intention of writing indirectly" [see Sample 1 in Appendix B for Yoko's full text].

One of the Japanese students used the paper to consider her own reactions to Kaplan and how they changed as a result of doing research:

My first idea [when reading Kaplan] about linguistics was that a person that doesn't speak a language can never understand the structure of that language. However, as I've done my research I understand that my idea about the language was wrong. Although I've been speaking Japanese more than twenty years, I had never noticed that Japanese was such an indirect language until I researched it by myself. (Kazumi Mase, Japan)

Kazumi told me during a rough-draft conference (which I recorded afterward in my notes) that when she first read Kaplan's article she was angry because she thought he was criticizing Japanese writing. As she reflected, however, she realized that "since I started learning my language in elementary school, I've been guessing the answer from the given clues." This, she told me, made her depressed and frustrated. The more she thought about it, the more she realized, too, that the difference between Japanese and English rhetoric may cause communication conflicts. Thus, as she explained in her paper, "English speakers may conclude that Japanese is so indirect that they never reach the point, while Japanese people think that English is too simple that they explains about only one thing over and over."

Many Arabic students also agreed with Kaplan about his assessment of their rhetoric: "By looking carefully at my own writing in English when I first learned to write in English, I found that I linked most of my ideas coordinately" (Maher Albaiat, Saudi Arabia). One Arabic student pointed out that the parallel structure in Arabic was a result of the Islamic religion:

It is a fact that repetition and parallelism in the Arabic language is influenced by Quran. Quran to Arabs is not just one form of human speech among others, but a vehicle to reach God. The verses in the Quran are repeated again and again to emphasize. Being Muslims, the Arabs adapted the path of Quran and applied its repetition structure in all of their writings. . . . The religious leaders believe that any attempt to apply other styles of writing other than Quran, will make people forget their religion since Quran will not be the

major source for their writing. (Khalid Altowaijri, Saudi Arabia)

### **What the Students Said: Objections to Kaplan**

About half the ESL students disagreed with Kaplan in some way; slightly over two-thirds of the NES students disagreed (see Samples 2 and 3 in Appendix B). Most of these students agreed in general with Kaplan, but they felt he had made rather hasty generalizations based on limited data. They thought the situation was more complicated than Kaplan suggested. The students—both NES and ESL—started by feeling somewhat defensive about Kaplan and his descriptions of their cultures' rhetorics; fueled by their resentment at an outsider making judgments about their cultures, they were able to state many legitimate objections to Kaplan's methods and argument.

Several pointed out, for example, that Kaplan ignored the different purposes and genres of writing, treating all writing as the same in each language group:

In [some] situations, indirection is unnecessary. The usage of indirect does exist in poems or some essays. However, Chinese writing can be very direct when dealing in newspaper articles or interviews. (Theresa Tsai, Taiwan)

Many students pointed out that Kaplan ignored writing's dynamic nature, that far from remaining stable artifacts for study, written texts change as writers mature, as writers are taught, and as writers revise. One Arabic student, for example, pointed out that the rhetoric of student writers may be much different from the rhetoric of professional writers:

It is more appropriate to analyze the writings of the professionals instead of students in order to judge a language . . . . The reason that [an Arabic student writer writing in English] might go in a zig-zag way is because he maybe does not know enough English to go straight or he either does not understand it fully. (Abdullah Al-Ahmadi, Saudi Arabia)

Several NES students made similar points, especially after looking at other freshman papers:

Although this linear form of writing is taught and accepted in the English society, it does not always occur, especially in the writing of students. The art of writing takes some people years to learn and some never learn correctly. . . . We

[Americans] are taught to write in a linear form; it is not something we are born with. (Pam Stover, USA)

Many students agreed that linearity and directness were valued in English prose, but they did not believe this structure reflected English speakers' thought: "The English paragraph is direct because we have been taught to write directly beginning in elementary school," wrote the American Sydney Wood. And, explains the Laotian Khanida Pradaxay: "Not all Americans write the way Kaplan explains. But the English textbook writers do."

Not only does writing change as students mature and are instructed; it also changes as people revise:

True, we do expect . . . directness when reading such formal writings as articles in newspapers and magazines, but these articles are not a reflection of native English-speaking thought patterns. These articles have been carefully constructed and put into a form that can be presented to the public, and a less formal example of writing is needed to observe our thought patterns. (Billy Hartnedy, USA)

As the writer of Sample 3 in Appendix B points out, Kaplan's research methodology did not consider writing as a process: "I feel that Kaplan should study rough drafts because the thinking process is changed when a rough draft is changed to an orderly piece of writing" (Alicia Parker, USA).

Some of these objections are summarized in the following discussion from an imaginative paper in which a student reported on an experiment he designed to contrast a speaker's oral version of an event with a written version of the same event:

This use of circular indirectness and the use of digressions in . . . oral communication make it clear that the patterns Kaplan assigns to various cultures are certainly not rigid. . . . Somewhere between the thought process, manifest as unprepared oral communication, and written English there comes a translation step. It is during this step that we apparently revise our thoughts from their normal arrangement into a form closely resembling the standard English that we were all taught in school. (Doug McCarty, USA)

Doug realized what Kaplan himself ("Cultural Thought Patterns Revisited") has subsequently realized as he has become influenced by the work of Walter Ong—that not only are some cultures more oral than others, but that literacy transforms thought.

Another objection raised to Kaplan's argument was that Kaplan

lacked a diachronic perspective: “Kaplan says that English is . . . logical and straight to the point. . . . This hasn’t always been so. [It has only become true] in more recent times when English became a more standardized language” (Brent Sawrie, USA).

Finally, several students pointed out that there is not a necessary equivalency between a language and a nationality, since many cultures have several different languages or dialects, and since many languages—English, for example—are spoken in radically different countries: “My research of letters from friends who are natives of Great Britain found that their thought patterns and paragraph structures are not dominantly linear in development” (Skip Green, USA).

### **What the Students Revealed**

In an ethnographic project such as this one, the data include not only what the students said about contrastive rhetoric, but what they revealed through their own rhetoric. A look at the student samples in Appendix B, which are representative of the student papers as a whole, reveals that the paragraph and discourse structures of the students do not reflect cultural differences, and so these papers cannot be used as evidence of the contrasting rhetorics of these students’ cultures. This absence of differences does not prove there are no differences in these cultures’ rhetorics; it simply suggests that finished texts written in English may not provide good evidence for studying such differences. In fact, it substantiates the objections the students themselves raised regarding Kaplan’s original methodology. All of these papers are final drafts, revisions of earlier drafts that students shared with me and with other students in order to get feedback. And all of the students have participated in class activities designed to teach them and give them opportunity to practice organizing academic writing. Class activities focused especially on writing introductions that summarized the background (in this case Kaplan’s work), identified an issue or problem, and then proposed an expanded or alternative hypothesis. In almost all cases, students were able to produce papers that followed this NES academic structure. This finding does not mean that they would have done so naturally, without the instruction; it simply means that student papers of this sort are not very good evidence of rhetorical contrasts.

Although the papers’ organizations do not reflect cultural differences, the ways the students approached the assignments—their attitudes and purposes—did differ somewhat depending on the students’ cultures. The NES students, as mentioned previously,



tended to be the most argumentative about Kaplan: over two-thirds chose to disagree in their papers. The Arabs were also argumentative. Many, in fact, became rather defensive, feeling that Kaplan was criticizing their mode of writing. Interestingly, several Arabic students told me in person that they did not agree with Kaplan, but that they chose in their papers to agree with him because they thought that would be easier. I suspect, too, that they may have chosen to agree with Kaplan because they thought *I* agreed with Kaplan, and they wanted to please me.

The Japanese students were more reflective and less argumentative in their papers, tending to explore the reasons for the relationship between rhetoric and culture rather than simply to argue a position. Although they, along with the Malaysians and Cambodians, did well on the assignment, all three Oriental groups preferred and did better on the first assignment in the course, a more personal writing task. Few of the Arabs, on the other hand, did well or enjoyed the first assignment as much as this later assignment.

These generalizations about different nationalities should be considered very cautiously, since the sample of students from each country was extremely small, and since the differences may be as much due to gender as to nationality. As mentioned earlier, all of the Arabs were male, while all the other students—Japanese, Malaysian, Cambodian, and Chinese—were female.

### **The Teacher-Researcher as Participant**

A final element in my triangulation of data requires that I examine my own participation in this project. I was a constant participant in the evolution of these students' papers, if not in the evolution of their thoughts on the topic. I made the original assignment and defined certain constraints on that assignment. I focused the students' attention on certain features of academic writing. I led discussions and designed class activities on the topic, hoping to encourage exploration of the issues. I modeled the thinking processes involved in hypothesis-testing by making and supporting my own research hypotheses. I brought in examples of how published academic researchers had approached this topic. I required students to turn in first drafts, which they shared in group conferences; in these conferences students worked to clarify their hypotheses and methodologies and analyses.

Inevitably, my own biases crept in. I tried not to tell students what I thought about Kaplan, and when I modeled examples I tried to make it clear that these did not necessarily reflect my own

perspective. I also tried to make clear that my evaluation of their papers would not depend on whether they agreed with me. But it is clear that my own perspective *did* creep in, for so many of the papers do reflect my opinion. Probably, as I helped the students clarify and revise their rough drafts, I nudged them in directions like my own. This is especially true in the NES class. Perhaps in that class, because I was less worried about students being offended by the possibility of rhetorical contrasts, I was less guarded about my perspective and more directive in conferences. And it is also clear that some students did not believe me when I said I would not grade them on whether they agreed with me but on whether they developed and supported a hypothesis. So they tried to figure out what I thought and then wrote it. This may have especially been true in the ESL class and among the less proficient writers in both classes.

Not only did my bias perhaps change some of these students, but their biases changed me. I started the project with a negative view toward contrastive rhetoric; in fact, I had recently finished writing a critique of the theory (Liebman). But as a result of my students' work, my own perspective on contrastive rhetoric has changed and enlarged. Though I realize that contrastive rhetoric, especially its research methodology with its focus on textual organization, has limitations (and I am now much more aware than before of some of these limitations, thanks to my students), I also can see its potential as a powerful and informative concept. When students discussed the differences between communication in the United States and their native countries, the students revealed some fascinating differences in attitude and approach. As a result of this research, I believe there probably are cultural differences in rhetoric; however, we need to devise new research methodologies to describe them, and we need in our descriptions to consider all aspects of rhetoric, not just a text's finished organization. Especially, we need to consider how writing purposes and processes might differ across cultures.

### **Benefits of Student Ethnographies**

In terms of research, the major benefit of this student ethnography project is that it allowed me to expand my view of contrastive rhetoric and consider some of its methodological problems and issues. In addition, the project suggests ideas for more narrowly focused or quantitative research studies that might avoid some methodological problems. More controlled research for example, might include studies comparing the rough drafts of NES

and ESL writing students, or exploring the cultural differences in attitudes toward readers and writers.

Educationally, the project was also highly beneficial. Perhaps most important, it provided an opportunity for the students to write in a meaningful and interesting context. They were engaged in the topic, and they felt they were doing important work. I told them outright that I needed their help in studying this material and that I would be citing them as references. In short, students were being enfranchised into the academic community. Of course, a few of them were a bit intimidated by this—how could they, as mere freshmen, make a contribution?—but most were honored and worked hard at their writing. Instead of simply performing tasks to get a grade from the teacher-as-examiner (Britton), they were learning to make rhetorical choices in a way never asked of them by the typical “research paper” assignment.

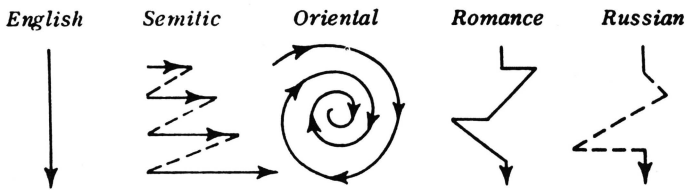
It may be surprising that in this research course, students did not write library research papers. In fact, I asked students to avoid the library completely. Past experience has convinced me that working on library research with beginning college students leads at best to long “data-and-quotation-dumps” and at worst to plagiarism, both intentional and unintentional. The student ethnography project I describe in this essay permitted instead a focus on the complex thinking and writing skills involved in any sort of research. Because of the sequencing of assignments, the students were able to work in more detail on research skills. In order to be ethnographers, students had to read, write, and connect those activities. They had to summarize, paraphrase, and quote. They had to practice a variety of research methodologies. They had to incorporate sources and test hypotheses. Of course, their own research projects were limited because of their small sample sizes, but their reasoning about this research was authentic and frequently sophisticated.

Obviously, because the students were researching contrastive rhetoric, they had an opportunity not only to practice rhetoric but to study it. One value of using contrastive rhetoric as the subject of a student ethnography was that it led to an awareness of the rhetorical choices available in English or any language. Many students also became increasingly aware of the choices available in writing processes, especially as they noticed the differences between rough drafts and revisions. Because students, therefore, were writing about writing, they were practicing and developing their metacognitive skills (Bracewell).

One cognitive skill the project allowed students practice in was that of considering other perspectives, of decentering, especially cultural decentering. For many of the American students, this

course provided their first opportunity to become less insular culturally and to interact with non-American students. And for many of the ESL students, this course provided a welcome context for them to meet and talk with Americans. Not only did students from both classes learn to write, then, but they learned a great deal about other cultures. Perhaps most importantly, they learned a great deal about the value of curing one's cultural myopia.

### Appendix A



Robert Kaplan's Diagrams from "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education." Language Learning 16.1 (1966): 15

*(Continued on next page)*

## Appendix B

### Sample Student Papers

#### PAPER 1: JAPANESE LANGUAGE [Uses Poetry as Data]

According to Kaplan's research, I learned that foreign students in the United States writings are different from Americans' because of different languages they use and different cultures they have been in. This fact allows them to have a different point of view of logic and a sequence of thought of writing; therefore, they develop paragraphs differently. Kaplan says that Orientals' writing is approached by indirection, which means the subject is focussed from a variety of views, and it is never shown directly, which makes Americans think it is awkward and unnecessarily indirect.

I agree with this theory Kaplan made about Japanese in a way. Because I believe that language is a part of the culture behavior of people. But still, there are two faces in Japanese culture. One is the culture which, I think, proves Kaplan's theory that indirectness is part of Japanese culture. Another is the Japanese modernized and industrialized recent culture which also proves Kaplan's theory that culture effects people's attitudes toward language.

The first culture is a tradition. Ever since Japanese ancients found their language, it has been taught to Japanese as a media of exchanging ideas and imaginative thought and feelings of human beings. Taking after this tradition of using our language, our generation has been trained to be able to appreciate our own feelings and an author's intention of writings indirectly. We naturally became able to associate with people using indirect language and enjoy appreciating indirect language.

For instance, this is one short sentence that was written by Basho Matuso, which I found in a Japanese book: "A frog jumped into a old pond, and I heard the sound of water."

I would think that this sentence itself doesn't make sense at all to Americans, but this is the most appreciable and the most beautiful sentence to me, and I think that most Japanese would be very impressed by the way this sentence was written. The author, Basho, is saying that he heard a sound of water since a frog jumped into a pond. I would guess that this pond was about more than 500 years old, covered by duckweed and moss, but water is clear and clean, and it had been hidden in a place where no one pay attention. When Basho was traveling in Japan walking (there weren't any cars or any transportation when it was written), he found the exact scene that is

written in this sentence, and he had been impressed by the silence and the quiet that he could even hear the sound of jumping frogs. The atmosphere I imagine from this sentence, I would think that this was written in a such a quiet—so quiet level that we won't be able to encounter—on one day of early fall, humidity and chilly morning. The atmosphere doesn't seem happy . . . maybe he was traveling alone. I can think of Basho's intention of being very sensitive about observing nature. And more than anything else, I envy his encountering and being able to tell us that it was so quiet that he could hear the sound of jumping frog.

Another example was written by Shiki Matusoko: "The wisteria blossoms that are put in a vase are too short to reach the floor."

The way this sentence is written is also indirect but enjoyable for us Japanese. Shiki isn't the only author who has been known as one of the most sensitive authors, but also known as a man who spent most of his life sick in bed. Therefore, I would imagine that the intention of this sentence is the sick person's sensitiveness and sorrow. Who would care if the wisteria in a vase were too short to reach the floor? Shiki was too sick to get up and only thing he could do was think about the objects which reflect on his eyes. Once people get sick and have to stay in bed for a while, we notice a lot of things we have never thought about and realize how important the health is.

We Japanese respect and tend to keep our purpose of traditional writing style, indirection. We try to achieve what we call, "guessing skill," writing as indirect as we can and read a great amount of indirect writings. The way we were taught how to achieve this purpose for Japanese linguistics could be disadvantage arising from learning and developing English paragraph as a second language, but it is result of historic tradition, which, I think, is the major influence in the indirection of writing . . . .

by Yoko Tago, Japan

## PAPER 2: MY HYPOTHESIS [Uses Own Papers from Other Courses as Data]

Robert B. Kaplan, in his article, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education," says that some Orientals tend to use an indirection in their writings. Different perspectives are used to clear the idea but without realizing it, the description doesn't focus on the idea as clearly as expected.

I agree with this idea when the Orientals write about a fiction story and about an experience because they use their imagination in

writing these papers. Nevertheless, I believe that the Orientals do not write indirectly in writing about the facts, such as a history, an instruction, and a description of an object. I will show this by looking at some papers I have already written for other composition classes.

