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focus

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A BEGINNING

One's first experience editing a journal is frightening. How many typos did I miss? Is the typing clear enough? Is it centered properly? And what is more important, will the readers like the articles?

But, how can we miss, with such scholars as Harriet Sheridan, Edward P. J. Corbett, and Stephen Dunning? The Editorial Board decided that this first issue should focus on last spring's conference. Harriet Sheridan was the keynote speaker, Edward Corbett spoke to the college section, and Stephen Dunning, who has furnished us some of his poetry, was the luncheon speaker.

Our themes for the next two journals have also been selected by the Editorial Board: the winter journal will focus on Politics and the English Teacher, a theme which can include the pros and cons of issues such as standardized tests, a state-wide testing program, a state-mandated curriculum, grantsmanship, teacher evaluation and tenure. The spring journal will focus on teaching reading.

So send MEJ your thoughts -- in an article, a letter, a poem. We do not want to resort to using the esoteric articles of college and university professors from all over the country and the world -- yes, we have one from Teheran -- who are harassed to publish or perish. Although we welcome down-to-earth articles from anywhere, this is a Minnesota journal. So I would repeat the words of Elmer Suderman in his last issue last spring:"Force the new editor to edit, not to print whatever is sent...The new editor <u>will</u> enjoy that."

THE STATE OF THE LANGUAGE ARTS: WHERE ARE WE, WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Delivered at MCTE Annual Conference - April 22, 1977

Harriet Sheridan
Carleton College
Northfield, Minnesota

How are the language arts? What is their state? The answer is simply given: The state of the language arts is parlous. Why so? Let me take up the questions of whence, where now, and whither. To lend some credibility to my claim to speak about literacy past, present and future, I'll begin with a literary allusion to Robert Frost's poem "The Ovenbird." Ovenbirds do not usually congregate in large numbers such as attend MCTE conferences, if Frost's account of their habits is to be trusted. Yet, choice of accommodations notwithstanding, I think that we, in this location, are talking about an ovenbird's problem.

> The question that he frames in all but words
> Is what to make of a diminished thing.

This phrase, "what to make of a diminished thing," is the text that I now advance to match the text adopted by a proliferating race of critics who have chosen the line that precedes, using it to describe the achievements of today's English students, whose thoughts and passions are said to be framed in <u>all but words</u>.

You have read the indictments in <u>Newsweek</u>, <u>Change</u>, <u>The Chronicle, Harper's</u>, the <u>Yale Alumni News</u>, the <u>New York Times</u>, the <u>Wall Street Journal</u>, and other such whimsical publications. The uproar is

national. Herds of Jeremiahs roam from sea to shining sea crying out against the deterioration of the skills of reading and writing. In a report to the University of California regents, the chairman of the University's system-wide Academic Council revealed some "alarming" statistics about the basic English writing skills of University of California students.

> Records of the College Entrance Examination Board show that in 1968, 63% of the entering students on the University of California's eight general campuses had scores below the minimum required by the University on the College Board's multiple-choice English composition test. By 1975 that percentage had climbed to 75%; of these, only a small percentage passed the 'second chance' essay exam given on UC campuses at the beginning of the student's first quarter. These students represented the academic cream -- the top eighth -- of California's high school graduates. 'With more than 50% of our students required to take subject A,' one UC administrator commented, "We can hardly continue to consider the course remedial.'

In the 1975-76 Annual Report of the Committee on Subject A, the chairman informed the Santa Cruz campus of the University of California that the number of students enrolled in writing courses to meet the writing requirement spiraled from 11% in 1972-73 to 40% in 1975-76. Recent estimates indicate that the figure for 1976-77 will top 60% (The USCA Review, April, 1977).

The news from the East Coast is no better. An account in the Yale Alumni News complains that:

> Anyone who reads student writing today knows that students can't write....The cases are rooted...deeply in a society that rears its children on sentimental and shoddy reading material, which bathes them in the linguistic sludge of television, and which debases the English language in the place where all learning begins: at home. (Yale Alumni News, p. 16)

And closer to home:

> A survey of English department chairmen at both public and private colleges and universities in Minnesota produced general agreement that student writing skills have deteriorated badly. 'Writing skills have broken down,' says Julie Carson, director of freshman composition at the University of Minnesota. We have to start teaching writing at a different point than a lot of people suspected we would. We get down to teaching basic things. (Larry Millett, St. Paul Pioneer Press, July 22, 1975)

In an article entitled "I Can't Teach Comp No More," a teacher on the firing line vented her wrath on the back page of the Chronicle:

> While the Modern Language Association put it more delicately when it wrote that 'students are coming from high school with a far less firm grasp on fundamentals than before -- middle-class as well as disadvantaged students,' I'm beginning to believe that no one under the age of 19 can write a simple declarative sentence.(Phyllis Zagaro, "I Can't Teach Comp No More," Chronicle, March 1, 1976).

There is no dearth of suggestions about the causes of our debasement. The arch-villains are said to be the influence of television and the decline of reading among today's school children. One critic continues further to explain that students cannot write carefully thought-out essays because they associate abstract subjects with vague reasoning. "We have to point out that the discussion of an abstract topic must be even more precise than the discussion of something concrete that they have experienced," she says (California Monthly, November, 1974).

The second subject for lamentation is the deterioration of the

reading skills of our students. The New York Times announces that

> Publishers, responding to a changing market in college texts, are increasingly resorting to simplified language in their books to adjust to a new element in higher education -- the college student who cannot read at traditional college levels.... Since the publishers see no hope the educational system is going to raise the young people's reading ability,the publishers are going to lower the level of what the students read.

And the Wall Street Journal (December 4, 1974) complains:

> It is truly painful to watch such students struggle with reading and flounder as they try to express their thoughts.... The fault lies not with TV but with ourselves. We, and most especially our educational system, have accepted an anti-language culture. The young do not learn their language simply because they are not taught.

One of our own, Ed White, complains in an interview with Daniel Dieterich, published in the January 1977 issue of College English, that his own freshman composition text books "which were once used in freshman composition courses, now seem to be used ...in advanced composition courses."

The "plight of the American language" itself, disfigured by neologisms that are splashed all over its body "like the daubings of a chimpanzee turned loose with finger paints," with its "parts of speech broken into smithereens," and with only "tinkers with tin ears... fashioned... out of old applesauce cans" to set the fractures and dislocations, is another subject for extravagant lamentation (Jean Stafford in the Saturday Review/ World, December 4, 1973, p. 14).

It may reduce our burden to know that the sins of the children

are visited upon the parent, and that laments about the decline of literacy are resounding in England as well. Great Britain's generally left-leaning New Statesman, for example, has commented editorially, "The evidence from universities, colleges, and employers that school leavers lack basic skills can no longer be ignored" (Malcolm Scully, "New Wave of Pessimism Sweeps Some Academics," Chronicle, November 8, 1976, p. 1).

And the London Times, analyzing the problems facing the Education Secretary, Shirley Williams, reports that "The concentration upon education as a path to self-awareness and expression has been taken to the point where basic standards -- the three Rs -- are slipping. Prime Minister Callaghan proposes to swing back the pendulum" (Sunday Times, October 17, 1976, p. 17).

When a Prime Minister gets into the act; when high school English departments are accused by School Boards of being "neo-primitive, of engaging in "social engineering, and offering courses that had no place in a high school" (reported of Darien High School in the CSSEDC Newsletter, NCTE, September 1976, p.4); when a nationally syndicated columnist for the Baltimore Sun (Ernest B. Ferguson) in his concluding comments about the Republican and Democratic Party Platforms, observes that "next election year, when the politicians seek strong issues to unite all kinds of voters, and which matter more than most convention effluvia, they might endorse a constitutional

amendment to require the schools to teach the children to read and write" (reprinted in Minneapolis Tribune, August 29, 1976); when the New York State Board of Regents enacts a requirement that students pass ninth-grade exams in reading and math before graduation from high school (March 26, 1976); then we cannot dodge the conclusion that the hue and cry about our national illiteracy and the demand that we get "Back to the Basics" is a political issue.

We may suspect that the call to retreat is most ardently sounded by those who found the Sixties hateful, who loathed long-haired students and underground newspapers, and who now, newly-dusted Warriner Handbooks under their arm, await the Second Coming of the lock-step curriculum.

We may even argue like Richard Ohman in the "Decline in literacy is a fiction, if not a hoax," a fiction created by the culturally and educationally elite, akin to the spasm that fathered the conflict over race and I.Q., underlain by "a continuing political argument about who shall be educated and what shall be the limits of equality in America" (Chronicle, October 25, 1976, p. 32).

But however we explain the crescendo of complaints about the state of literacy today, we cannot ignore the fact that the Where are we now? question about the language arts has got to be answered: We are in trouble, plenty of trouble. Never mind whose fault it is. When the taxpaying citizenry finishes skimming their newspapers, they know who to blame: teachers.