Orientals are known as people who are well-mannered and polite. The old generations held this tradition from a long time ago and passed it on to the new generations up until now. The most obvious countries that I can see exercising this tradition are Japan and Malaysia. They communicate to each other as nice as possible by avoiding using the rude ways. Being raised in this mannerful world, Orientals are sensitive to the direct sayings. Thus, they will not tell something is wrong directly to another person because they don't want to hurt anybody's feeling. This tendency does affect their ways of thinking and expectedly their writings. This may also explain why the Oriental write indirectly in writing about experiences and fiction stories.

My first paper ["Moving From High School to College] fall under this circumstances. The sentences are indirectly developed in focussing the main idea. This composition was written by me and it hasn't been polished yet.

All through the paper, the end of every paragraph seem to focus on the same thing, that is, being independent. But I had never mentioned the word "independent" until the last paragraph. And still I don't clarify enough the word. The word 'freedom' in the last paragraph may be clarifying a little about this. It shows that in the previous time, I didn't have the chance to do anything on my own but now I do.

For example, the fifth paragraph says:

I was happy when I was told that attendance is not a big deal. If I skip a class, I'll miss the lecture but there's no such thing as a physical punishment. But of course I'll be punished in other ways, such as failing the exam. When I was in the high school, I'll be beaten or something else when I skipped class more than 3 days. Talking about these physical punishment, it is true that in the high school, the rules are very strict because it wants us to learn to obey the rules at a young age. I had to wear a uniform to school. Expensive jewelry are also banned to avoid the student from being a criminal victim. But now, I can wear whatever I want because I can take care of myself.

This paragraph tells us about how the rules are different between a university and a high school in Malaysia. I could skip the classes everyday and wear any expensive jewelry, but I have to think what

is good or bad for me. What I was trying to say was that I can make my own decision now because I am an independent lady. But the sentences above never said this very directly.

As I mentioned before, there are times when the Oriental turn out to be direct in their writings. Those are when they write a historical, an instructive, or a descriptive composition. I described about my mother in the following short essay:

She is small and short, even shorter than me. She is about 4 feet and 6 inches. Her skin is fair and her eyes are small because of her Chinese ancestry. She has many moles, one on her nose, one on the left side of her lips, some on her hidden body. Her soft, straight and long hair is showing her soft heart, her sincerity, and her honesty. She is 37 years old but her beauty is still there.

In this short essay, I used an inductive, linear-developed paragraph. I described her physical appearance with some detail ideas, such as her height, her eyes and her skin. Lastly, I came out with the general idea that she was beautiful even when she was 37 years old. The description before the general idea was used to support the general idea.

A “How To” composition is a kind of instruction in doing something. As we all know, an instruction must be direct, or else people will not fully understand to follow what is being told in the composition. In this case, the writer won’t use his or her imagination by swirling around, but he or she directly think about the main point. The next paper [“How to Find an Apartment”] is a paper showing the using of direct words in an instruction. This is an instruction of how to look for an apartment.

Almost all of the paragraphs were using the deductive order. For example, below is the first paragraph:

Looking for an apartment is not a simple process. It needs a lot of careful thinking and considering all the aspects, which involve the facilities, whether it is furnished or not, and other conveniences, especially if you plan to live in the apartment for a long period. Sometimes, you will not be satisfied with the surrounding or the payment, after you have lived there for only one or two months. As a result, you have to find another apartment which will make you comfortable or satisfy. To avoid from having such problems, you should follow these good steps before making any decision in choosing an apartment.

The first sentence was the main idea. It told us that it is not easy to



find an apartment. Then the following sentences described about the requirements and the problems that we have to deal with before looking for an apartment, that make the process difficult.

I think it is clear enough for us to follow the directions easily because the wordings are so direct. We can follow it step by step without being stuck by any confusing directions because every paragraph contained a step and was supported by the methods to do them.

The last paper ["The Gulf of Sidra"] is dealing with a historical composition. Let's look at it whether it's directly or indirectly described.

Some paragraphs used the deductive order and some paragraphs used the inductive order. But anyhow, they did state the main ideas and strengthen the ideas by the descriptions and the illustration. For instance, the following is the third paragraph:

The USA showed up as a hero opposing Kaddafi's action by crossing the 'line of death.' "The purpose is to exert the USA's right to conduct naval and air exercises in every part of the globe," said Secretary of State George Shultz in April 7, 1986 *Newsweek* article "Kaddafi's Crusade" (pg. 24). As a result, as the USA expected, the Libyans attacked them and they attacked the Libyans in response. At the end, some Libyans were killed but the exact number was not able to be determined.

The paragraph started with the crossing of the 'line of death' by the USA. Then the second sentence told about the purpose of the action. After that, it mentioned about the response from each other's actions and lastly, it concluded that some Libyans were killed.

After analyzing the papers, it seems to me that the Oriental have the inclination in following the genre of writing in writing a composition. In literature such as fiction stories, experiences and plays, they tend to develop their ideas indirectly. The reason probably is that they use their imagination, which is affected by their culture and way of thinking. On the other hand, the Oriental use the directly developed ideas in the ordinary compositions such as articles in the newspapers that usually tell about the incidents that happen in the history, describe an object and instruct an activity because they know what the readers expect in searching for information.

by Sabariah Othman, Malaysia

PAPER 3: CULTURE OR INDIVIDUAL PERSONALITY? [Uses American Diary Entries and Letters as Data]

In the article, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education," Kaplan discusses the different types of cultural writing styles. He states that people of a certain culture will have the same writing style, which differs from other cultures' style of writing due to rhetoric, which is a way of thinking. Kaplan feels that native English writers write in a direct manner. He also feels that Arabic writings mainly contain parallelism, Oriental writings are indirect, and Romance writings are direct but show digression.

I feel that Kaplan is wrong in the fact that native English writers write directly. Many of the essays Kaplan read were written under the direction of an instructor, which does not show original thought patterns produced by the native English writer. My hypothesis is that native English writers differ among themselves in their writing styles because of rhetoric. I have found three pieces of impromptu writings to support my hypothesis. None of these pieces of writing show the characteristics of direct English writing according to Kaplan.

My first example is a journal entry from Debi, who is a native English writer:

Here I am sitting, thinking of a friend who may not be living tomorrow. He might take his life tonight. I can picture that; the embalment after pints of his precious blood drains from his body because of a quick flick of a razor. They would fill his pale, stone body with a transparent liquid. I can see now as I gaze over his soulless body, at his funeral, wishing I could have made him understand that he has friends to live for, now he will never talk to me, never skate with me, never see me flush when I trip over my skates or see me laugh when he says something funny and now as I stand over him with my heart aching, he can not see the tears fall from my eyes. He'll never see me again. As they shut the lid to his casket, I realize I'll never see him again either.

This piece of writing resembles a Romance style of writing, which portrays digression. Digression is the act of turning aside from the main subject. Debi introduces the reader to a situation, then states the topic in the second sentence. It seems to me she wanders off the subject but jumps back to the main point throughout the entry. Therefore, this piece of writing is not directly written as Kaplan expected.

My second example is a journal from Michelle, who is also a native English writer:

It was just Alicia, Tanya, and me. We did everything together; we even got our haircut by the same hairdresser. My love for them grew just as much as theirs did for me. We were the

three stooges sharing a year of great highs. We had been acquaintances before our Senior year in high school. But at the start of our Senior year we found that our likes and dislikes were very similar. That month produced a great friendship that we thought would last forever. I remember directing the whole marching band while Tanya and Alicia stood side by side on the football field. While we were in the stands I was able to sit by them when I wasn't directing. Gossiping was a major part of our friendship. We talked about guy problems at lunch. My problem was with my boyfriend, Tanya's problem was with her fiance, and Alicia's problem was with her dating game. We came to the conclusion that all guys were jerks. There was no one else involved in our group. We figured we were comfortable with each other and we even tried bringing another person in but they would never work out. We had lots of fun but it all had to end when graduation came; we all had different things to do. Alicia stayed home to go to college and work, Tanya got married and held down two jobs, and I had to come here to Batesville for college. I talked with Alicia a few weeks ago, and we told each other how much we missed our little group.

This piece of writing portrays an Oriental style of writing. Kaplan explains that Oriental people write indirectly where the subject is viewed many ways but never directly. Michelle's entry barely touched on the main point (friendship group). She explains what revolved around the group, touching the main point once or twice. This example supports my hypothesis opposing Kaplan's.

My final example is a letter from Leata, also a native English writer:

Dear Alicia,

As you know by now, we came by.

I hate the way you wrapped presents for me, but I loved everything.

I have read about six of Piers Anthony's books. I can't wait to read this one! I love the Hershey's kisses; they're my favorite kind of candy. At home I'm always doing crosswords, so guess what I'll be doing now.

I hope you have a fantastic Christmas. We didn't go to school all this week.

Carla and Ronnie are visiting. Nancy, Ronnie's 14-year old daughter, and I are having fun.

Tell Jimbo I said "Hi."

Leata

I compared her letter to the Arabic style of writing and I saw similarities. The Arabic style of writing includes parallelism, which is single sentences forming a paragraph, more like a list of corresponding statements. Leata's main point is her Christmas vacation (though it is not stated). She has composed a list of sentences. Notice how she has two parts to one sub-topic, such as "I love the Hershey's kisses, that's my favorite kind of candy." This piece of writing shows parallelism because it contains sets of sentences with corresponding statements within the sets. Therefore, Leata does write in the Arabic style, which disagrees with Kaplan's statements.

In conclusion, a rough draft shows the native English writers' thought patterns without an instructor's interference. I feel that Kaplan should study rough drafts because the thinking process is changed when a rough draft is compared to an orderly piece of writing. My three examples show that not every native English speaker writes directly. They write differently because they all have a different way of thinking.

by Alicia Parker, USA

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Gail Stygall

## POLITICS AND PROOF IN BASIC WRITING

Like boxers who are bleeding and winded but not yet ready to quit, basic writers reel into the freshman classroom each year. Somehow these students have maintained a sense of belief in their own promise and have enrolled in college. They come to college in spite of an educational system that often wishes basic writers would disappear. Their very presence reminds everyone concerned that the system does not support all students equally well. And once they reach college, these same basic writers may have yet another round to go with those who govern higher education at the state level: education versus political exigency. Remote executives of higher education and state legislators demand proof of effectiveness of basic writing instruction "or else."

In responding to a call for proof of the effectiveness of basic writing programs at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI), I conducted a quantitative examination of the historical records of the multisectioned basic writing course for which I had administrative responsibility. In so doing, I was able to document a marked increase in the success rates of basic writers after IUPUI had undergone a substantive, program-wide shift from a traditional product-centered course to a process course. A comparison of the two curricula is my first focus in this discussion. I also found the basic writing course was successful according to a

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number of statistical measures, thus offering strong preliminary evidence of the success of the process approach for basic writers, which I hope will speak usefully on behalf of the basic writers whose political voice is often silent. These statistical measures constitute the second part of my discussion.

Contexts for evaluating the effectiveness of basic writing programs are complex and often found in discourses foreign to the composition teacher. With education becoming politicized and usually accompanied by demands for teacher accountability, these public concerns remain a constraint on any major changes in approaches to basic writing. No matter how convinced I or my colleagues may be by the merits of teaching process or of putting grammar in context, a public official inevitably wants to know why he or she has just received a letter from a state university graduate filled with misspellings and mechanical errors. Once a particular group of students comes under public scrutiny, as basic writers often do now, the profession's internal discussion of the best methods for teaching those students is often lost in public demands for immediate action. With writing program evaluation still in its infancy, I found little guidance on how to conduct an in-house evaluation of a multisectioned basic writing course. Moreover, though writing program evaluation continues to move toward a rich array of qualitative methods, academic administrators and public officials often reject these methods as too anecdotal and diffuse, preferring instead quantitative data, all the better for calculating the ubiquitous "bottom line."

In Indiana, until recently my home state, legislators have asked if they are, in effect, paying for the same instruction twice when they fund college-level basic programs in reading, writing, and math. These state legislators and their counterpart political appointees serving on the Indiana Commission on Higher Education have little patience for what they consider esoteric explanations of college students' writing performance. Maintaining that standardized multiple choice tests at best measure only a small part of writing ability, writing faculty and administrators have few listeners when the Cassandras rise to indict education generally and English instruction in particular. Indiana legislative and Higher Education Commission response to underprepared college students was twofold: either abolish all college level basic courses or limit them to a single state-funded campus. In order to accommodate students who might not live near that single campus, preference was to be given to a campus developing composition by computer plans, thereby cutting the labor-intensive costs of teaching basic writing. Abolition or the single-campus solution were rather dismal alternatives.

Thus I undertook an initial examination with which I hoped to demonstrate that an administrator can respond to a call for evaluation which, while honoring a process approach to basic writing, can still provide concrete statistical evidence of the approach's efficacy, invaluable in the political arena. The measures of evaluation that I present here suggest that grading *process*, rather than single *products*, provides a better indication of students' progress. To grade *process* means to reconstruct the traditional construct of writing ability. As I am defining it here, I take a student's writing ability to be a construct composed of four aspects: a demonstration of a capacity to generate text; a facility for staying focused on a topic in a piece of extended text; self-understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses in the writing process; and, a recognition of various appropriateness indices so dominant in school-sponsored settings for writing. Beyond the construct itself, I examine the elements of the construct over time to provide a more accurate evaluation of a student's performance in other writing courses.

This construct is, of course, different from traditional approaches to grading and assessment in which the construct is composed of mechanics, style, organization, development, etc. The change in construct was a necessary consequence of the change in curriculum. With the change in the course came a change in how students performed on each of four measures. They improved their scores on a grammar exit examination, even though little or no classtime was devoted to grammar instruction. Grading in the basic class became an accurate predictor of grades in regular freshman composition. When matched with students who entered freshman composition directly, the basic writing graduates passed the regular required course at a higher rate than their counterparts. Finally, attrition in the basic writing course decreased as the course changed.

The setting of this study is the main urban campus of IUPUI. Formed in 1971 from the separate city extensions of Purdue and Indiana, IUPUI has grown from fewer than 10,000 students to 23,000 students, making it the third-largest campus in the state. Its student body, older at an average of 26 years of age, IUPUI's students are often first generation college students. IUPUI does admit less-prepared students into a variety of support programs, though all these programs will be phased out by 1992. Students entering the currently active support programs are also enrolled in regular coursework. All students entering writing courses take the English Placement Exam, consisting of a one-hour grammar test and a one-hour essay exam. Raters from the English Department score



the essay, with the students' placement decisions weighting the essay more heavily than the grammar exam. Students' essays receive one of four scores, resulting in placement: basic, regular, honors, and exemption. Approximately 35% of the students taking the placement exam are assigned to the basic course, resulting in an enrollment of more than 2,000 students each year.

## **The Old Course**

In order to provide a basis for comparing the performance measures of the original basic writing course and the later process-oriented course, I want to begin by establishing their curricular differences. The original course, born in the panic of nearly open admissions in the 1970s, was entitled "Fundamentals of English," and it was as traditional as its name. The course assumptions included faith in the part-to-whole paradigm, in which students had to know and apply knowledge of prescriptive grammar at the sentence level initially. The paragraph followed and had to be mastered before moving on to the complete essay. Students spent hours completing workbook exercises, with instructors generally believing that these grammar drills would create the discipline, if not the knowledge, necessary to train better writers. Assigned to the basic course, instructors shuddered and waded in, hoping that one more time over the same material would finally make it stick. A look at the "C" level of the old program's grading rubric is illustrative of how strong was the product orientation.

### ***Old "C" Grading Criteria***

**GRAMMAR:** Few errors in grammar, especially in formation of verb forms and tenses. Formation and placement of adjectives and adverbs. Usage of both coordinate and subordinate conjunctions. Subject/verb agreement. Pronoun/antecedent agreement.

**PUNCTUATION:** Proper placement of many kinds of punctuation. Evidence of knowledge of comma and semicolon usage in compound sentences.

**USAGE AND SPELLING:** Evidence of knowledge of appropriate word choice. Infrequent misspellings. Few misspellings of words on weekly spelling lists.

**SENTENCE STRUCTURE:** Primer style. Overreliance on compound structure. No comma splices, fused sentences, or fragments.

**ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT:** A central idea for the essay although it may be trite and/or unfocused. A central

idea in each paragraph although the topic sentence may be unfocused.

Even a cursory glance at these standards for grading students' work in the old course reveals a hyperconcern with prescriptive grammar. In fact, nothing in the criteria actually addresses the issue of development and detail, a category the placement raters later discovered had great consequences for basic writers. The collective tone of the document was unrelievedly negative. Choosing texts consistently, the basic writing instructors used a handbook, a workbook keyed to the handbook, and yet another workbook just for sentence errors. Understandably, both students and instructors thought grammar was the critical component of basic writing.

The grading criteria sheets and textbooks are also an accurate indicator of what was being taught in the classrooms. Four essays were required, but the largest part of classroom time was spent dissecting errors, filling out worksheets, and taking spelling and grammar quizzes. Program administrators, though well aware of research indicating little relationship between grammar instruction and improvement in writing, nonetheless did not see a viable alternative. Textbooks that spoke to basic student populations nearly invariably took the part-to-whole approach. Further, as many of IUPUI's primarily part-time instructors were drawn from the public schools in the metropolitan area, these instructors found the grading criteria similar to those used in their local schools, thus allowing the instructors to move between institutions with ease. For administrators, abandoning standards of grammar was to commit the writing program to endless faculty retraining.