It is small comfort to look backwards and to discover that we are merely again repeating the past.

In a book that was reprinted by the NCTE a while ago, and that deserves to be revived yet one more time, How the French Boy Learns to Write, published in 1915, Rollo Brown contrasts the carefully organized, continuous French tradition of teaching writing with the "very feeble" tradition of good language teaching in America. He observes:

> The teacher in the American high school must not only deal with ...boys who cannot spell, who not only know no grammar but hate the word itself, and who cannot give adequate expression to the few thoughts and vague feelings that save their minds from emptiness, but he must struggle, and he must help his pupils to struggle, against the overwhelming flood of inaccurate, sometimes absolutely vicious speech that tyrannizes the community. The student does not encounter anywhere an unyielding conviction in favor of careful, thoughtful speech and writing.

In 1936, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching funded a study by Burges Johnson of Union College and Helen Hartley of Syracuse University on written composition in American colleges. One reads the report of their research with an overwhelming sense of having heard it all before. The introductory section of the report begins as follows:

> This inquiry into some aspects of college teaching of composition carried on for a period of three years at Syracuse University... was based upon this hypothesis: that a majority of students in American colleges are not taught to write well....Both in personal correspondence and in meeting other normal business and social demands they reveal a lack of that literary style or even of that ordinary writing skill which one should expect of the

> college-trained man. A scientific inquiry or a series of experiments planned to proceed from such a hypothesis might begin at almost any point and go in almost any direction. If the college fails in this field of instruction, is it handicapped by the quality of the work done in the high schools or by the quality of its own teachers or by the method of teaching? (Written Composition in American Colleges)

As part of the preparation for their research, the two investigators obtained from leaders in journalism, industry, and graduate schools comments about the state of literacy. One such comment made by the Dean of the University of Chicago Graduate School might just as well have been made by his successor in 1977:

> Concerning the ability or inability of the average college graduate to express himself well in writing, I do not think that the situation has changed very much in twenty years. A very large number of applications show a lack of facility in English that is surprising in the case of anyone who has spent four years in college. The cause of the deficiency is a deep-seated one. It goes back to the high school and is in my opinion the immediate result of the subordinate position now accorded the study of languages in large numbers of high schools. The English that a great many applicants for admission to our undergraduate college write is amazingly bad. Apparently the students who show this deficiency on entrance very often retain it all the way through college until it crops out again in their application to the graduate school.

It is tempting to retrieve and repeat the host of ancient complaints about illiteracy as the apologists amongst us are busily doing, and thereby exonerate ourselves from any particular blame for the present "crisis." It is fatuous to cast about for single causes, to point the finger at permissive high school English Departments; at the promiscuities of televisionese; at the increased number of women and minority students who take College

Boards and thereby lower them; at the insidious racism of the educational elite.

The January issue of College English devoted to "Literacy and Basics" began with an editorial lament that the call for contributions to that special issue produced very few responses. Expressing their mystification, the editors commented:

> The reasons for this are not clear. Is the topic dead already? Is the profession generally lethargic about it? Resigned? Defensive?... We were further disappointed by the scope of the contributions. A large proportion merely reiterated the public concerns and in terms very similar to those employed by the media. Others devoted most of their energy to suggesting better ways to teach writing. We might infer from these facts that the profession accepts not only the public assessment of the literacy 'crisis' but also the blame for it. Our original call queried whether in fact there has been a significant decline in reading and writing ability among students. Yet not one contribution reviewed and analyzed in any detail the assumptions, methods, and statistics of the testing upon which so much of the public outcry seems to be based.

The editors go on in an attempt to put the current crisis into a sociological and political context, with the underlying premise one that Richard Ohman had articulated elsewhere. He is not alone, however, in his suspicions of the motives of some of the proponents of the "Back to the Basics" movement. Fear has been voiced as well by minority groups who see in the so-called renewed commitment to "academic standards" an attempt to justify cuts in special programs for "disadvantaged" students. As part of this commitment to "standards," proficiency testing has arrived on our professional

scene to ensure that no student graduates or moves to more advanced courses without requisite basic skills. The C.U.N.Y. system will shortly require all students to take proficiency exams in reading, writing, and mathematics, tests designed "to assure the university and the public and the students that those who move to advanced work have the basic skills necessary to do that work."

Comparable kinds of proficiency tests have also been instituted or will be instituted in the California State University System, at the University of Toronto, in Oregon, and at the University of Wisconsin at Madison (Malcolm Scully, "Colleges Toughen Requirements That Students Show Basic Skills," Chronicle, April 18, 1977). It seems clear that assessment is going to become a significant part of the usual procedure for both secondary schools and higher education. Students who fail those tests are going to look backwards crossly at their earlier preparation.

The past was prologue to this present. And we know, those of us who teach freshman composition, that our students are in fact diminished from that past. Let me talk about "Where we are" from the perspective of what I see in my own English classes, and of the recent experience of my department with job applications. Of the hundreds and hundreds of applications that we have read during the past few years, only a handful show any specific preparation to be teachers of reading and writing. Very few more have taken a

sufficient range of graduate-level courses to be educated enough to teach introductory literature courses. What has been happening in the graduate schools, we must ask? The message we read, imperfectly, perhaps, from the transcripts, is that fewer and fewer have been prepared to teach less and less. And so we add remedial reading and writing specialists to our ancillary staff, cordoned off from us respectable faculty folk.

But us respectable scholars are being dogged by the ghost of responsibilities past, by our neglected duty to teach reading and writing. It could be argued that those trained to be literary scholars in our graduate school years had best be left to the practice of what they are most comfortable doing. There are plenty of young aspirants to senior status in the universities who would willingly do the donkey work. I think I am not exaggerating when I say that most college English faculty prefer "to teach otherwise" than composition. But there is an enlarging number of senior faculty who are now ready to join the ranks of the scholar-teachers, of the Daniel Faders and Paul Olsons and Edward Corbetts. Attendance is rising at the Modern Language Association Annual Conference sessions on composition.

And what of our students? Of the five hundred or so who enter Carleton each Fall (God willing), no more than a dozen are exempted from our writing requirement. In the past, petitioners for exemption clamored at the door of the department chairman, offering

high verbal SAT's as proof of their skill. But we had learned from experience that high SAT's do not necessarily prophesy good writing.

Others were disappointed when their Advanced Placement composition exam did not get them out of the requirement. They were scarcely appeased with the explanation that the department regularly reads all such exams, whatever the score, and generally agrees with only a third of the College Board readers' rankings. Each fall this has resulted in a stormy protest from our Admissions Officer, himself the target of complaints from Advanced Placement teachers around the state.

But, lately, students who have been offered exemption have begun to turn it down. They come like lambs to the slaughter, carrying their handbooks. And there is an increase in the number of students who, having taken the required course, are not given the imprimatur at first try, and must therefore enroll again as sophomores, juniors, and occasionally even as seniors. And do so without whining.

When we dare to crash through the thicket of alarming statistics to the other side of candor, we must acknowledge to ourselves that all we can do in one ten-week course, with fifteen students, a dozen papers, four conferences for each, is to create the awareness of basic principles necessary for real learning to begin. And then they are gone from us, unleashed on hapless colleagues in other departments.

If we were as convinced as I wish we could be that all faculty in every discipline cared about good writing, and practiced it themselves, then we'd worry more about this unleashing on the one hand -- and less on the other. I suspect that my College is not alone in engendering examples of official prose like the following:

> It seems appropriate to provide a forum for soliciting comments which can be attended by all major constituents and yet not in such numbers as to prove to be unwieldy. Therefore, meetings have been scheduled, and it is hoped that all concerned have an opportunity to have their input represented. These meetings are intended to be parallel sessions which would solicit comments and would also engage in any dialogue thought to be germane in restructuring procedures in the future.

When official pronouncements such as these are published, how can we complain about the simple blunders of the innocent!

Had we adequate staff, we would do what we have known for some time we should be doing, namely requiring students to take writing courses for a year or more, and, more horrible even than that, demanding that they write decent prose in psychology courses and philosophy courses and biology courses as well as in English courses.

When I cast back to my earliest experiences teaching college freshmen, I have to ask what to make of our diminished students today. For whatever reasons, their working vocabulary is no better than that of Gua, the talking chimpanzee. For the last ten years, I've asked my students to compile lists of unrecognized words met with in

their reading, unrecognized words like: abject, expedient, vindicate, spatial, venerate, chary, sultry, insular, solicitude, avers, misled, homogeneous, oblique. To see the freshman faces light up in 1977 at the prospect of regular vocabulary drill is to recognize one of the rewards we teachers have reaped by surviving the Sixties.