Yet it was evident that the course was not as effective as it could be. For several years, the basic course graduates passed regular freshman composition at a rate of approximately 50%, using the flat "C" as the pass mark. The course did not appear to be helping its target population. Though in an occasional semester, basic writing graduates nudged their pass rate in freshman composition to 60%, neither the program nor the students made a significant breakthrough. Additionally, regular composition instructors complained that those grievous grammar errors had systematically reappeared in their classrooms in the work of the basic writing graduates. The basic instructors' gatekeeping function demanded that these errors and the students making them must disappear, and disappear they did by flunking out of regular composition.

If the basic writers' lack of success in regular composition did not mandate a change, a Writing Program Administrators' evaluation report in 1981 certainly indicated the need. After examining the

writing program, its administrators, its courses, syllabi, and texts, they made the following recommendation for the basic course:

As currently designed, the syllabus requires weekly exercises and instruction in both grammar and writing process. Current research into the development of student writing abilities shows that not only is drill in grammar not immediately transferable to one's writing, but also that in the early-draft stages of the writing process a student's concern for correctness inhibits him or her from generating ideas and developing them into clear sentences. (McClelland and Smith 15)

They recommended that the syllabus for the basic writing course be reviewed and changed, with individual grammar problems to be addressed in a writing center. Change, however, was slow to come.

### **The New Course**

Though both the writing program administrators and instructors were beginning to develop and refine the uses of collaboration and revision in regular freshman composition, administrators found it harder to articulate how the basic course should be changed. Instructors tried tinkering, adding freewriting and looping, cubing, and journal writing. But grammar remained at the core of the course, with the handbook and single product grades weighted with mechanics accumulating to a course grade. A unique set of circumstances finally forced change. A growing realization on the part of the English Placement test raters about the critical value they placed on amplitude, as shown by development and detail, resulted in a change in the placement test rubrics. The raters, several of whom also served on the Writing Program's textbook committee, raised the issue of the focus on grammar when they asserted that amplitude predicted student performance in regular composition more accurately than grammar alone. The textbook committee refused to adopt another handbook or workbook, choosing instead Donald Murray's *Write to Learn*. Such a radical departure meant a highly speculative change in a course serving thousands of students. The literature was mixed on the results of a process course, one that encompassed expressive writing, when compared to a product-centered course. Moreover, most of that literature examined single sections. The instructors had just voted to change the nature of twenty-five to thirty sections each semester. But the faculty, both part-time and full-time, had come to believe only a substantive

change in the course would reach the students untouched and unmoved by the old course.

Much debate occurred over the summer following the textbook change and before the text change went into effect. Both the course structure and the grading standards would have to be revised.<sup>1</sup> Veteran instructors, intrigued by the change, volunteered to go back into the basic classroom. In many ways, the choice of Murray's text for a basic course alone turned conventional thinking about basic on its head. Though instructors were versed in current theorists and pedagogy, they hesitated to begin basic writing instruction with open-topic, expressive, personal experience texts—whole texts, not bits and pieces, not paragraphs, not context-free sentences. Having opted for expressive writing for the basic course, the writing program administrators went another step, deciding to require only daily writing in journals, daily classroom practice with invention, and outside reflection and evaluation of the merit of the heuristics for the first third of the semester. Moreover, instructors decided to read the journals and invention material, but to respond only to the students' evaluation of the usefulness of the heuristic, though not to grade any of it. The second two-thirds of the semester addressed drafting and revision, with three final products emerging from the second stage being given single product grades.

Just as the old courses' grading criteria revealed its central concerns, so too does the grading rubric of the later course. In some ways, the manner in which the students' work was to be evaluated was the most radical of all the changes made, a change in the central construct of writing ability. Once again, I use the "C" category as illustration, using two of the four categories as representative.

### ***New "C" Grading Criteria***

**AMPLITUDE AND FLUIDITY:** During the initial 'hands-off' period of journal writing, planning strategies and experimenting with heuristics, the instructor should expect the "C" student to demonstrate a noticeable increase in both amplitude and fluidity. Journal entries may progress from fairly brief one-page reports to relatively complete expressions of feelings, thoughts, incidents, values, beliefs, and significant people in students' lives. The student will also demonstrate the ability to use several of the invention techniques well, although he or she will probably not be equally effective with all. While the "C" student may experience some discomfort in translating ideas from heuristics and journals into drafts, the instructor should find,

by the end of the semester, that one or more of the final products are longer than the standard 500-word essay.

**KNOWLEDGE OF ONE'S OWN WRITING PROCESS:** Because the goals of [the course] require a high degree of personal involvement in the writing, the student's gain of self-knowledge about his or her own writing process and the application of this knowledge to the student's text become a factor in final evaluation. The "C" student should, at the end of the semester, evidence some knowledge of what writing strategies work best for him or her, what topics allow enough distance in time and emotion to avoid unresolved problems, and what writing tasks push the student without a high risk of failure. In short, the student knows what works for him or her. The "C" student will probably be a little short of the necessary distance and decentering of the [regular composition] expository or argumentative essay, but the instructor should find the student's texts are only a short distance from revealing an appropriate generalization beyond purely personal experience. Instructors should examine reflections on heuristics and strategy sheets over the course of the semester in evaluating this aspect. Reflections from early in the semester for the "C" student will probably be brief, cursory, and directed to the instructor. At the end of the semester, the "C" student will write more, will relate the heuristics and strategies to the text in question, and will be able to identify what he or she feels are critical decision-making points.

Because some literature on writing assessment confirmed IUPUI raters' suspicion that length was a key value in evaluation (Brosnell 172; Breland and Jones 28), a reasonable hypothesis seemed to be that amplitude would be a necessary component of the repertoire of writing abilities brought to the regular freshman composition class. Students placing into the developmental course were often writing only 300 to 350 words in the one-hour essay exam, while students placing into regular composition apparently had little trouble writing 450 to 500 words in the same time. This ability to produce adequate detail, sustaining information on a topic, was not even a factor in the old version of the basic course. Knowledge of one's own process was even a more foreign category to the previous grading criteria, but such knowledge seemed equally important in the performance of school-sponsored writing tasks. The construct of writing ability now matched the new course demands, allowing instructors to grade what they were teaching.

## Preliminary Evaluation of the New Course

From the enormous quantity of data available of multiple sections of this basic course offered each semester, I selected the Spring 1986 semester to provide data for four measures of course evaluation. The Spring 1986 semester was attractive for several reasons: the course revision had been in place for two full years; instructors were by then experienced with the course goals and grading; and the effects of doing something different should have diminished. Spring semesters at IUPUI see the largest number of basic graduates enrolling in regular composition. Of the 900 students enrolled in regular freshman composition in the Spring 1986 semester, 398 were graduates of the basic course.

The first measure I chose examined the entrance and exit examination scores for basic writing students who entered regular composition in that spring semester. For four years, the testing program used a locally developed and field tested one-hundred-question grammar exam. The instrument includes typical questions of sentence boundary recognition, verb forms, pronoun agreement, punctuation, spelling, editing, and error recognition. On this measure, all sections of the basic course show increases in exit examination scores, even when the scores of students who did not pass the basic course are included in the average. The rate of increase for all students is 15%. For students who successfully completed the course, the rate of increase in score is 16.8%.

One of the relevant evaluation issues for a basic writing course is whether or not the students leaving the course at the end of the semester are roughly similar to the students who directly enter the regular course. The entrance and exit scores provide one means of making that evaluation. Students testing directly into regular composition for Spring 1986 had an average grammar examination score of 77.4. After completing the basic writing course, graduates entered with an average score of 70.4. With a regular freshman composition essay rating, these students would now place into the regular course.

Table 1 in the Appendix at the end of this essay includes data for all sections of basic writing offered in the evaluation semester. The final average figures were weighted for the number of students taking the final examination in each section. Average entrance and exit pairings were included in all cases in which the data for both was complete. It is worth noting that the range of scores from exiting basic writing students is much narrower (14.9 points) than the range of scores for students who have entered regular composition directly (30.0 points).

The second measure I selected for examination was the pass rate

for basic writing graduates and for direct-entry students in regular composition. The average grade in the regular course for all sections of regular composition that semester was 2.30, a "C+," an average that has remained stable over the last six semesters. Basic writing graduates pass the regular course at a rate of 80.6%, while students who enter directly pass at a rate of 71%. Not only is the pass rate substantially different, but the ranking of grade frequencies is different as well. Table 2 in the Appendix provides all categories for both groups.

In his review of the Georgia system developmental courses, John Presley makes a strong argument for using this pass rate in regular composition as a key evaluation figure (50). That IUPUI's basic writing graduates passed the subsequent course at 80.6% compares favorably to the other studies Presley mentions (52). What is surprising, however, is the frequency with which direct-entry students fail the regular composition course. After I confirmed the original placement decisions for these direct-entry students, I discovered two factors contributing to the direct-entry failures. One factor is that students placed into honors composition often enroll instead in regular composition and fail. The second factor, more important for basic writers, is that an apparent indirect effect of success in the basic writing course is to socialize the students into college. Writing program instructors turn in a second internal roster with their official registrar's roster. The internal roster requires instructors to comment on unusual grades. Instructors have taken this requirement to include explaining grades below "C." From these internal records, regular composition failures seem to arise from missing class, and from not turning in or completing assignments on time. These are not the factors instructors note for basic writing graduates, whose failing grades cluster in the "C-" to "D" range, rather than "F."

As a third measure of evaluation, I examined the grades of basic writing graduates in regular freshman composition. Students' success in the basic course should be related to the regular course, at roughly the same grade level. Once again, Presley suggests some useful criteria, for he maintains some drop in grades between the developmental and regular course is inevitable (52). Using a linear regression calculation (*Trajectories*, a floppy disk statistical package) and assuming the basic course grades would predict the regular course grades, I found at each grade point a match between regular and basic grades, with a slight lag in basic graduates' grades.

I chose attrition as a final measure of evaluation, assumed by many higher education researchers as a critical value in assessing a course or program. A 1977 Roueche and Snow survey of 300 institutions of higher education, for example, included four major

evaluation questions on attrition (38). Attrition within a single course is usually measured by the number of official withdrawals from a course. I was aware of attrition “F” grades, those failing grades given to students who quit attending class or who fail to turn in one or more required assignments. Though the second measure indicated the attrition “F” remains a problem in regular composition, the shift from the old course to the new course in basic is concurrent with a drop in attrition rates for basic writers. Table 3 in the Appendix displays the specific figures for two semesters, one under the old basic syllabus, the other under the new. Withdrawals in the regular composition course have remained constant at approximately 8% over the past five years, as have the number of official withdrawals in the basic course. What did change significantly over time was the number of unofficial withdrawals (students who left but never withdrew).

## Conclusion

If those of us who teach basic writers or who have administrative responsibility for basic writing programs fail to publish and discuss the results of course and program evaluations, we lose some of the ability and flexibility we need to support our programs in the public arena. Legislators, professionals in another field, are not expert in current rhetorical theory or its pedagogical implications. Not having our expertise, those in the public discourse often turn to the general literature of education. What do they find? Let me offer two examples. The first, an article by William White, appearing in *College Board Review* in 1984, offers one type of program to support developmental students—comprehensive and intense counseling—employed successfully at Moorhead State College in Kentucky. English classes were a part of the developmental program and, without reference to current writing research, White posits language deprivation as a cause for students’ entering developmental English classes. White can offer a thoroughly discredited view of language development in part because few experts in developmental English enter the ongoing discourse of higher education. With writing theory unknown, White can easily claim that it is good counseling that makes a successful developmental program. The second example is an article appearing in *Community College Review*, also in 1984, by James Palmer, suggesting that on the basis of information collected from developmental programs across the country, “remediation” does not improve students’ reading and writing performance. Our voices are remarkably absent from this discussion. We need to join it before our students are out for the count.



## Appendix

**TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF ENTRANCE/EXIT SCORES ON GRAMMAR EXAM**

Section Number	Average Entrance	Average Exit All Students	Average Increase	Average Score-Students Passing Basic
B664	63.5	70.6	7.13	72.9
B665	61.7	68.8	7.19	69.1
B666	60.9	66.9	6.00	68.2
B667	61.6	74.3	12.70	79.9
B670	not available	68.4		68.9
B672	61.5	69.1	7.60	72.3
B674	52.5	75.5	22.90	70.8
B678	61.6	69.1	7.50	69.3
B680	60.8	70.0	9.20	73.3
B681	62.7	68.2	5.50	68.0
B682	63.6	66.9	3.30	67.1
B683	59.6	69.6	10.00	70.7
B684	61.6	67.2	5.60	66.4
B685	52.3	73.1	20.80	74.0
B686	62.3	70.1	7.80	71.3
B687	58.8	71.8	13.00	72.2
B688	60.8	72.5	11.70	72.5
B689	61.9	70.1	8.20	71.2
B691	60.8	64.3	3.50	65.0
	Average Entrance All Sections	Average Exit All Sections	Average Exit-Students Passing Basic	Average Entrance Regular Comp
	60.8	70.2	71.0	77.4

TABLE 2: COMPARISON OF REGULAR COMPOSITION GRADES OF BASIC WRITING GRADUATES TO DIRECT-ENTRY STUDENTS

Grade	Basic Writing Graduates		Direct-Entry Students	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
A	6	1.5	32	6.3
A-	8	2.0	43	8.5
B+	23	5.8	47	9.4
B	68	17.1	92	18.3
B-	63	15.8	53	10.5
C+	78	19.6	46	9.4
C	75	18.8	43	8.6
TOTAL PASS RATE		80.6		71.0
C-	23	5.8	38	7.5
D+	15	3.8	7	1.4
D	14	3.5	21	4.2
F	25	6.3	80	15.9
	398	100.0	502	100.0

TABLE 3: BASIC WRITING ATTRITION COMPARISON

Spring 1982	Total Enrolled	Official Withdrawals	Attrition Fs	Total Attrition
Number	755	55	133	188
Percent		7.3	17.6	24.9
Spring 1986				
Number	463	36	32	68
Percent		7.8	6.9	14.7

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The original new course syllabus was written by Ronald J. Strahl, then Director of IUPUI's Writing Program, now Director of Basic Skills at California State University-Long Beach, and Rebecca Fitterling, now at General Telephone & Electronics. Without their insight, the new course would never have been offered. I wrote the grading rubric and subsequent course revisions, but all these activities were collaborative ventures to which all the basic writing faculty contributed.

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Janice N. Hays

# SOCIO-COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING: ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS FROM ONE RESEARCH PROJECT

In earlier issues, the *Journal of Basic Writing* has carried an exchange about adult socio-cognitive development and college students' writing. To date, this colloquy has included Myra Kogen's "The Conventions of Expository Writing," my (Hays) reply to that article, and Joseph and Nancy Martinez's response to both papers. Whether or not such dialogue changes any minds, it forces us to question, clarify, and sometimes modify our assumptions about issues crucial to the study and teaching of composition. It is in this spirit that I want again to discuss intellectual development and writing.

In her article, Kogen questioned descriptions of college freshmen as cognitively immature and suggested that such students' problems

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with writing might be explained by their lack of familiarity with academic conventions, implying that they needed simply to learn about the nature of academic writing in order to perform satisfactorily on it. In response, I contended that some student-writing problems result from more than just lack of familiarity with the academic discourse community. Using excerpts of student writing gathered from a research study, I pointed to certain audience postures that were correlated significantly with levels of socio-cognitive development as assessed by a Perry Scheme rubric. The Perry Scheme (see Appendix A of this essay) describes an adult socio-cognitive sequence that traces the development of epistemic reasoning, or the ways in which thinkers make meaning out of their worlds (Perry; see Kitchener for a general discussion of epistemic cognition). In their article, Martinez and Martinez supported Kogen's position, asserting flawed premises and methodology in my research and that of other writing researchers studying socio-cognitive development.

In what follows, I want to look at developmental issues in writing by focusing on the research alluded to in my earlier piece, a study involving argumentative writing, audience adaptation, and socio-cognitive structures as assessed by the Perry Scheme. I will use this project to illustrate more general points about developmental research on writing.

## **The Writers and Writing**

The study, begun in 1983, involved 136 students from the senior class at a Colorado Springs high school and from undergraduate classes at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. College-entrance requirements ensured that all students met minimum criteria of academic competence, and we excluded any for whom English was a second language. Because ours is a commuter campus with many nontraditional students, writers' ages ranged from 16 to 55. My colleague Kathleen Brandt and I utilized a computerized random-selection program to choose a representative sample of students from three grade levels (high school senior, college freshman/sophomore and junior/senior) and three academic areas (the liberal arts, business, and engineering/computer sciences).

All students wrote two essays about the tough drunk-driving laws that the Colorado Legislature was, at that time, debating. Writers were asked to present and support their own positions on these laws, which were summarized on an assignment sheet. We used an argumentative task because argumentation is both intellec-

tually taxing and a common form of college writing. The first topic asked students to write for the newsletter of a “friendly” audience, one that on the whole would probably agree with them. On the topic sheet, we suggested twelve or so readerships—for example, Mothers against Drunk Driving in support of the legislation, the Colorado Springs Bar and Tavern Owners Association in opposition to it. The second essay, written two to seven days after the first, used the same topic except that writers were to address “hostile” readers, those who would probably disagree with them. We wanted to see if students would write differently about the same topic for different readerships and what such differences might be. We knew about the limitations of impromptu writing as an accurate indicator of writing ability. However, we needed to ensure that all writers performed under similar conditions, and constraints governing socio-cognitive assessment meant that we had to gather data within a short time period (see Moore 3).