For whatever reasons, the only cultural allusions that are safe to make nowadays are to T.V. programs. Over the years, I have asked my freshmen to list five or six of the books they read and were familiar with before college. Silently, I have watched Silas Marner being replaced by Great Expectations being replaced by Catcher in the Rye, being replaced by nothing in common at all any more. Biblical allusions, classical allusions, historical references -- all miss their mark. Allusions to Caesar salad dressing may be recognized -- and to Marathon Man, but not much else. Even children's classics are slipping away. A survey of the thirty-five students in a Children's Literature course last winter turned up only five who had read Alice in Wonderland, three Wind in the Willows, and as few Charlotte's Web, though I have no doubt that the recent television cartoon will produce a surge in the latter's popularity.

For whatever reasons, we cannot use common grammatical terms for the parts of sentences anymore. In order to recommend changes in sentence structure we negotiate in baby-talk. "You have a dangling

modifier here -- it has to refer to a subject." "What's a modifier?" "What's a subject?" "Your pronoun doesn't agree with its antecedent." "What's a pronoun, an antecedent, agreement"? There was a time when I feared that the rising tide of high school students trained by Paul Roberts in transformational grammar would meet the ebb-tide of college faculty still saluting James Sledd -- and the result would be Babel. Groundless alarm. The tides have met, and the result is silence.

What I see then are this generation's unlettered students panting after learning, eager to develop infant skills, rendered breathless by their enthusiasm for handbook drills about the parts of speech, filling the corridors outside the remedial reading office, nagging student rhetoric assistants for extra conference time, signing up for advanced rhetoric instead of spring softball. "The hungry sheep look up and are not fed."

For the sake of the clerk of Oxenford, let's not muff it again. When we march resolutely back to the basics, let us know what we are marching to, and let us all march to the same drummer.

The tattoo that drummer is sounding is not a retreat but a summons to accept our destiny as teachers of reading and writing. Not in the narrow and mechanistic way that "Back to the Basics" would have us practice, but in the more enlightened way that we have been developing for the last dozen years or so -- acknowledging

that our prevailing ideal is not to make a great body of grammatical pedants or literary writers, but to enable students to think their thoughts into the best expression possible, to record their feelings with accuracy and honesty, and to feel the importance of putting everything into good form (this is a quotation from Rollo Brown's book, by the way).

How in the world did we ever get into the fix we are in, abused by parents, journalists, and each other?

The teaching profession has in its charge during their most impressionable years the entire citizenry of this country. How is it that we have amongst them so few advocates and friends! If we have known for decades that we must teach reading and writing coordinately, carefully, continuously, closely, how is it that the conditions of our employment interfere even more now with the proper practice of our profession? How many years has it been since the NCTE published its standard course load for high school English teachers: four sections with twenty-five students each? And how many School Boards have been willing to honor this standard? Why have we not been able to plead our case more successfully, all of us experts in the language arts?

Only a crisis allows us to effect change, it seems, and the pressures of crisis generally lead to the stupidest excesses of revisionism. Unless we stand guard, those old workbooks are going to come out of the closet; whole units of grammar teaching, once again

divorced from any relevance to writing or speaking, will be mandated. Required freshman composition courses will reappear in college catalogues, with droves of overworked and underprepared T.A.'s assigned to teach them.

And if we are going to administer proficiency tests, how are we going to prepare our students to take those tests? This is the question of: Where are the language arts going? Well, let us acknowledge that "Students are going to be tested," and then let us frankly recognize that now we are on our mettle to direct the revival of the English teacher's arts. If we don't, others will do it, and do it in a less than delicate way.

In an essay in Salmagundi, George Steiner observes that

> If we are serious about our business, we shall have to teach reading. We shall have to teach it from the humblest level of rectitude, the parsing of a sentence, the grammatical diagnoses of a proposition, the scanning of a line of verse, through its many layers of performative means and referential assumptions, all the way to [the] ideal of complete collaboration between writer and reader....

We can be no less meticulous in the teaching of writing. Such teaching does not require any special mystical initiation by teacher and student. It must begin early, as it did for the literate French boy about whom Rollo Brown so lovingly wrote, who learned to write by writing, and reading, and writing, and revising and revising. (He was, of course, laboring in an age that expected its students to work.) Only elementary school teachers who have a

solid grounding in the theory and practice of the teaching of composition will be able to conduct the sort of careful, structured education in the art of language, in the art of composition both written and spoken, that every child must enter into at the earliest stage of innocent receptivity. Freedom and discipline was the theme of the Sixties. Unfortunately for today's condition of literacy, only the first part has been honored.