We placed no time limit on the writing although most students spent about three hours on it; a few finished earlier, and a few wrote for four or five hours. High school students wrote at their school, university students on campus on two consecutive Saturdays. With the study, we hoped to explore questions about audience adaptation, flexibility of thinking, dialectical engagement with readers, and the relationships of these variables to argumentative writing performance and socio-cognitive development. The nature of our sample enabled us to study the impact of various factors, both individual and social-contextual, on impromptu writing performance: education, age, academic interests, gender socialization, and socio-cognitive development.

## **Evaluations**

Each paper was rated blind by the two researchers and a graduate student, all of whom trained together to read to a common norm. We used a criterion-referenced instrument that assigned ratings in four areas: quantity and quality of ideas, organization and focus, clarity and effectiveness for readers, and correctness and felicity of syntax and usage. We assumed that students would probably not use sophisticated strategies for influencing readers and so defined “effectiveness” quite minimally. Readers’ scores for each paper were summed. Statistical tests showed acceptable levels of rater consistency.

We chose a systematic random sub-sample of papers from 52 students for closer analysis (a total of 104 papers) and sent copies to the Syracuse Rating Group in New York, a team of developmental

psychologists trained and experienced in evaluating socio-cognitive performance using a Perry Scheme rubric. Thus it should be clear that I did not, as the Martinezes assert (81), myself assign Perry Scheme ratings to the essays. It should also become clear that the papers I cited in my response to Kogen exemplified trends found in the larger sample.

A Perry Scheme assessment looks for evidence of subjects' epistemic reasoning, or the ways in which they construct meaning out of the materials of their world. To provide adequate data for assessment, a production—essay or interview—must be on a topic that elicits epistemic reasoning and be long and complex enough to contain a sufficient number of socio-cognitive “cues,” or indicators. According to Zachary, coordinator of the Syracuse Rating Group, in the Colorado study even subjects who performed at lower levels of the Perry Scheme produced more than sufficient data rich in cues. A particular level of epistemic reasoning can exist in both fluent and nonfluent writers. We found writers who were assessed as “dualistic” (position two in the Perry Scheme, the lowest performance level in our study) who were anything but remedial-level. We also found some assessed as moving into relativism (position four) whose writing was flawed with incoherence. In fact, the incoherence, which we writing assessors had penalized, probably indicated that these students were in transition to more complex styles of reasoning and thus had difficulty integrating all their ideas about the topic—a finding important for writing teachers to note lest we penalize writers for conceptual growth.

In making Perry Scheme assessment, the Syracuse Rating Group draws upon cues (about 40 for each Perry Scheme position) dealing with overall protocol style, with ways of knowing, ways of acting (including reasoning style and conceptualization of the self), and ways of perceiving and relating to the environment, including the social environment of peers, authorities, and the general society and culture (see Appendix B of this essay for examples of Syracuse rated papers). To pinpoint transitions between levels, evaluators assign each essay a three-digit rating: a 2-2-3 rating would indicate a paper primarily at position two of the Perry Scheme but showing some characteristics of position three thought. Scores on the Syracuse ratings in this study ranged from 2-2-2 to 7-7-7, with the majority of essays falling in the 3-3-3 to 3-4-4 range—early multiplistic to late multiplistic. In Hays, Brandt, and Chantry, we have discussed the Syracuse Rating Group's methods at greater length, and I refer interested readers to that source (for a more general discussion of Perry Scheme-evaluation methodology, readers should consult Moore; and Mentowski, Moeser, and Strait).

Brandt and I conducted lengthy and detailed textual analyses of various aspects of the writing: audience adaptation, discourse structure, argumentative structure, depth and elaboration of development, syntax and diction, and rhetorical strategies. We used textual coding schemes for each area, some of our own devising and some derived from other researchers, applying them, one at a time, to the 104 papers. Because of the project's complexity, to date we have studied only the audience-adaptation results in depth.

We developed the audience instrument partly from prior research (for example, Berkenkotter) and partly from what appeared in the texts themselves. The audience coding rubric included five broad categories, and each in turn contained three to ten different codings, or "moves," indicating writers' adaptations to their readers. The categories ranged from very simple indications of audience awareness, such as actually naming the readers, to more complex ones: strategies to appeal to the audience and responses to readers' inferred points of view (see Appendix C of this essay). One researcher coded all 104 papers, marking each indication of audience activity. We tested the coder's consistency by training two other experienced readers in the scheme and asking them to apply it to 75 examples that the initial researcher had also coded; inter-rater agreement was high among all three raters.

The researchers tabulated the coding results and converted them into audience moves per T-unit. A research assistant entered these numbers in an SPSS data file. Thus each student's computer record listed that writer's demographic data, Perry Scheme performance evaluation (from the Syracuse raters), holistic paper ratings, and audience activity scores on each paper. There were 48 kinds of audience moves a writer could make, and frequencies ranged from a low of no moves to a high of 6.00 per T-unit. At this point, we enlisted Kathryn Chantry, a statistician trained in research psychology, to design and perform the study's statistical analyses. These included examinations of relationships between the writing group's demographic characteristics, Perry Scheme ratings, holistic paper scores, and audience adaptations. The statistician summed individual audience moves into categories (for example, Strategy, Response, Context) in order to decrease the number of individual variables in the regression equations.

We used a social-survey approach to statistical analysis in order to identify significant patterns in the cohort studied. A statistical relationship establishes the likelihood that in a sample population, one phenomenon is related to another or others on the basis of something besides chance. Statistical procedures correct for the effects of individual variations on overall patterns and for overlaps



between variables. For example, in our study, age and grade were correlated: as age increased, so did grade level ( $p < .02$ ). In equations studying the relationship of both to a third variable—Perry Scheme, for example—the statistical procedure itself discounted commonalities between age and grade, leaving the “variation,” or change, in Perry Scheme score that could be predicted by grade only or by age only. Other statistics (beta weights) explored the proportions in which demographic factors contributed to the prediction for Perry Scheme score: only grade level was statistically significant in predicting the group’s variation in Perry Scheme score, and it accounted for only a portion of that score.

Statisticians usually do not consider findings “significant” unless they are apt to occur by chance less than five times out of a hundred. This figure is a convention based on the assumption that if an outcome happens 95 times out of 100, it is not a chance event. However, depending on the nature of the study, many statisticians prefer lower levels of probability. In the University of Colorado study, many findings had a probability level of .0001, meaning that the odds were less than one in 10,000 that these results occurred by chance. Estimates about chance or nonchance are grounded in assumptions about probability. Insurance actuarial tables apply such premises when they assume, for example, that a 25-year-old American female with no complicating medical history is likely to live for about 57 more years. Not all 25-year-old females will, in fact, live to the age of 82, but in the general population enough will so that it pays the life insurance company to “bet” on these odds and issue policies at lower premium rates to 25-year-old females than to 50-year-old ones. Survey statistics rest upon rigorous assumptions about the representative nature of the sample studied. Thus results obtained with a correctly chosen sample of students at one university will accurately reflect what would occur with that entire university’s student population but not necessarily with students at another institution in another part of the country. If, however, similar results occur in different settings, we are fairly safe in generalizing to the national population.

Statistically significant results do not prove causation. A significant correlation in a regression analysis (one type of statistical study) establishes only that a factor studied occurs in a linear relationship to others also under examination—that within a population, as one factor increases or decreases, so does another (as years of smoking increase, so does the incidence of lung cancer), or else that as one increases, the other decreases (as income increases,

convictions for violent crime decrease)—and that this relationship does not occur by chance but is predictable.

Our profession is currently the site of a lively debate about the nature of proof in composition research, with many members questioning statistical methodology. Certainly quantifiable data are only one ground for justification of findings, not the only one. However, those who appear to advocate abandoning all statistical methods do not, it seems to me, take into sufficient account the sophistication and subtlety of statistical analysis that recent computer technologies have made possible. Nor do objections to statistical studies seem adequately to differentiate between experimental and survey statistics. The former assume a control of variables difficult to achieve with human subjects; the latter identify significant trends within populations and study interactions among variables being examined (for an extended discussion of survey research, see Anderson).

In regression analysis, if at least 30 subjects are studied in the same or a similar context, we can tell if their behavior is statistically significant. Of course, all research methods have strengths and weaknesses. We learn a great deal from observing individuals that we could not from examining aggregate data. However, without statistical analysis we are on shaky ground when we make assumptions about universality. Some nonstatistical research involves so few subjects that its results may be idiosyncratic rather than indicative of more general patterns. For example, Peter Smagorinsky has observed that generalizing from the Graves and Calkins research with New Hampshire children's writing is questionable because of the small number of children studied and because the researchers are affecting outcomes in ways they have not acknowledged.

Similarly, when Kogen asserts that she observes improvement in students' writing performance after she teaches certain academic writing conventions, I don't doubt that she is accurately describing changes in her students' writing; I am sure she is a fine teacher who gets results. However, I have questions about what causes the change: How long does it take—a week? A month? A year? How many students has Kogen observed? How old are they? What methods does she use? Is the change global or selective? Do other teachers get the same results with different students but using the same methods? Unless Kogen tells students about an academic convention during one class and sees immediate change—say, on the next paper—it is possible that what she observes is attributable to socio-cognitive shifts facilitated by the activities she engages students in. Of course, any one of a dozen other factors could also

cause the improvement. But without more rigorous methods than a teachers' sense of what happens in a classroom, we cannot know what is implicated in change.

While the accumulation of many case studies with similar patterns suggests that the observed behavior characterizes many writers, without statistical analysis it is difficult to know what the patterns mean, which of them are significant predictors of writing performance and which are incidental to it. For instance, in the Colorado study, we discovered that a great many subjects engaged in "Context" activity. That is, they established a frame of reference for their readers by explaining the issue or problem, the proposed laws, and so on. The frequency of such activity was higher than that of some other audience adaptations. Yet statistical analysis showed that Context had no predictive value for overall paper scores. Without statistical analysis, we might conclude that establishing context had considerable impact on students' argumentative writing when in fact it had far less than some activity that occurred with less frequency. Statistical studies are, of course, only as good as the assumptions and interpretations of researchers making them. My point is not that all writing studies should be statistical but that in the profession we should utilize a variety of methods and use one to check another.

Because of the nature of survey statistics, overall results are not affected, as the Martinezes suggest they might have been in the Colorado study (80-1), by some students having problems with writing tasks. That is, a few such responses would not significantly influence the pattern evident in the overall population; such concerns would, of course, be important in the case of individual students being tested for evaluation or placement. If large numbers of students had such difficulties, this fact would show up in the statistics, and for research purposes such information would be useful. For example, dualists in our study interpreted the paper topic differently than did early multiplists, and they, in turn, understood it differently than did late multiplists. That is, dualists read the assignment as asking them to give their own opinions on the topic. Multiplists interpreted the topic as primarily a problem-solving exercise, and dealt with it by offering practical ways that readers could help to solve the drunk-driving problem. Some late multiplists and all relativists saw the assignment as asking that the merits of the case for or against the proposed laws be argued. This pattern gives us useful information about systematic differences in the ways that students at varying socio-cognitive levels process information. The Martinezes also suggest that "channel inefficiency" in writing might have caused students to perform poorly on

the Perry Scheme assessments. Such assumptions confound writing-evaluation with Perry Scheme-assessment criteria, which are quite different. Except in subjects above the “flip” (position five, that point at which students shift from multiplistic to relativistic structures), Perry Scheme researchers have not found differences between assessments derived from oral and written productions (Zachary). In our study, only two students scored above the flip.

## Results

In the Colorado study, audience activity predicted strongly for overall writing performance with both friendly and hostile readers. On the nonwriting factors explored, level of Perry Scheme-performance predicted most significantly both for overall writing performance and for certain kinds of audience adaptation. Yet if familiarity with academic-discourse conventions alone explained academic-writing performance, and if such writing performance had no connection to socio-cognitive development, then we should have found a strong predictive relationship between educational level and writing performance, and a weak or nonexistent one between Perry Scheme level and writing performance. If indeed, as the Martinezes argue (80), the Perry Scheme itself only reflects socialization into a particular kind of college environment, then in our analysis the statistical procedures would have discounted the impact of Perry Scheme ratings in predicting writing performance, and instead have established educational level as the significant variable in the writing studies.

Initially, we omitted the Perry Scheme measure from equations examining the impact of nonwriting factors (age, gender, and so on) on writing. Of the demographics studied, grade level was the only statistically significant predictor of overall writing performance. Thus had we not later added Perry Scheme rating to the equation, we could have concluded that educational level was *the* contributing factor to writing performance. However, when we included Perry Scheme performance in the equations, the contribution of grade level dropped below the level of significance, and the Perry Scheme measure was the only nonwriting variable predicting for writing performance.

These findings suggest that whatever is assessed by a Perry Scheme measure involves socio-cognitive factors in addition to those accounted for by educational level. In our study the impact of these factors on writing performance was enough greater than that of grade level so that in the presence of the Perry Scheme measure, educational level ceased to contribute significantly to writing

performance. More generally other (nonwriting) studies with the Perry Scheme show that educational level does indeed influence the development of epistemic reasoning, more so than chronological age (see, for example, Benack and Basseches, Kitchener and King). Such findings certainly accord with the “socialization into the academic environment” thesis—but only up to a point, for a considerable proportion of what the Perry Scheme assesses is not accounted for by age and grade level alone. In other words, the Perry Scheme measures “something” in student performance related to more than just the combination of age and grade level. I would surmise that this “something” captures the socio-cognitive structures the Perry Scheme describes.

I am not arguing that the Perry Scheme reflects universal socio-cognitive development. Rather, it demonstrates that a particular context—the American college or university—requires students to make sense out of multiple and often conflicting views about reality. In coming to terms with these varying perspectives, students construct new and more complex socio-cognitive structures. These structures in turn influence ways in which students respond to the college environment, and so on. That is, socio-cognitive structures interact with experience and environment but are not synonymous with them. It is also, of course, possible that such processes can take place prior to college although in the United States, at least, such does not often appear to happen. To date, nationwide Perry Scheme data from both traditional and nontraditional students show that most freshmen enter college in transition between Perry positions two and three “while juniors and seniors are primarily in transition between positions three and four and in stable position four” (Moore, 2). However, a study in Germany showed that recent high school graduates there performed at socio-cognitive levels typical of college seniors in this country (Kitchener and King, 17).

The rate at which learners construct these structures varies, but the sequence in which they do so apparently does not. These structures have little to do with intelligence, for very bright students can be dualists. What appears to be “invariant” is that dualism will give way to multiplicity, multiplicity to relativism, and so on. This sequence has important implications for teaching: if we know that multiplicity follows dualism, we will not assign dualistic students relativistic tasks, a practice that would require them to respond two or three positions beyond where they presently are. Studies suggest that they will neither understand the assignments nor respond to them relativistically but will, instead, approach them dualistically (for example, see Stern). On the other hand, students can be stimulated by assignments designed to challenge them with tasks

just one position above their current level of socio-cognitive performance “plus-one staging”) provided they also receive support appropriate to their current socio-cognitive level. Earlier, I noted that dualists in our study interpreted the assignment as asking them simply to state their opinions about the drunk-driving issue. For the most part they did not support these opinions with argument or evidence although some dualistic writers included graphic examples of friends or family members injured by drunk drivers. One could, of course, argue that these students simply did not as yet know about college-level conventions requiring evidence and argument. However, since a third of these dualistic performers were in college, and since a quarter of them were sophomores, not freshmen, it seems equally likely that they did not apply academic conventions to their writing because they had not as yet constructed the cognitive structures to integrate and support the conventions. Such an interpretation does not negate the importance of either individual cognitive processes or social context. It suggests that both are involved in the way that people make meaning and that the process is more complex than either model alone suggests.

In our study a fourth of the high school students and a third of the college freshmen/sophomores were early multiplists, and they did recognize that they needed to support their positions. But instead of dealing with arguments that an adversarial reader might make against their points, they detoured into discussions of ingenious but not always realistic proposals that, they suggested, would solve the drunk driving problem and so not cause the tougher laws adversely to affect their hostile readers; this pattern was also typical of many late multiplists. Only those in transition to the upper levels of Perry Scheme performance fully engaged their hostile readers’ probable objections to the law and argued them, conceding that the laws would bring problems to these readers but suggesting beneficial trade-offs, such as improved public relations for the beverage industry or avoidance of still more regulation of the alcohol business. All students had the same essay prompt, and the marked differences by Perry Scheme level in their responses to that prompt suggest the need for assignments specifically designed for level of socio-cognitive performance.

If teachers know that multiplicity follows dualism and know what characterizes both kinds of performance, they can, for example, construct assignments for dualistic students to stimulate multiplistic functioning in a few key areas while retaining some of the support that dualists need—for example, lots of well-defined structure (see Knefelkamp and Slepitzka). This approach is similar to Vygotskian “scaffolding” (Applebee and Langer) but includes

verified information about the order in which epistemic reasoning develops and the characteristics of each of its levels. To illustrate, our results suggest that dualistic students could be helped towards multiplicity with assignments asking them to give detailed reasons for their own viewpoints together with illustrative examples, without, initially, considering opposing views. Engaging them in exercises to explore aspects of some specific problem might also help them look at issues from several angles while still staying close to the concrete particulars of the problem itself. Early multiplistic students could be helped by assignments asking them not only to generate solutions to problems but to explore in detail the likely effects of these ideas and deal with the possible negative consequences of some solutions, an activity that few students in our study engaged in. Instead, numbers of multiplists proposed, for example, that bar owners install breath-a-lyzers so that customers could test their levels of intoxication. Writers inevitably followed this proposal with assurances that if bar owners did so, tougher drunk-driving laws would not be needed. Yet none of the early multiplistic performers addressed the question of how bar owners could guarantee that their patrons would use such devices, what their legal responsibilities might be for patrons who exceeded safe blood-alcohol levels, nor the fact that a great deal of drinking that results in drunk driving does not, in fact, take place in bars. Some of these points did occur to late multiplistic performers.

We also found that although Perry Scheme performance was the strongest predictor of overall writing quality, on papers directed to friendly readers, educational level predicted strongly for audience Strategy activity—tactics that recognized readers’ attributes or mounted strategies to align them with the writer’s point of view. In one such move (S [Strategy] 1 in Appendix C of this essay), writers characterized or “defined” their readers to those readers: “You alcohol counselors struggle daily with this problem [recidivism in problem drinkers]”; “Members of the Colorado Highway Patrol know what it’s like to arrest drunk drivers and then watch them get off with a slap on the wrist.” In another important Strategy activity (S 7 in Appendix C), writers established a common bond with their friendly readers: “We all care about the welfare of our children,” or, “As church members, we want to help those in need.”

Yet Strategy moves directed to hostile readers were significantly predicted by Perry Scheme performance and less so or not at all by grade level. Such Strategy activity included writers not only establishing commonality between themselves and their hostile readers (perhaps the fact that both were concerned citizens or parents) but also praising their hostile readers (“The Colorado

Beverage Association is a responsible group that cares about the state's economic and social welfare"; S 6 in Appendix C). Even more, Perry Scheme predicted for Response, a dialectical measure in which writers inferred readers' positions and their reasons for them, and then in some way responded. A typical Response sequence would read: "You might feel that the laws will hurt business [Response 1, stating reader's position] because customers will be hesitant to patronize taverns [Response 2, reason for reader's position]. However, the law doesn't propose to restrict the consumption or sale of alcoholic beverages" [Response 3, response to reader's position]. Such sequences were especially important on the hostile-audience papers, for they required writers reasonably to engage viewpoints different from their own. This kind of dialectical thinking is probably at the heart of argumentative writing. Most writers in our study did not, however, use a full Response sequence, often omitting the statement (implicit or explicit) of reasons for readers' views. Many writers simply articulated readers' positions and then responded to them, often in overfacile ways suggesting that they did not fully understand why their audience might question their points. This truncated pattern implies that many students, even those rated as relativistic, were not yet performing at fully dialectical levels, and, in fact, Benack and Basseches have established that full dialectical functioning does not emerge before the upper levels of Perry Scheme functioning.

However, of the audience variables examined, Response predicted most strongly for overall writing performance on the hostile-audience papers, and statistically it was significantly related to Perry Scheme level and not at all to grade. Again, if exposure to college requirements for argumentative thinking and writing alone explained writers' performances on such tasks, then the dialectical activity in our study should have been strongly predicted by grade level and not at all by Perry Scheme rating. Nor can we assume that some subjects had already been socialized into this facet of the academic writing environment in high school. The strong linear relationship was between Response moves and level of Perry Scheme performance. Frequency counts showed that on the friendly-audience paper, late multiplists engaged in over twice as much Response as early ones, nearly three times as much as dualists. On the hostile-audience paper, late multiplists made around twice as many Response moves as early ones, nearly four times as many as dualists. Yet in our study, at least, only one high school student (out of 15) was a late multiplist. It seems clear that in the school our high school subjects attended (one of the "best" in Colorado Springs), socialization into the academic discourse environment did not account for certain kinds of cognitive functioning.



However, academic socialization prior to college may well explain other strands of writing behavior. The linear relationship between friendly-audience Strategy and grade level suggests that all students in the study had achieved a sufficient level of socio-cognitive development to relate to readers like themselves and that, given that level, more years in school may simply have offered students more general information with which to approach readers. Yet although writers' Strategy activity with friendly readers was not related to Perry Scheme performance, that with hostile readers was. This finding suggests something like cognitive egocentricity reflected in papers assessed at the lower and even middle positions of the Perry Scheme: effective conceptualization (probably through identification) of readers sharing writers' views but not of those opposing them. Papers in the upper levels of Perry Scheme performance did show more evidence of accurate and empathetic images of hostile readers. Grade in school did not predict for audience Strategy moves requiring writers to conceptualize hostile readers. That is, the papers of early multiplistic college seniors showed less evidence of such imaging than those of late multiplistic sophomores.

Our findings suggested that both socialization into the academic discourse community and socio-cognitive functioning were important contributors to argumentative writing for two kinds of audiences, with Perry Scheme performance being a stronger factor than school socialization. In the Colorado study, the sample was large enough and the subject mix varied enough as to grade level, age, major, and gender that we could discount factors such as particular class or instructor effects. Our results also showed that while overall level in school had a significant relationship to certain aspects of writing performance, area of academic major did not—a discouraging finding for proponents of a liberal-arts education but one that will not go away just because we do not like it. Yet here again, these results question notions about socialization into academic paradigms as exclusively accounting for writing performance. If the latter were so, then as a group the engineers in our study should have performed differently than the business or liberal-arts students. They did not, even though their curriculum and writing conventions are quite different from those in other colleges; on more discourse-specific writing tasks, I would expect results to differ.

In choosing subjects, we were careful to select a representative random sample of our own population, and rigorous statistical tests show that we succeeded. We cannot be sure, of course, that our students are like those in other universities in other parts of the country. We have no reason to believe that they differ drastically from students at comparable four-year colleges, but until our results are duplicated

with other high school and college subjects, readers should exercise caution in generalizing to the nationwide high school and college population. Our results do, however, accurately reflect how the entire population sampled in our study would perform on the argumentative task we assigned in the context in which it was assigned; the population so sampled totaled around 5500 students. The Colorado study also does not explore what differences instructional intervention might make in subjects' writing and socio-cognitive performances. We hope to address this question in future research.

By now enough research in enough different settings has examined audience adaptation and socio-cognitive development to suggest that some connections found in our study reflect more general patterns (see Crowhurst and Piché; Kroll; Piché and Roen; Rubin and Piché; Rubin and Rafoth; Rubin, Piché, Michlin, and Johnson; Shapiro). These studies have demonstrated statistically significant relationships between socio-cognitive abilities, assessed with a variety of measures, and several aspects of writing performance. Some of this research examines children's writing, and so one can, of course, dismiss it by claiming that socio-cognitive development is relevant for children's writing but not for adults'. This would be a curious conclusion considering what we know about the importance of developmental structures for other aspects of adult performance. Such studies do not rule out contributions to writing performance made by context, culture, academic socialization, socio-economic status, and so on. What they do suggest is that socio-cognitive structures cannot be ignored as contributors to students' writing performance. Because one thing appears true, not everything else is false. Before writing theorists and teachers dismiss intellectual development's relevance for college composition, they need to study socio-cognitive research fairly and ponder its implications for the college composing process.

## **Appendix A**

### **Descriptive Summary of Positions Two through Five in the Perry Scheme**

#### *Stage Two, Multiplicity Prelegitimate*

In this position, individuals perceive alternative points of view. However, legitimate multiplicity is often rejected in favor of discrete units of knowledge. Authorities are the source of knowledge, but because individuals perceive alternative points of view, they are

forced to separate authorities into Good Authority, which is truthful, and Bad Authority, which may be ignorant, wrong, or misinformed. The individual is a passive knower who knows reality through Authority. Peers, like Authority, are bifurcated into those who support the reality of Good Authority and those who are bad, ignorant, or wrong. In reasoning about reality, the individual is forced to confront the diversity perceived. Position two subjects will rely on simple, often nonrational, solutions to the contradictions of reality in an attempt to maintain the Good.

### *Stage Three, Multiplicity Subordinate*

In position three, individuals acknowledge the existence of different views and, further, acknowledge that the differences are legitimate. However, they perceive the legitimacy of diversity as temporary and hold out for the possibility of discovering the absolute nature of knowledge through Good Authority's hard work. As emulators of particular authorities, individuals view their own hard work as essential in knowing. Learners have become active. As active learners of the *quantity* of knowledge, they will embrace certain authorities for their personal characteristics—i.e., friendliness, clarity of thought, wisdom, good looks, dress, etc. Peers' views are recognized, but have little impact on knowing since learners view them from a reasoning stance incapable of distinguishing between bias and inference. As a result, experiences of diversity are expressed or reported as lists of unconnected events or opinions without logic or modifiers.

### *Stage Four, Multiplicity Legitimate*

Position four individuals recognize that in many areas they will never achieve certainty, but fail to generalize this insight to an integrative theory or view of knowledge. The realization that they may never banish uncertainty can on the one hand result in a cynicism towards authority—a sense of being let down, or failed, in their search for the truth. On the other hand, it can lead to a deeper embracing of authorities, particularly those who recognize the individual's particular genius. In either case, it is the individual who will generate his or her truth. For one, it is a lonely oppositional process; for the other, it is a partnership with an idolized authority. Peers are important to position four individuals. They are respected because they, too, have been left to generate their own truth. For this reason, one belief is as good as another. Individuals are able to see that evidence leads to hypothesis and conjecture rather than to absolute answers. But they are unable to endorse a conclusion unless it coincides with their own

view. The truth which they establish for themselves becomes the absolute through which all judgments are made. The individual has created his or her own absolute world.

### *Stage Five, Relativism*

With position five, a qualitative change has occurred in the individual's view of the structure of knowledge. It is as if the long personal history of accumulated *quantities* of data, experiences, and the like has resulted in a *qualitative* shift in the perception of reality. For the first time, the individual sees that the "big picture" depends upon understanding the frame of reference from which it is developed. Authorities are seen as experts who interpret reality and who have preferences and biases. For these reasons, it is possible for the individual to evaluate authorities qualitatively, distinguishing between authorities who have carefully weighed the evidence at hand and thus arrived at a considered judgment or point of view and those who have failed to approach with logic and passion the search for knowledge. Since all knowledge is viewed as relative, the self emerges as a consciously active partner along with experts in the process of exploring reality. In the educational context, the self emerges as the agent of its own learning. Because knowledge is viewed through the experiences of the self and because the individual understands the importance of exploring the context of experience, the individual realizes the legitimacy of others' considered judgments and thus may attempt to view knowledge and understand problems through the experience and perspective of others. This empathic ability brings about a recognition of the social/communal nature of knowledge. To this active, self-generated role in knowing, the individual brings a reasoning style characterized by logical inquiry and use of evidence to support his or her point of view. Unlike the position four learner, the individual in five can distinguish subtle differences in the evidence. Right/wrong, either/or thinking is no longer sufficient to the task of knowing.

—Based upon descriptions of stage positions in B. Hannum et al.

## **Appendix B**

### **Examples of Syracuse Rating Group Assessments of Student Papers for Perry Scheme Position**

The following excerpts illustrate how one cluster of rating cues, "ways of knowing," was applied to papers in the present study. A

position two, “multiplicity prelegitimate” (dualism), performance suggests that “Knowledge [Truth] is knowable . . . , concrete, finite, absolute, factual, complete,” shows “no tolerance for gray areas,” and perceives knowledge as dualistic while rejecting multiplicity as “the wrong way.” Experience is dichotomized into good/bad, right/wrong, we/they, and so on. The Syracuse raters noted that dualistic essays in the Colorado study “spoke to one factor of the [drunk-driving] problem and/or proposed a single-factor solution . . . . The knowledge [utilized] was usually based on complete, concrete, global examples,” and “dogmatic and absolute statements were common.” The position two essay excerpted below was assigned a Perry Scheme rating of 2-2-3 (only one paper in the study was rated 2-2-2). Cited writers support the proposed laws and direct their essays to members of the beverage industry.

*Two.* First of all, innocent lives are sacrificed because of this incessant indulgence [drunk driving]. There is no excuse for getting drunk and then driving at any time. Second of all, it is hard for companies to keep selling alcohol if most of their customers are getting killed on the highways by carelessness. This carelessness must somehow be curbed. Labels on the bottle won't help because people ignore them anyway. A simple slap on the wrist won't help because like masochists they will only be back for more. The best way to curb this carelessness is through education and through tough enforcement [17-year-old high school senior].

This excerpt reflects absolutist assumptions: statements such as, “People ignore [labels] anyway,” and, “Like masochists, they will be back for more [punishment],” surely are not true of all people all of the time. Yet the phrasing here allows no exceptions. The assertion that companies can't sell alcohol “if most of their customers are getting killed on the highway by carelessness” appears to wrench reason in order to dismiss a perceived diversity: that although excessive drinking can result in drunk driving, members of the beverage industry have the right to sell alcohol. The writer resolves this diversity by implying that most customers kill themselves on the highways anyway—so, presumably, bar and tavern owners have nothing to lose from the stiffer laws. The excerpt shows the writer's awareness of multiplicity (some people advocate labels on bottles, some would say there are already laws against drunk driving) but dismisses these factors (people ignore labels, the laws amount to a “slap on the wrist,” the “best” way to deal with drunk drivers is through “tough” enforcement and education). No details define or support these contentions, nor does

the writer explain how “education” and “tough enforcement” will solve the problem. Such lack of justification suggests a view of knowledge-truth-reality as concrete and complete, and hence needing only to be stated. Also note the good/bad, we/they approach: drunk drivers are “incessant indulgers,” are “careless,” have “no excuse.” Yet the quality of the writing is not remedial, and indeed suggests a good vocabulary and grasp of syntax.

With reference to ways of knowing, a position three (“multiplicity subordinate”) performance suggests that although “total truth (definite answers) is not known YET,” this uncertainty is temporary. Position three essays imply that “perfection is possible” in the future. “Alternative points of view are acknowledged,” and “differences are intriguing [and] interesting.” Knowledge [truth, reality] has “multiple components or factors,” with concomitant assumptions that “the more multiple components, the better . . . [that] knowledge is quantifiable,” and that “*what* is more important than *why*.” Position three essays use detailed, descriptive examples and list alternate viewpoints—often matter-of-factly and without genuine evaluation or integration:

*Three.* [The excerpt follows two sections, one on drunk driving statistics, the other asserting that bars and hosts should be responsible “to see that no one is injured or killed by our friends and customers.”] Tougher drunk driving laws will keep first-time offenders from overindulging in the future. If they do overindulge, they will be more likely to bring someone to get them home safely. This would help the alcoholic industry by having more customers at local bars. The friend responsible would more than likely have a drink or two himself. . . . If everyone brought a friend to supervise his actions at the pub and escort the drunk home, the streets would be safer for all of us and them. The industry would prosper from more customers . . . . [29-year-old college senior].

The excerpt reflects a “multiple components” approach to the issue: it lists information about drunk driving, raises the issue of responsibility, and, like many position three papers, takes a “we can solve this problem” approach, in this case suggesting that patrons’ friends who are designated drivers for the evening will add to bar business by having a few drinks themselves [!]. In general, such papers imply that perfection is, indeed, possible—drunk driving can be stopped, and the alcohol business will not be affected.

Position three essays give lots of facts. Usually these are not explored in depth, but the diversity of information and views

suggests a position three “more is better” emphasis upon quantity of knowledge. This laundry-list approach differs from the single-component emphases of most position two papers. Position three texts take a less pejorative tone towards the audience’s business interests than do position two essays, some of which mention these interests but seem not to credit them with legitimacy. Position three papers genuinely acknowledge alternative points of view as represented by the adversarial readers’ concerns although they rely upon overly facile “solutions” to mitigate the seriousness of these concerns.

Position four, “multiplicity legitimate,” is the quintessential “everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion” position. Where a position three performance acknowledges alternative points of view, position four accepts multiplicity as “legitimate in areas where the truth is not yet known,” in fact affirming and embracing it. Other position four ways of knowing cues include “opinions are equal when the facts are not known,” and “knowledge is ideas in process.” A position four performance engages in some qualitative reasoning—“ ‘better’ is perceived in some areas”—and recognizes the reasons why something is so as being more important than the fact that it is so. Also, in a position four performance, “truth is becoming personal”—is “my truth.”

*Four.* I realize that you are not responsible for the behavior of other people. You do, however, produce a food that affects people’s behavior. Consequently, you are indirectly responsible for their behavior.

No law should or could deprive you from the right to operate on a market at which there is a demand for alcoholic beverages. You could, however, through commercials, advertisements, and the labels on your bottles, point out to people the possible consequences of alcohol consumption. In this way you could create an awareness among alcohol consumers of the effects of alcohol and still sell your product. Laws against the total consumption of alcohol would not be the answer to the problem, nor would the absence of any law. . . . We need laws to punish those who acted irresponsibly and deprived others, the victims, from good health or their life. Tougher laws constitute one aspect to prevent people from driving while under the influence of alcohol. Public awareness constitutes another aspect and might keep people from driving while drunk. Your assistance would be highly appreciated by your customers who are against drunk driving and the American people as a whole [20-year-old college sophomore].