We are learning more about what we should do. The latest and most useful text on the subject of basic literacy is one just published, written by Mina Shaughnessy, entitled Errors and Expectations. In this book, which is the fruit of years of work with students in the open admissions program at C.U.N.Y., we find for the first time a serious attempt to organize and explain the kinds of errors that students with undeveloped powers of self-expression commonly commit.

There are enough texts now available for the profession to begin to exercise its own right to teach what it knows it must teach in the way in which it knows it must teach.

We have learned from our own experience that the first step in the teaching of composition is to establish common criteria of judgment, to come to some agreement about the kinds of errors to eradicate and the methods of doing this; and the second step is for us who teach composition to compose ourselves, and to subject our own

writing to the editorial opinion of our colleagues.

We've got to be willing to take the responsibility for teaching our students ourselves on the level at which we find them. We've got to agree to work with each other on all levels, elementary and secondary schools and colleges, to establish goals, methods, content, and sequence. Unless we are willing to practice what we preach -- first he wrought and afterward he taught -- politics will be the teacher.

A model for the kind of cooperation that should lie in the future for practitioners of the language arts is provided by the Bay Area Writing Project, a writing improvement program launched at the University of California at Berkeley four years ago. As it was originally designed, the program offered intensive summer writing clinics on the Berkeley campus for composition teachers from elementary schools, high schools, and colleges in the surrounding area. That project is now about to expand throughout California and to other centers in the country.

We, in Minnesota, would do well to think actively about establishing a cooperative program of our own. It is true that we have been doing this in a sporadic way for the last fifteen years or so, but the results have not been as impressive as they ought to be. Why should we not join together in summer programs and in

in-service programs in which there is a genuine sharing between public school teachers and post-secondary school faculty?

If the language arts are to be rescued from the moribund condition in which they are said to be, if we are to claim that the report of their death has been greatly exaggerated, then we must join together.

Jean Stafford concluded her elegy over the English language by remarking that if H.W. Fowler, whose Modern English Usage is the most dazzling record of a temper tantrum ever written, were alive today, he would die.

Very well, then, let us acknowledge that the times are indeed out of joint. And then let us agree that it will be exhilerating to be amongst those who can try to set them right. I think none of us can be under any illusion about the difficulty that lies in wait for the high school teacher who receives students from the elementary school who have not got in the habit of careful expression, who have no zest for the creative use of language, who have not developed the attention span to sit through anything moving at a slower pace than Starsky and Hutch. To receive such students in classes of thirty or more is bound to cause a loss of teacherly joy. For college faculty to receive students whose impoverished vocabulary makes them painfully inarticulate, and whose syntactical insecurities render their inarticulacies obscure, is for those faculties to

round upon their colleagues in the secondary schools and accuse them of abdicating their responsibility to teach English in favor of teaching collage-making. Recriminations are bad for the spirit.

I turn now for my concluding epigraph from the world of ornithology to the world of botany. "Out of this nettle, recrimination, let us pluck this flower, cooperation." The happiest outcome of this Conference will be pledges made by us all, from college to elementary school, to join together to go forward to the Basics of our own educated choice.

DREAMS OF DUCKS

Stephen Dunning
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan

1
This dream recurs, ducks caught
by an instant freeze
webbed feet firm in the ice
bodies twisted side to side
heads jerking. The marsh grasses
rice, cattails; cracks and echoes
of shotguns far away
hunters invisible in blinds
drunks before sunrise, voices
staggering across the still silver
of Lake Mille Lacs. The dream
tries to divert me
from ducks twisting
side to side, father and me
stiff in our boats, decoys
bobbing and nodding, alive
in the quiet surface of Mille Lacs
splinters of daylight
coming through the blind
our feet firm in the ice

2
I awake to water so clear
stones, twigs, grains of sand
the grasses and the water ferns
are focused by early light.
Smells at the ends
of deep breaths, snow
coming out way, and soon
melted, bubbling parafin
for dipping the birds.

Father posed me in front
birds on a stringer, him behind
holding the gun, smiling down
hand on my shoulder:
Step back so you get the birds
and Mother did, moving the Brownie
up and down; side to side
finding the heap of blue-wing teal
the canvasback shot by mistake
the mallards: a weight of ducks
hung on the stringer
bead-eyed birds, side to side
hanging from my belt.