Many position four papers reveal the “personalizing” of knowledge: “I realize,” “I feel,” “I’m sure,” “I propose,” introduce the writer into the dialogue in ways not evident earlier; a position four performance “owns” its point of view. The cited excerpt also illustrates writers’ concerns with “why” rather than “what,” explaining why alcohol producers’ warnings could alter drinkers’ behavior and yet not interfere with liquor sales. Other Position four papers explain why the proposed law is necessary or unnecessary, why its provisions will or won’t work, and so on.

Rather than the quantity of ideas that position three papers list, position four essays focus upon fewer ideas but argue causally for them. Yet despite this narrower lens, position four performances see more facets of opposing points of view than do position three essays: the essay excerpted above recognizes that bar and tavern owners and liquor producers are not just concerned with “business” but also worry about public relations and maintaining a broad base of public support. The writer is aware of the producers’ legal right to sell alcohol and the public demand for these products.

Yet such papers still imply that alternative perspectives are straw men to be handily toppled by the writer’s asserted solution for the reader’s likely problems with the new laws. By contrast, the few position five essays in this study make no such claims, recognizing that the laws will hurt the beverage business but nevertheless contending that they are the lesser of probable evils: some reduction in profits versus likely governmental regulation or other legal consequences if the drunk driving situation continues unchecked. Such papers appear genuinely to ponder alternatives and, as a result, to recognize that ideas are contingent and contextual.

—Based upon B. Hannum et al.

## Appendix C

### Audience Coding Rubric: Definitions and Examples

#### ***Positive Moves***

*N* Naming; recognizes that an audience exists by direct and indirect reference.

*N 1* Direct reference “you”: speaks or writes directly to the audience.

- “You would not want the drunk driver in your bar.”



- N 2 Indirect reference “They, their”: usually appears when writer is generalizing about audience in protocol although may appear in text.
- “*They* won’t go along with this.”
- N 3 Names audience: appears in text and protocol when writer names the group to whom the paper is written.—MADD, Bar and Tavern Owner Association, etc.
- S *Strategy; implements a strategy or tactic for reader.*
- S 1 Appeals to self-interest vis-à-vis laws: how laws will help reader; how reader might benefit financially, socially; how business will benefit, reputation improve.
- “These laws will make your job easier.”
  - “You will not have to put up with drunks in your bar.”
  - “Drunk drivers are not good for your business.”
- S 2 States readers’ responsibility, obligation; what readers ought to do. Key words: “ought,” “should,” “your duty,” “your responsibility.”
- “Bar and tavern owners ought to be sensitive to these problems.”
  - “You should be a responsible citizen.”
- S 3 States readers’ circumstances, beliefs, experiences, characteristics: their state of being. Key phrases: “you have seen . . . ,” “you might think . . . ,” “you put your family first . . . ,” “you are . . . .”
- “As bartenders, you see drunks all the time . . . .”
  - “You come in contact with this . . . .”
  - “Parents care about the well-being of their children . . . .”
- S 4 Direct emotional appeal
- “What if you lost a child, spouse, or friend because of drunk driving?”
  - “This tragic incident may occur to your child.”
  - “You might be affected personally.”
- S 5 Tells readers they have choices.
- “You have a choice . . . .”
  - “These issues present us with choices . . . .”
- S 6 Praises, supports, shows appreciation, flatters: calls readers “responsible people,”
- “[Yours is] a prominent association . . . .”
  - “We as upright citizens . . . .”
- S 7 Use of shared features, aligns with audience: “we.”
- “Just recently in *our* city . . . .”
  - “*We* all want a better place to live . . . .”

- S 8 Asks reader to take some kind of *action* or to support laws or to take action to solve the problem.
- “I urge you to support these laws . . . .”
  - “You can ask your customers to drink less . . . .”
  - “You can write your congressman . . . .”
- C *Context: establishes context and gives background information for the reader.*
- C 1 Simply states own position but not as a summarizing statement or not repeating an earlier statement. This is the initial statement of the position: limited to first part of paper.
- “I’m here to argue against the proposed changes in these laws.”
  - “The state should pass and enforce tougher drunk driving laws.”
- C 2 Introduces self, establishes a persona.
- “I’m speaking to you as a concerned citizen.”
  - “I know how law enforcement officers feel because my father was a policeman.”
- C 3 Gives reasons for own position (not general reasons; some variety of “I” statement).
- “I feel very strongly about drunk driving because my best friend was killed by a drunk driver.”
  - “One of my best friends was permanently disabled in an accident involving a drunk driver.”
- C 4 States issue or problem: what it is, why it’s a problem; comes in the opening section only.
- “The number of accidents caused by drunk drivers has risen sharply.”
  - “The provisions of the present law are not enforced. Drunk drivers are let off with a slap on the wrist.”
- C 5 Gives specific information or clearly explains the proposed laws (does not give an opinion but clarifies what the terms of the laws are).
- “Under the proposed law, anyone found guilty of drunk driving must enroll in an alcohol education program.”
  - “One such bill provides for a mandatory twenty-four hour jail sentence, license suspension for thirty days, and a stiff fine.”
- R *Response; responds, accommodates to reader’s concerns, values, beliefs.*
- R 1 Articulates readers’ possible worries or fears or possible objections—that laws might affect business or financial position, that reader might see laws as extreme or unfair.

- “Bar owners may feel that the laws will hurt business.”
  - “You will probably believe that these laws are too costly.”
- R 2 Gives reasons for these fears, worries, etc.: often signalled by “because” clause.
- “Some [tavern owners] fear these laws *because* they are afraid they will hurt business.”
  - “Many [drivers] object to the new laws *because* they are afraid they will be caught driving drunk.”
- R 3 Answers objections, fears; rebuttal. Explains why the reader need not be concerned.
- “The laws won’t keep anyone from drinking but only from driving drunk.”

### **Negative Moves**

#### *I Inappropriate or Negative Appeals*

- I 1 Negative or pejorative references to readers. The writer blames the readers or attempts to make them feel guilty; negative representations of readers.
- “You [bartenders] don’t care what happens to people: you just want to make money.”
  - “Maybe you just don’t care about how you drive . . . .”
- I 2 Inappropriate argument for audience. The argument is ineffective with the specified audience.
- “Alcohol is a depressant. It does not give *you* your judgment.” [to Council of Churches]
  - “Those laws are a step in the same direction parents have tried to go all along where raising their kids is concerned.” [to Bar and Tavern Owners Association]
  - “Drinking is popular among teenagers.” [to Playboy Club]
- I 3 Private or code references.
- I 4 Vague pronouns.
- I 5 All purpose words.

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Cherryl Armstrong

## 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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Gesa Kirsch

# STUDENTS' INTERPRETATIONS OF WRITING TASKS: A CASE STUDY

When students interpret writing tasks, they often ask their teachers: “What do you want in this paper?” While on the surface this question seems to be only a request for information, on a deeper level it can signal a shift of textual authority from student to teacher. If teachers answer by presenting a list of requirements for the assignment, they will reinforce many students’ beliefs that writing tasks can be solved by following a “right” formula. Teachers become stage directors, while students become performers, rehearsing parts of scripts instead of producing plays themselves. The answer to the often-asked question “What do you want in this paper?” then, influences how students interpret writing tasks, and determines the sense of authority they have over their texts.

The issue of task representation is relevant to all students—in fact, to all writers—but it is particularly pertinent to basic writers. I use the term “basic writers” here to mean beginning college writers who may be able to write error-free, grammatically correct sentences, but whose writing lacks development and fluency. Such writers often do not have the confidence and authority to interpret writing tasks broadly, in ways that are meaningful to them. Instead, they tend to be eager to please their teachers, a factor that limits

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their authority over their texts. (Brian Monahan, for example, found that basic writers spent more time revising for a teacher audience than for any other audience.) Task representation is an issue crucial to basic writers, but since it applies to all other student writers, I use the term “students,” not “basic writers,” throughout this essay.

As composition scholars and literary critics, we are beginning to understand that interpretive acts are complex, and that knowledge can be understood only in the context in which it is generated, but we rarely apply this knowledge to one of the most essential, frequent, and immediate occasions for interpretation in the composing process: writers’ interpretations of writing tasks. Before writers can begin composing, they have to devise or formulate their own writing tasks. Student writers must interpret tasks given to them. While some students interpret writing tasks in ways which excite them and lead them to explore their topics, many students limit their exploration process. Interpretation of writing tasks demands writers’ authority, yet students’ sense of authority over their texts is often fragile. Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch, for example, have argued that teachers easily undermine students’ authority and appropriate students’ texts by making heavy corrections and rewriting papers. Carol Berkenkotter found that feedback from peers sometimes threatens students’ textual authority. David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell have explored how basic writers often struggle and fail with writing in an academic community because they do not know how to speak with authority in the discourse community they just entered.

In this article, I address the following questions: How can we, as teachers, answer the question “What do you want in this paper?” without undermining students’ authority over their texts? Better yet, how can we get students to understand that they are asking the “wrong question?” How can we help students to interpret writing tasks in ways that encourage them to take charge of their writing rather than cater to the imagined demands of a teacher?

Successful interpretation of writing tasks, I argue, demands writers’ authority, confidence, and knowledge of rhetorical choices. Without these assets, writers’ options are narrow, their resources limited. To illustrate the importance of task interpretation, I examine the case of one student writer whose understanding of writing tasks changed dramatically during the course of his freshman writing class. This student, Eugene, entered his freshman writing class thinking that interpreting writing tasks meant finding out “what the teacher wants,” but later learned to interpret writing tasks as occasions to explore his ideas and try new rhetorical strategies. In other words, Gene came to understand that the nature

of writing tasks and rhetorical situations is flexible, that each writing task demands a contextual interpretation.

Gene entered his second course of freshman writing—a class that introduces students to argumentative writing—in the winter of 1986 at a large public university in Southern California. In this class, students write four different kinds of arguments: they make proposals, justify evaluations, analyze causes of a trend in society, and interpret a piece of literature. As instructor of the course, I collected the following material: all the writing Gene completed during the quarter, including prewriting notes, numerous drafts, a final revision and a self-assessment for each assignment, and journal entries concerning class discussions and students' current writing. Furthermore, I held several conferences with Gene during which we discussed drafts, and I interviewed him several weeks after the end of the term, tape-recording our conversation.

In the discussion that follows, I highlight how Gene's interpretations of the various writing tasks changed over time. Only when Gene broadened his interpretation of writing tasks did he learn to expand his repertoire of writing strategies, his depth of analysis, and ultimately, his ways of knowing. While Gene's drastic change in interpreting writing tasks is not typical of most freshmen writers, it does suggest a potential for growth that lies dormant in many students until they master the skill of interpreting writing tasks and assume authority over their writing.

### **Gene's Initial Interpretation of Writing Tasks: "Searching For the Right Ingredients"**

In the beginning of the course, Gene interpreted writing tasks as rigid exercises that demand a number of specific "ingredients." After completing his second paper, Gene expressed his concern about the "correctness" of the assignment in his self-evaluation. He wrote: "My paper doesn't carry every 'necessary' ingredient, but for the subject matter, I feel it serves its purpose." In the interview, Gene reflected on his approach to the first two papers: "I was given a list of what the paper was supposed to contain, and I looked at it, and I said ok, and did it." What Gene expressed here, I think, represents how many students approach writing tasks: instead of analyzing the occasion for writing and the audience in order to make rhetorical choices, students' efforts rest with second-guessing the teacher.

Students have good reasons for interpreting writing tasks in narrow terms. Gene, for example, explained how he understood a rule he had been taught in high school:

To me, analytical and creative writing was a problem at first, because . . . in high school [I] had been taught that analytical [writing] should be totally separate from creative—I'm not sure if that's just me; we never really did any kind of combination. We did something pretty straightforward about certain types of writing . . . or else we did something totally on our own and thought about it a lot.

Gene's explanation reflects a distinction that traditionally has been made by literary scholars and English teachers: that there is creative writing, writing worthy to be studied, and transactional writing, writing that gets work done. Even though this distinction has been challenged in recent years, and scholars acknowledge that the borders between fiction and nonfiction often blur, this knowledge has not yet influenced the teaching in many English classes.

Gene had learned to think of "creative" and "analytical" writing as two dichotomous activities; writing could only take one or the other form. This understanding of writing caused Gene to experience conflicts when composing essays. In a journal during the first week, he wrote: "In the past, I have found that when I write I get the feeling that readers will accept the paper as interesting but not convincing enough to change [their] minds." And he went on to speculate about the reasons for this dilemma:

Perhaps there is a lack of feeling in my papers but then again that deals with emotion. I was taught good critical papers have an objective tone. There must be a delicate balance between the objectivity needed for a level-headed argument and the conviction or feeling needed for an earnest tone. I have yet to find this balance. Hopefully it is obtainable through practice.

In this journal entry, Gene displays an intuitive sense of what classical rhetoricians have proposed makes a convincing argument: an appeal to readers' *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. Yet Gene could not reconcile his intuition with the rule he had learned, that "good critical papers have an objective tone." Gene experienced this conflict because he understood rhetorical rules as absolute and inflexible, much the same way blocked writers often understand rules, as Mike Rose has reported in his study *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension*. Rose observed that "high-blockers . . . simply did not express or imply many rules that embodied contextual flexibility" while "all low-blockers seemed to function with [flexible] rules. . . . That is, contextual options appear[ed] to be a dimension of the rules' operation" (71). Although Gene was not a

blocked writer, his rigid interpretation of writing tasks narrowed his rhetorical choices and caused him a great deal of frustration at the beginning of the term.

In his second paper, an evaluation of the tennis player Boris Becker, Gene tried to resolve the conflict of rules by including a personal anecdote. He explains in his self-evaluation: “I tried to bring myself into the picture from the onset, then focus on Becker with an analytical eye, and then swing it back around to me to emphasize that it is still my own personal judgement.” Here, Gene had used both “modes” of writing in his essay, but he had not yet understood that the two can be integrated without conflict.

As the quotes above illustrate, writing a self-evaluation after each completed assignment and reflecting in journals on his writing process helped Gene to articulate his current understanding of the assignments and the nature of writing. Those articulations, in turn, helped me as teacher to respond to Gene and to share a mutually understood language to talk about writing. Writing self-evaluations and journals, then, is one factor that contributed to Gene’s changed understanding of writing tasks.

### **Gene’s Changing Interpretation of Writing Tasks: Gaining Contextual Flexibility**

In the process of writing the third paper, a causal analysis, Gene achieved a breakthrough. Ironically, he began the assignment by interpreting the writing task even more narrowly than he had interpreted the first two. The assignment asked students to speculate about causes of social, historical, or political trends, trends that affect various parts of the population in some profound way (such as an increase in teenage suicides or cocaine abuse). Such trends often have a host of causes—ranging from psychological to economic and political ones—and therefore invite students’ conjecture and speculation. For this assignment, Gene picked a narrow trend; he proposed to write about “an increase in horsepower among currently released new automobiles.” Although this was quite possibly a trend, the topic did not invite speculation about complex political and social causes. In fact, Gene himself recognized the trends’ limitations, observing that the topic was “pretty much straightforward. It [had] one single cause, not a combination [of causes].” Despite this insight, Gene did not reconsider his topic choice, probably because he felt safe having selected what he considered a simple and manageable topic. By interpreting the writing task in such limited terms, Gene had few risks to take and few rhetorical choices to make. His strategy was to

“play it safe.” Writers like Gene, particularly writers in freshman composition classes, may find it most comfortable to have few writing options. By limiting their interpretations of writing tasks, they avoid confusion and map out a small, familiar territory in which to demonstrate their writing skills (often concentrating on surface features, such as grammar or format).

Gene’s strategy of playing it safe, however, did not work when he approached the causal analysis. He had mapped out a territory that was too small to even fulfill the assignment because the writing task invited students to speculate about *several* causes, not just a single one. The narrow topic choice, therefore, indirectly contributed to Gene’s breakthrough because our discussion during conference focused on the topic and its limitations. After reading his first draft of the trend paper, I asked Gene about other, similar trends. Gene observed that other products, such as computers and stereos, were also advertised as having increased power while coming in smaller sizes, and he started to speculate about psychological and economic factors influencing consumers. When I encouraged Gene to write about these causes in his essay, he expressed delight to be able to use his insights and common sense, but immediately began to worry about the “right ingredients” of the paper, about losing the “objective tone.” In his journal he wrote:

In the past couple of days I’ve been worrying about this trend paper. In conference we spoke about a lot of interesting things. We also talked about the sources I would be using. We both agreed that . . . the goal of the paper is not to throw out statistics or expert testimony; the goal is to let the paper be thought-provoking and somewhat far-fetched. Therefore, my own observations are the expert testimony.

This extract captures how Gene struggled to gain confidence and authority over his writing. While he still displayed concern about using the right ingredients, he asserted in the last sentence—for the first time in the quarter—authority over his writing. Consequently, Gene explored a number of different causes, and his original idea became only one example of the larger trend. In his final revision, Gene wrote the following paragraph:

One obvious cause [of the trend of increased power in smaller products] is the growing technology manufacturers now have. Time dictates that products will increase in efficiency because of technological development. People feel that . . . products should become more and more practical because of [this inevitable] progress. Therefore, there is a demand for



smaller products. . . . But this cause can be carried only so far. To say it is practical to own a radio the size of a credit card is ridiculous. Isn't it only that much easier to lose? Obviously, there is a point where practicality cancels out and another element comes forth.