3
We fly patterns like birdshot
spatters of us
v's and vague arrow heads
through the silver sky
patterns skewed to the sun
to the warmth in the East
handfuls of us
loose in the grey-silver dawn
beating our wings toward sloughs
lush with grass and seed
early birds flying south
running at life
to grass and to seed

the surprise weight
brushing through feathers
biting through skin
letting my warmth
leak into dawn
the weight eating
into my heart
breaking my beat

me caving in
legs pulled tight, wings
stretching out for air to hold
me folding, my whole self
tight for falling
for arcing down
away from friends
me pulled by the force
deeper than flight
my memory braces
to hit the water
ready now
the weight in my heart

SUCCESS

Patricia M. Fergus
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minnesota

The re- re-
Vision thuds
Grandly on the desk,
Gleaming in its
Black and whiteness

He grins, pivots,
Struts six steps,
Pivots again and
Croaks gloriously,
I did it!

Determined to enroll their children in a new "back-to-basics" educational program recently adopted by their school district, several hundred parents spent a cold January night in sleeping bags outside the Diablo Vista Elementary School in Pleasant Hills, California. By the time registration was completed the next morning, 1056 students had signed up for 400 seats in what is to be called "Academics Plus," a program that will stress the "three R's" and include stricter discipline, frequent grading, more parental involvement, and a dress code. Council-Grams, May, 1977, p. 12

IS COMPOSITION DECOMPOSING?

Edward P.J. Corbett
Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

My title poses the question, "Is composition decomposing?" If composition is taken to mean "student writing" and decomposing to mean "deteriorating," many of you would respond to that question with a resounding "Yes." In the public media over the last year and a half, there has been ample testimony from various sources that would seem to confirm your perception of the situation. Reports of declining verbal scores on the SAT and the ACT standardized tests have alarmed parents and teachers in much the same way that reports of precipitous drops in the Dow Jones average panic the financial community. The report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress that the composition skills of 9-year-olds were holding steady was small comfort for the accompanying report that those same skills had declined noticeably among 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds. Most alarming of all, perhaps, were the reports that many of the prestigious colleges and universities were instituting or reviving courses in remedial English. Has there been a local newspaper anywhere in the country that has not carried syndicated stories about the national decline in writing skills or depressing reports about the decline of those skills in the local schools? Yes, indeed, student writing seemed to be going to hell in a

basket. And the prophets of doom issued their usual call for repentance and reform.

But the lamenting about the sad state of student writing has not been universal. Richard Ohmann, editor of College English and the author of a recent book, English in America: a Radical View of the Profession (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), declared that the alleged decline in writing skills was a fiction, and maybe a hoax, visited upon us by the mass media (Chronicle of Higher Education, October 25, 1976). In an article in the Spectator (April, 1976), a University of Iowa Alumni journal, Richard Lloyd-Jones, the current Chairman of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, examined Newsweek's claim that Johnnie couldn't write and showed how vague and misleading that claim is. I would not add my own voice to the chorus of laments. After more than a quarter of a century of reading student papers, I have found that the percentages of good writers, of competent but dull writers, and of barely literate writers have remained remarkably steady. If the numbers of inept writers have increased, you must remember that until quite recently, the school population was increasing all up and down the line. If one examines the history of education, one finds that there has been no period when some teacher or employer has not fulminated about the disastrous decline in literacy among young people. It would seem -- to paraphrase the Biblical text --

that bad writers we will always have amongst us.

But here I am exposing my own vision of the situation, and I have been susceptible to enough myopia in the past not to have any confidence that my view of the situation is a 20-20 perception. We would do well, I think, to agree not to debate the matter. What is encouraging to me about all the hue and cry is that composition is now getting the attention, among parents, teachers, administrators, and legislators, that it has not enjoyed for a long time, if ever. Once considered the stepchild of the English department, the teaching of composition has now come to be regarded as necessary, important, and respectable. And teachers of composition are beginning to come out of the closet. Teachers of composition have always performed a valuable service for their schools and for their students, but now that service is being recognized and rewarded. We all know about the depressed state of the teachers' market, but if there are any job openings at all, they are likely to be for experienced or trained teachers of reading and writing.

The irony is that this rehabilitation of the fortunes of the writing teacher has occurred just at the time of general retrenchment in the schools. The student population is declining, budgets are being cut, and staffs are being reduced. The public wants us to get back to teaching the basics -- whatever they are -- but as a result of its own struggle with the inflationary cost of living

the public is not willing or able to appropriate the funds necessary to finance the back-to-the-basics movement. If teachers have not been asked to teach more classes, they have often been expected to teach more students in each of their classes. It was once considered unreasonable to expect a teacher with a classload of 175 students to assign a theme a week; it is criminal to expect a teacher to read 200 or more themes a week. Teachers have a right to demand that taxpayers put their money where their priorities are.