In the rest of the essay, Gene goes on to conjecture about the psychology of advertisers and consumers and about the importance of status symbols in society. His essay is thoughtful and provocative, and his analysis of causes goes into more depth than the topic of the first draft would have ever allowed him to do.

Writing a speculative argument helped Gene to assume authority over his text and bridge the gap he thought existed between creative and analytical writing. Reflecting on the causal analysis after it was completed, Gene said:

I wanted desperately to be thought-provoking. Without that, it is just another paper. I tried to dig and cover all bases but since it was . . . speculative it was difficult. Even though this work was the most challenging [so far], I really enjoyed it because I had to do so much thinking. I really had to concentrate so that what I wrote made sense to the reader or even myself.

In conference, Gene and I had “agreed” on the goal for the paper, that it should be thought-provoking. This agreement constituted a “permission” Gene seems to have waited for in order to assume authority over his text. Admittedly, it was still an act of my teacherly authority to suggest that the paper should be thought-provoking, but unlike specifying the “ingredients” a paper should contain, this act of authority enabled Gene to use his insights and explore new ideas. As teachers, we can never escape the authority invested in our roles and reinforced by educational institutions, but the least we can do is openly acknowledge the existence of this authority and discuss its effects with students. Conferences can provide a forum for informal student-teacher dialogue where ideas can be explored before appearing (and being judged) in final revisions of assignments. Because I encouraged Gene to take risks with his writing, and because our discussions focused on the content of his essays rather than on mechanics, Gene was able to expand his understanding of writing tasks.

Gene's confidence and increased motivation carried over into the last assignment for the class, an analysis of a short story. In his first draft, Gene offers an interesting, but not fully developed, interpre-

tation of a short story by Nadine Gordimer. Gene's first paragraph describes the experience the main character goes through:

In "A Company of Laughing Faces," the main character, Kathy Hack, among people her own age for the first time, comes to the realization that youth is not something one experiences with a large group. It is a state of mind in which one can achieve individuality. . . . Kathy discovers excitement and new wonders in the time spent with her peers, but with careful consideration learns she is alone.

Since the rest of his draft was fairly short, I returned to this opening paragraph during conference, asking Gene to elaborate. Gene started to discuss Kathy's conflict between wanting to conform while still desiring to remain distinct from the crowd. Gene then compared that conflict to one of the books we had read in class, Erich Fromm's *To Have Or To Be*. "In those terms," Gene said, "you could compare the conflict Kathy experiences to the distinction Fromm makes between the two modes of viewing life described in his book. "But," Gene interrupted himself, "I can't really put that in my paper, can I?" Again, the question of right "ingredients" distressed Gene. After my encouragement to include his idea—what better way to explore the meaning of a story than by making connections between previously unconnected ideas—Gene elaborated on his first paragraph, appropriating Fromm's terms. For the final revision he wrote this opening paragraph:

Kathy Hack, a girl of seventeen, among people her own age for the first time, is exposed to the subtle contrast between being young and having youth. Although Kathy's peers are thought of as being young, they are nothing more than a nameless, faceless horde of [people]. They do nothing but follow one another blindly without truly expressing themselves. They do not understand that to be young means one is able to feel free of role-playing or peer pressure. Kathy learns the hard way the nuances of these two attitudes.

I do not intend to argue that this paragraph is stronger than the first one. But Gene's adaptation of Fromm's terms helped him to define and analyze the events in the story. Having terms for the development of the main character, Gene found a way into the story and connected previously unrelated ideas. He even began to explore the conflict several other characters in the story experience. Asked about the difference between his first and last two papers, Gene said in the interview: "It might have been my attitude . . . the last couple [of papers] were more what I wanted to do . . . so [they got] a little

more input on my part.” Gene’s interpretation of writing tasks had changed and with it, his motivation and authority as writer. Rules were now understood the way Rose observed fluent writers perceiving them, as “multioptional and flexible” (90).

This changed view of writing tasks enabled Gene to expand his last two essays, an ability of consequences. Composition specialists know that addition to texts is a revision strategy frequently used by experienced writers (Sommers 380–388), a strategy that enables writers to make meaning changes rather than surface changes (Matsuhashi and Gordon 235–242). Furthermore, studies show that teachers frequently rate longer papers as being of higher quality (Picazio). After completing the last assignment, Gene wrote: “It seemed like I could continuously add more and more [to the paper]. It’s a rare feeling.” And a rare feeling this will remain for many freshmen writers as long as they interpret writing tasks as mysterious riddles which have to be solved by “always keeping an objective tone,” or by finding the right, yet hidden, “ingredients.”

## Discussion

At least three elements seem to have contributed to Gene’s changed interpretation of writing tasks. First, writing journals and self-evaluations frequently allowed Gene to articulate his understanding of assignments and his own composing process. Second, in conferences, Gene and I could discuss his work in progress and set goals for his writing. Through our dialogue, we established a shared language to talk about writing assignments and composing processes. Such shared language or “meta-language” is important for successful communication between students and teachers. It took me, for example, several weeks to understand what Gene meant by “analytical” and by “creative” writing and why he perceived them to be such dichotomous activities. Third, the very limited topic Gene chose for the causal analysis also contributed to his breakthrough because it focused our discussion on ways of reconceiving and broadening the topic.

Little research has been done on students’ interpretations of writing tasks and the process whereby they learn to do so. As researchers, composition scholars are left with a number of challenging questions: To what extent does the interpretation of writing tasks influence writing performance? How and when do writers learn to interpret writing tasks? How can a teacher recognize writers whose interpretations of writing tasks limit their authority over writing? What teaching methods promote flexible interpreta-

tions of writing tasks, ones that will leave writers motivated and with authority over their texts?

In order to help more students advance the way Gene did, we as teachers, have to learn to recognize moments in conference, in journals, and in encounters in the hallway, when students attempt to tackle new ideas, to reinterpret writing tasks, and to overcome what they perceive as conflicting rhetorical rules. For Gene, journals, self-evaluations, and conferences provided forums for reflection on his writing process. As teacher, I had to resist giving “pat” answers to the question “What do you want in this paper?” Instead, I had to turn the question back to Gene, asking for his writing goals and encouraging him to explore new and “far-fetched” ideas. At the end of the quarter, Gene wrote: “In the past, I felt I could write either analytically or creatively, no in-between. The past two papers have really opened up something that I’ve never been able to do before.” And exactly that—enabling students to do something they have never been able to do before—should be our goal as teachers.

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Irvin Hashimoto

# PAIN AND SUFFERING: APOSTROPHES AND ACADEMIC LIFE

Editor's Note: *One of my favorite journal articles is Irvin Hashimoto's "Toward a Taxonomy of Scholarly Publication" (College English, September 1983) which draws—literally—parallels between the classification system of World War II naval vessels and academic publishing. In the tradition of visual whimsy and wisdom, and as a gentle parting plea from the outgoing editor that we keep alive that tradition, JBW proudly presents its first New Yorker cartoon to accompany an essay.*

I doubt that many of us take much time arguing about the rules for using the apostrophe. But anyone who's taught composition very long knows that even simple rules cause us pain. Deep inside, I feel my forehead twinge and my mind begin to bend and whip around itself as time and time again my students abuse apostrophes right before my eyes:

The improvements for today's society are great and of many.

This term means, in general, to respect a person's rights and to act accordingly.

A person's life is not improved by acknowledgement of a chicken's worth.

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Unlike many religions that insist that their's is the only means for salvation . . .

I still feel tweaks of guilt and anger and fear when I read such stuff—guilt that somehow my teaching hasn't taken root; anger that somehow my students still don't know beans about apostrophes, and fear that one day one of the Dean's moles is going to stick his or her head in my door and ask me if i *really* thought I could get away with sending my students apostrophe-less out into the academic community.

But I'm getting better about my guilt and my fear and my frustration, and I'm just about ready to lay the blame somewhere else.

First, I want to lay a large chunk of the blame on a rather strong *handbook tradition* that leads us all to look for simple, clear, rules and conveniently makes the whole notion of "complexity" our students' fault. We tell students that apostrophes are easy, that all they have to do is to use 's to show possession and we say to those who don't understand, "Well, lookit up." Or maybe we give them simple handbook exercises on apostrophes:

John (*Adams*) letters to his wife illuminate his character.

She studied the (*goddesses*) roles in Greek myths.

The (*utilities companies*) recent price increases are unlawful.  
(*The Little, Brown Handbook* 354)

And by doing so, we ignore the ugly truth: the rules for apostrophes are much more messy than they appear in typical handbook practice.

Even when our students do go to their handbooks and "lookit up," they learn all kinds of confusing things. They learn, for instance, that even though they're supposed to add 's for possession, they're not supposed to add 's to words that end in s-sounds like "conscience" and "sapience" and "Constance" and "Prudence" and "Hortense."

Students learn that even though teachers often tell them *never* to use apostrophes to make plurals, people use apostrophes all the time to make plurals of numbers or letters or maybe confusing abbrev.'s or words named as words such as *bananas* in the sentence, "I put three *banana's* in my first paragraph." And they learn that there are exceptions to exceptions: even though you're not supposed to use apostrophes to make plurals, you're sometimes allowed to make plurals with apostrophes with numbers or letters or abbrev.'s, unless you spell those numbers out or use them in combinations

like “1980s” or “1920s” or if you happen to use letters in combinations like “PhD” or “MA”—unless those letters are lower-case in sentences like, “There are three b’s in *abbab*” (Turabian 31).

And they learn what to do about people like Jesus, Moses, Xerxes, and Confucius. Turabian tells them, for instance, that it’s more correct to say “Moses’ Laws,” “Jesus’ Ministry” and “Xerxes’ victories” than to say “Confucius’ lessons” because Jesus and Moses are Jesus and Moses and Xerxes is a “hellenized name” of more than one syllable, but “Confucius” is just an old name for an old Chinese dude (31). But Strunk and White suggest that despite what Turabian says, it’s probably *better* to say “the laws of Moses” and “the temple of Isis” than to say “Moses’ Laws” or “Isis’ Temple” (Strunk and White 1).

And they learn that the whole notion of “possession” is rather screwy and ill-defined. What, in fact, does it mean to “possess” something? Certainly, in simple cases, it’s clear who owns or owned what when we say, “John’s dog ate Joan’s cat” or “The students sat in Mr. Hughe’s car.” (Of course, that’s equally clear even if you don’t use any apostrophes at all—“Johns dog ate Joans cat,” but that’s not the point.)

Unfortunately, things are not always that clear. The *Simon and Schuster Handbook for Writers* says that you use “possessive case” to show “ownership” or “close relationship” (457). The *McGraw-Hill College Handbook* tells us that apostrophes can “show that an entity has a particular attribute, quality, value or feature” (449). But *The Little, Brown Handbook* says you can use the apostrophe to “indicate possessive case” in sentences like this, too:

She took two *years’* leave from school.

For *conscience’* sake she confessed her lie. (353)

But for goodness sake, how do those “years” own or “possess” a “leave”? Do years have rights to ownership? If not, how does a “sake” belong to a “conscience”? Is there, in fact, a “close relationship” between those “years” and their “leave”? If so, how would you characterize it? Or would you say that “conscience” is an “entity” and that “sake” is an “attribute, quality, value or feature” of “conscience”?

While we’re still on the subject of “possession” or close relationship or entities with attributes, qualities, values or features, what about other cases of “possessive case” like “three days’ rent” or “three weeks’ pay” where days don’t rent anything and weeks certainly don’t pay very much. And what about “Abe’s running for

President upset Mary” or “Tom’s being sick ruined Thanksgiving”? Does Tom actually “own” his “being”? Does he really have a “close relationship” with his being? Is his “being” simply an “attribute” or “feature”? (Surely there’s something metaphysical in all that.)

And there are so many other problems out there to worry about. Certainly, there’s a difference, for instance, between the following pairs of sentences:

1. (a) The evidence points to Jones’ committing the crime.  
(b) The evidence points to Jones committing the crime.
  
2. (a) Karoll and Black argue that by far the most serious consequence arising from teens holding after-school jobs is poor school performances.  
(b) Karoll and Black argue that by far the most serious consequence arising from teens’ holding after-school jobs is poor school performances.

While the difference here has something to do with “possession,” it also has something to do with some sort of *intention* of the writer and “objects of prepositions” and “participles” and “verbs used as nouns”—and I don’t know how long it would take me to tell my students about such things. I once knew a man who grew old and small and his body degenerated and his brain actually dried up and blew out of the window one day while he was trying one more time to explain something about objects of prepositions and participles to a class that knew full well that they could probably write *all* their papers for the rest of their academic careers without knowing anything about objects of prepositions and special kinds of “intention.”

Lately, I’ve started asking myself other questions that handbooks apparently don’t know anything about, and I’m getting more and more resigned to a rather messy life. If you can say both “the flag of our country” and “our country’s flag,” why can you say “three quarters of the country” but not “three quarters’ of our country”—or “our country’s three quarters”? Why can’t you say, “The class read each others’ books”? Why do people in Indiana make such a point to emphasize the distinction between “Indiana University” (yes) and “The University of Indiana” (no) when “Indiana’s University” or “The University of Indiana’s” may be even better?

That last example is a clear case of what the handbook of Harbrace’s calls a “double possessive”—much like “the garden of Al’s”—where you use that apostrophe along with the preposition “of” to show possession. Unfortunately, like everything else, the rules for using such double possessives are rather vague. Why, for



instance, do people usually say “the garden of Mr. Smith” but not “the garden of Mr. Smith’s”? (Or, in fact, *do* they? At least they do in my family, but I don’t know about the fellow across the street. He doesn’t even kill the dandelions in his lawn.)

Why do we get upset when our students write something like “Whatever happened to childhood, that golden age free from the cares of the fast-paced, crazed adult world’s”? And how do we explain to them that somehow, that just *looks* ugly?

Suppose you happen to own three pairs of blue jeans made by Levi Strauss and Company. And each of those jeans is called a “pair of Levi’s”—or simply “Levi’s.” If each of those three pairs of pants have frayed cuffs, do you say, “My Levi’ses’ cuffs are frayed” or “My Levi’s’s cuffs are frayed” or “My jeans are frayed”?

The other day on television, I happened to see a sign advertising, “CBS Sports Coverage of the National Football League”—but why wasn’t that “CBS’s Sports Coverage of the National Football League”? or “CBS Sports’ Coverage of the National Football League”? or “CBS’ Sports Coverage of the National Football League”? I suppose the difference here has something to do with the functions of modifiers and the distinction between *possession* and *modification*. A similar problem occurs with common holidays such as “Mothers’ Day” (or “Mothers Day”? or “Mother’s Day”? or “Day of Mother’s”?), and “Valentine’s Day” (or “Valentines’ Day”? or “Valentines Day”?). But I don’t exactly know how I learned to fuss over such things, and I don’t really know if anyone else out there besides us English teachers really cares or sees the point at all if I happen to say “Valentines Day” on purpose or “Mothers’ Day” as distinct from “Father’s Day.”

Certainly, nobody worries like English teachers—least of all those students who have other *big* things to learn—like how to keep track of that good idea for Great Works or how to flounder through Sociology without looking too foolish. Or how to use COMMAS. (Somehow, commas are always a lot more important to my students than those apostrophes.)

And out there in the big world, other folk don’t seem to worry much, either. Take a Number 21 bus up Wilshire Avenue sometime and you’ll see a nice sign for Temptations Ladies Wear right next door to Venus Ladies Wear for Junior Missey. And Breuners Renting Furniture. And Ogdens One-Hour Cleaners. And Carl’s Jr. Restaurant. Take a trip down Isaacs Avenue and you’ll find that Joe Albertson’s supermarket is called “Albertsons.” And down at the Bonanza 88, they’re advertising “toy’s” for twenty percent off. And down in Milton-Freewater, the roadside stands are advertising “tomato’s” for ten cents a pound. And down at the end of Figueroa,

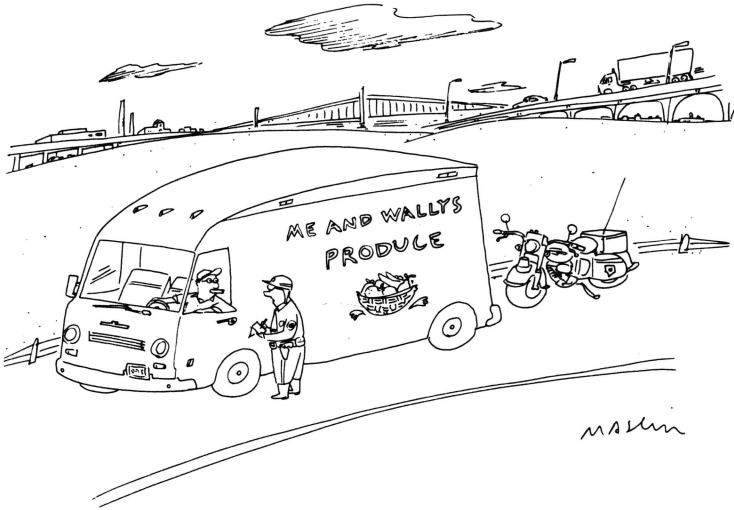
the Joneses have a sign all carved out with some kind of woodburning tool that reads, “The Jones’s.”

A couple of years ago, you could go anyplace in the U.S.A. and find a department store called Montgomery Ward and Company—or “Wards”—an apostrophe-free nickname perhaps analogous to “Sears”—a name that more legitimately comes from “Sears Roebuck and Company.” (Recently, “Wards” seems to have suffered economic setbacks—but I don’t think apostrophes have had anything to do with it.)<sup>1</sup>

The problem is simple. We’ve got oversimple rules and oversimple explanations of those oversimple rules and oversimple examples of those oversimple explanations and even an oversimple public that doesn’t seem to want to worry much about oversimple explanations or oversimple examples or even the oversimple sweat that comes off our foreheads as we wade into the wonderful sea of arbitrary punctuation. And while we exhort our beginning writers to follow oversimple rules and read oversimple explanations and while we predict bad things for lazy bums and lackluster punctuators, they act as if they have lot’s more to worry about—bigger games to play, tickets to tomorrow, appointments with some Giver of Great Ideas.

And while we continue to exhort them to follow our oversimple rules and try to talk to them about “possession” and entities with qualities, values, and features and our hair starts coming out in clumps and we lose weight and become small—and as we try to explain the mysteries of apostrophes used with words that end in *s* and why “it’s” is related to “yours” and not “your’s” and why we don’t use (unless we’re supposed to) apostrophes for plurals, our students quietly ignore us and our rules and make up their own, perhaps more friendly and forgiving rules—“Never use ’s to form a plural unless it looks better (as in *lot’s* and *Jones’*) or if you’ve seen it that way down at the Bonanza 88.” “Never use ’s an apostrophe with a gerund.” “Never use ‘Levi’s’ in the possessive.” “Always use *it’s* both for possession and for *it is*—unless you want to risk two rules instead of one.” “When in doubt, leave those apostrophes out unless the word ends in *s* in its original form or is plural or is one syllable or less or is in a place where no one will notice. Then make your decision based on euphony, common sense, and/or analogy.”

Lately, I’ve been trying to be a lot more calm about apostrophes. I still mark a fair number of them in the margin and try to help students to learn how to write “it’s” for “it is” and how to recognize simple problems like the “dogs bone” and “Hashimotos brain.” But



*"Sorry, but I'm going to have to issue you a summons for reckless grammar and driving without an apostrophe."*

Drawing by Maslin; © 1987 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

I'm slowly learning how difficult such ideas are for some students in a world where apostrophes are not so important, where life goes on with or without punctuation, where confusion rustles quietly around students' ankles or makes only small whining noises in the margins of their papers. And with my new vision of the world and the state of the apostrophe, my blood pressure's going down and right now I'm beginning to understand the sycamore tree outside my office window.

Given the state of the world and everything beginning writers have to learn in composition class, at some point, we all probably need to think about priorities and sycamore trees. How much time and sweat and exercising do we really want to spend on pesky little, almost meaningless punctuation marks? How much blame should we accept for our students' poor showing in the use of such marks? How much credit should we claim for our good teaching when our students suddenly or miraculously begin to punctuate better and annoy us less with their apparent willful ignorance? (I suspect we should accept as little blame as possible and with apostrophes at least, we should probably accept only a little credit—the credit we deserve for keeping our expectations reasonable and ignoring all the fluff that often distracts us from other, more important things.)

## Note

<sup>1</sup> For a more formal discussion of the history of apostrophes and even more strange examples of current usage (or nonusage) of apostrophes, see Sklar.

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James M. Deem  
Sandra A. Engel

## DEVELOPING LITERACY THROUGH TRANSCRIPTION

A major problem in improving the reading and writing abilities of basic skills students enrolled in open admissions colleges is created by the students' poor skills as well as their negative feelings toward school. While many of these students may have succeeded in high school well enough to graduate, they are underprepared for college work (Troyka 254) and have often failed or almost failed before. How do basic writing instructors teach such students? More specifically, how do basic writing instructors teach developmental reading and basic writing—once more, but with success—to students with years of accumulated negative attitudes toward school?

The answers most often provided by writers of basic skills materials have involved a skills-oriented approach. We teach students to find the main ideas and to draw inferences from their reading; instructors teach them to develop topic sentences and to correct the grammar and the sentence structure of what writing they are asked to do. Often such an approach begins with well-intentioned reading selections; students are invited to read professionally written essays and then to write similar expository

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essays which, for the most part, only the teacher reads. While such an approach is clearly popular now in college developmental reading and writing courses, it is not the only approach. Nor is it an approach that deals with the complete student.

An alternative course, one more holistic, makes the students' writing the center of the course—the focus for both the reading and writing of the course. James Britton has said that all language grows out of the expressive, out of “language close to the self” (90). Such an approach emphasizes expressive language, though is not necessarily limited to it. This alternative course creates a legitimate writing and reading community for the students while at the same time recognizing how language ability tends to develop.

We wish to describe one holistic strategy for teaching reading and writing as well as two specific projects that have evolved from our work with college basic skills students at open admissions institutions. Our strategies differ substantively from those typically found in the skills approach; our strategies recognize in a much more concrete way the relationship between the students' background and the curriculum, and they recognize what often really is nothing less than the students' sense of isolation in the unfamiliar and unhappy environment of the college classroom. Heath found that educators must pay “attention to the kind and degree of socio-cultural integration that an individual brings to the academic setting” (32). Heath indicates, and we concur, that students who come from varying cultural traditions—as is the case with most basic skills students in open admissions colleges—require a curriculum that is sensitive to the students' backgrounds (34). The curricular strategies we discuss here adhere to such a standard.

### **Beginning with Oral Fluency**

Deem has pointed out that one of the most vexing problems basic skills students face is an inability to transcribe their thoughts (360). These students leave gaps in their writing; that is, words are sometimes missing, sentences are jumbled, thoughts seem incoherent—even though the students are able to produce relatively coherent oral statements on the same topic.

Many basic skills students speak a nonstandard dialect which has led some authors to conclude (wrongly, as Hartwell has written; 101) that dialect interference causes the students to be poor writers. Rather, we agree with Moffett who says that the students' poor writing ability is merely reflective of their inability to transcribe their thoughts (278).

Shor notes that “in their native idiom, students have strong

speaking skills, so it is a greater resource to have composition evolve from their verbal talent” (131). Consequently, the most common-sensical approach to developing literacy in college remedial students would take advantage of the students’ oral fluency. These students must learn to transcribe in order to develop into successful writers. Moffett regards transcription—and its companion, copying—as a fundamental skill in writing, second only to handwriting. Transcription and copying shift “speech from an oral to a visual medium” (276).

Transcription, however, is not a generally recognized pedagogy for basic skills students. Even Moffett thinks there is a problem with transcription and copying in that “in neither case does the ‘writer’ create the content or necessarily understand it” (277); but Moffett assumes that transcription has to be taught through the thought and language of others, thus robbing the students of involvement in a creative process. He says that students who have spent “their school days copying, paraphrasing, and fitting content into given forms . . . have never had a chance to see themselves as authors composing . . . a creation of their own” (278).

However, we find no reason why transcription need be the total of any course. Instead it can be seen as a means to an end, as a means of capturing the students’ words and ideas in print so that they can begin to see themselves as writers, as composers of words and experiences. Transcription, perhaps because of its connection to speech, lends itself to expressive writing—but not only to expressive writing, as we discuss below.

### **Simple Transcription: A Missing Ability**

Simple transcription is the matching of the student’s thoughts to the words that the student writes. With a tutor in the writing lab or with the instructor in his or her office, the student is asked to talk into a tape recorder on either a self-selected or an assigned topic. The student records for five minutes or longer and then attempts to transcribe the tape verbatim, omitting any false starts or hesitations. When the tape is transcribed, the instructor or tutor listens to it and corrects the transcription, returns it to the student for study and revision, and if many errors were made, asks the student to transcribe the tape again at a later meeting. Students who have severe writing problems may give their tapes to the instructor first, to be transcribed, so that the student can study the instructor’s transcription before attempting to transcribe the tape alone.

There is at least one possible variation on this. Shor has written of a program at Staten Island Community College where students in

a basic writing class are paired in order to dictate to one another. As Shor notes, one side benefit of this activity is that it “encourages peer relations. The students have to cooperate to get work done; the teacher does not monitor them” (131).

Not only does composition evolve from transcription, but reading improvement takes place in that the students must read aloud and edit what they have transcribed. In the reading of the transcription, Shor says, “the grammar in [the students’] speech will automatically correct errors made by the students’ writing hand” (133). Both Shor (133–135) and Hartwell (112) indicate that students tend to correct their writing errors as they read aloud through their compositions.

### **Project One: The Oral History**

The transcription project most deliberately expressive is the oral history, three variations of which have been described by Deem and Engel, Kozol, and Lofty. In this project the students interview their instructor in class about his or her past educational experiences, using questions written by the class. The interview is recorded on tape. In our experience, students asked such questions as:

- Why did you decide to become a teacher?
- When you went to school did you ever think of quitting?
- What kinds of problems did you have in school?
- Did you have any problems at home when you were going to school?
- How are students different today than when you were in school?
- What’s the worst class (or type of student) that you ever taught?

Next, using variations (when possible) on the same questions the students asked, the instructor interviews each student privately and on tape in sessions that last approximately ten minutes. Sometimes, to save instructor time and to encourage more student interaction outside the classroom, we have also paired students to interview each other. In all interviews, the person interviewed is given permission to decline to answer any question.

When the interviews are completed, the instructor prepares students to transcribe either the interview they conducted or the interview of them by the instructor. The instructor presents brief lessons on problems that might develop during transcription, such as letter-sound mismatch or false starts or hesitations. We have found it helpful to transcribe parts of our own interviews to



demonstrate these problems and to offer possible solutions. For example, when Deem was asked if we had any unforgettable experiences as a teacher he replied:

Uh, I've been teaching since 1971 and probably every year has been one unforgettable experience. Um . . . my first year teaching, uh, the unforgettable experience happened at the end of the year when one of my students decided to . . . uh, he had some kind of bottle that he could squeeze . . . a plastic bottle that was filled with water; he decided he was going to squirt me in the face with the bottle. That was an unforgettable experience.

After pointing out the problems with transcribing speech verbatim, the instructor with the students' help refined the passage to a brief narrative paragraph.

Students are then asked to transcribe their own interviews, which oftentimes can be done in the writing lab. They are asked to begin to see their transcriptions as something akin to first drafts, as a collection of pieces to be fashioned into a coherent whole on paper, by addition and subtraction, elaboration, and modification.

Part of one student's transcription looked like this in its rough form:

*What was your wildest adventure?* I accidentally hit a teacher. *You hit a teacher?* It all started when I was talking to this girl through a classroom window, foolwing around knowing that student cannot be in the halls. Out of no were a teacher grabs my arm, but the way I move I hit him in the chess. Than he started calling me names and ever thing else started to get me mad. . . .

In revising, the student deleted all questions, corrected spelling and syntactic errors, and began to elaborate upon his oral account. Part of his early draft read:

One of my wildest adventures was when I accidentally hit a teacher. It all started when I was talking to this girl through a classroom window, fooling around knowing that students cannot be wandering the halls. Out of nowhere a teacher grabbed my arm, but the way I moved I hit him in the chest. As I stood there, he started calling me names. . . .

Through this project, the students learn to understand the differences between speaking and writing. They also begin to learn to edit their speech and in the process they improve their reading. And the final product—a typed student-edited collection of all the

interviews—serves to stimulate reading, discussion, and written reaction.

The class becomes a community by learning they are not completely unique or alone in their educational histories. For example, basic skills students generally remembered learning to read in school as a traumatic experience. One student remembered not wanting to read because he was shy. He wrote that his former teachers could not discover

if I could read or not because everytime my teacher would call on me I'd tell her I did not want to read. I did not like to read out loud, because what if I made a mistake, skip a paragraph, or came to a word I could not pronounce. I pictured myself each time my teachers would call on me and I saw myself being laughed at just like the others who made mistakes while reading. So I never read.

Another student recalled that in elementary school the students “had to line up against the wall and state the whole page word for word. If we didn't know it we all got clobbered.”

The topic, of course, for such a project, does not have to relate to education. Shor has used the theme of *work* as a basis for student composition with a similar technique (127–128), while Beegel has assigned students to interview writers—any writers, professional or amateur—about their writing projects (353–57). Similarly, our students have also interviewed neighbors or members of the profession that they wish to join. When prompted by reading assignments, our students have interviewed Vietnam veterans, pregnant teenagers, foster parents and children, and recent immigrants to the United States. The key, we think, is to encourage students to pursue their own interests.

The oral history can serve a number of important purposes other than improving reading and writing. First, it provides a homemade book for students who may, as Kozol suggests, be intimidated by the remote printed word (139). Second, the oral history demonstrates that books can be not only the work of others, but of themselves; books are attainable. Third, it can provide a basis for mutual understanding between students and teachers—and, equally important, among students. Finally, it encourages the students to become active in the learning process by being more motivated and self-directed.

### **Project Two: The Newsletter**

A transcription project tending to the more traditionally

expository is the newsletter. The students are asked to interview people at the college based on information the students want to discover. Students often want more information about financial aid, careers, registration, book selling, and student activities. By assigning interviews—or preferably by asking students to select their own subjects for the interviews—the students may feel freer to seek out information they might otherwise never obtain.

After the interview, students transcribe their tape before developing the interviews into a newsletter article. As with the oral histories, the necessary short lessons are given, and when all accounts are written, students return to the people they interviewed to verify quotations and to ask any questions that may have arisen since the first interview.

The *Developmental Studies Newsletter* at Mohawk Valley Community College is one such effort; *The Missing Link* newsletter at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, is another. Students chose to interview numerous people on campus ranging from the college president to the bookstore manager; the students sought information and occasionally aired grievances about such things as poor food service and long registration lines. At both institutions, the students were told to address their articles to incoming basic skills students.

In one newsletter, a student interviewed the head of the food service and conducted a food test. Another provided information on dormitory and off-campus housing. Still another posed the rhetorical question “Enough Parking Space or Not?” Finally one student who interviewed an instructor wrote an article entitled “All of You Non-Readers, Slow Readers Who Like Myself Point Blank Don’t Like Reading,” in which she described the instructor and the ways he sought to help students improve their reading.

The end result of this approach is that the students have a purpose for their writing—which engenders a stronger purpose for their reading. Since students are creating published documents of their written work, the motivation to produce their best writing and to read the writing of their peers is increased.

## **Moving On**

Transcription activities are one means to give such basic skills students better opportunities to improve their writing and reading abilities. Well-chosen reading material can easily supplement the projects and foster the students’ interest in exploring topics further. For example, students who write an oral history of work experiences could read Studs Terkel’s *Working*. Other books that

lend themselves to such an approach are Keith Walker's *A Piece of My Heart*, an oral history of women who served during the Vietnam War; and Anne Campbell's *The Girls in the Gang*, in part an oral history of some urban female gang members.

From oral histories, students can move on to popular novels, autobiographies, and other nonfiction. Students who have done the educational oral history could read *Mary* by Mary Mebane, an autobiography which demonstrates a young girl's persistence in achieving her educational goal; Virginia Axline's *Dibs in Search of Self*, a nonfiction account of an emotionally disturbed young boy's educational progress; or Robert Sam Anson's *Best Intentions: The Education and Killing of Edmund Perry*, which delineates the problems many minority students face in choosing to improve their futures through education while leaving behind their nonacademic peer group.

By combining thematically developed reading (two or three books) with an oral history project, an instructor can help students develop more typically expository compositions after the oral history project is completed. Assignments can move from the expressive to the expository, or to the persuasive. Students might, for example, be encouraged to see patterns and themes in the experiences within the anthologies; the interviews themselves can provide the content for further writing.

Through such transcription activities, students can improve their writing and reading abilities by creating a written product in their classroom community. Transcription is only one way to improve these students' abilities; it is, however, important to begin with this first step, a step that is often missing in the instruction of basic skills students.

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## NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

The National Testing Network in Writing, Dawson College, and The City University of New York announce the **SEVENTH ANNUAL NTNW CONFERENCE ON WRITING ASSESSMENT** on April 9, 10, and 11, 1989 in Montreal, Canada. This national conference will be devoted to critical issues in assessing writing in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary settings. Keynote speakers include **John Dixon, Peter Elbow, Peter Evans, Alan Purves, Leo Ruth, Helen Schwartz, Bernard Shapiro, Edward White, and Janet White.** Contact: Linda Shohet, Dawson College, 3040 Sherbrooke Street W., Montreal, Quebec, Canada, H3Z 1A4.

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**The Writing Centers Association, East Central Region,** announces its **Eleventh Annual Conference**, to be held May 5–6, 1989, at Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, OH. The theme of the conference is “Empowering Our Writing Centers, Empowering Our Students.” Persons interested in participating should submit a substantive, one-page proposal (plus 3 copies) *by December 16, 1988.* Contact: Ulle E. Lewes, Writing Resource Center, Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, OH 43015.

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*Focuses* is a new semiannual journal devoted to varied special interests in writing as a discipline. It is a forum for scholars who link their propositions about rhetorical theory with composition programs and practice in the classroom and in the writing center. For more information on submissions and subscriptions, contact: William C. Wolff, Editor, *Focuses*, Dept. of English, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608.

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*The Western Ohio Journal*, annual publication of WOCTELA (Western Ohio Council of Teachers of English/Language Arts), seeks manuscripts for a special issue: “Mystery, Fantasy, Science Fiction.” Idea exchange articles (elementary through college), criticism, fiction, poetry, reviews, announcements, and drawings are welcomed. Contact: Jim Brooks, DEV Studies, Sinclair Community College, 444 West Third Street, Dayton, OH 45402. *Deadline is January 1, 1989.*

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