There is another alarming note in the current hubbub about composition: the movement to establish minimum-competency standards in reading, writing, and arithmetic. At the close of 1976, seven states (California, Colorado, Florida, Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, and Washington) had enacted legislation mandating the establishment of minimum standards, and another nine states (Arizona, Georgia, Delaware, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, Oregon, and Vermont) were contemplating such legislation. On the face of it, minimal standards of achievement seemed to be a reasonable expectation, especially since the standards established in some states were so minimally minimal -- for instance, high-school graduates are expected to be reading and writing at no less than the ninth-grade level.

But a closer look at the implications and consequences of

minimal standards raises some ominous specters. The March 1977 issue of the NCTE Council-Grams reports the reactions of some educators to the establishment of minimum-competency standards. I will reproduce just two items from that issue of Council-Grams (pp.11-12):

> In a statement sent to all state chief school officers, curriculum leaders from 36 of the nation's largest cities have called for a slowdown on legislatively mandated minimal-competency standards. The statement, which also expresses concern about "any limited narrow view of the basics," was adopted at a conference of the Association for the Supervision and Curriculum Development. The trend toward standards of minimal competency could create, say the curriculum leaders, an "elitist society through arbitrary utilization of performance as a screening device."
>
> In an article on minimum-competency tests, Edward B. Fiske, education writer for the New York Times [January 5, 1977], cites a number of problems, the first being the difficulty of agreeing on what is "basic" in education and what an appropriate level of "minimum competency" is....Furthermore, it is often difficult to test minimal competency even when individuals know what they are looking for. Still another problem is what to do with students who do not pass. Mr. Fiske points out that Owen Kiernan, executive secretary of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, has warned that it is "naive" to assume that the very existence of a new requirement will motivate all students to meet it. "Once you demonstrate that Mary Smith needs more work, then this will cost money," Mr. Kiernan said. "And we are imposing these new tests just when retrenchment is the watchword."

What a second look at slogans like "back to the basics" and minimum competency standards" reveals is that simple pieties often conceal devilish over-simplifications.

But our suspicion of slogans should not deter us from doing what we can to help students improve their writing. We can speak

of improving student writing without necessarily conceding that it is bad. I have never heard any professional writer, however esteemed, proclaim that his or her writing could not stand improvement. The adjective good, after all, still has a comparative degree. One of our jobs as teachers is to make better those skills that are merely good -- and, of course, to inculcate skills where they do not exist.

If the word composition in my title is taken to mean "knowledge about composition," I think we would have to give a resounding "No" to the question, "Is our knowledge about composition deteriorating?" We have come a long way since 1963, when Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer published, in the NCTE monograph Research in Written Composition, their gloomy assessment of the state of the art. For one thing, between 1965 and 1970, we had five years of NDEA summer institutes, in which thousands of secondary teachers of English got their first exposure to theories of rhetoric and the teaching of composition. We have had innovative textbooks by authors like James Moffett, Ken Macrorie, James Miller, Peter Elbow, Donald Hall, and Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike. From English teachers, we have had illuminating theoretical books about the art of composition like Francis Christensen's Notes Toward a New Rhetoric (1967), James Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse (1971), James Moffett's Teaching the Universe

of Discourse (1968), and Frank D'Angelo's A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric (1975). A great many of our recent insights into the mysteries of the composing process have come from people outside the discipline of English, people like Jerome Bruner, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Michael Polanyi, and Thomas Kuhn. To name these contributors to the advancement of our knowledge of the art and the teaching of composition is to slight the dozens and dozens of dedicated teachers of composition, men and women, who in convention panels, journal articles, and in-service training sessions have cast a light on some small pocket of the formerly darkened continent of composition. There is still a great deal that we do not know about the process of composing, but we are infinitely better equipped today to help our students improve their writing skills than we were even ten years ago. If anybody needed to be convinced that there now exists a vast and respectable body of literature on composition, he or she would have only to look at Gary Tate's collection, Teaching Compsition: 10 Bibliographical Essays (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University, 1976).

I would like now to talk, in a little more detail, about three fairly recent works, which have added immeasurably to our knowledge about the difficulty of composing written discourse and which are likely to be recommended, if not required, texts in most future courses

designed to train teachers of composition. If you are beyond the stage of taking any more college courses, you can, if you are so disposed, consult these texts on your own.

The first of these texts is Janet Emig's The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971). One wonders why no English teacher, before Janet Emig conducted her study, had resorted to the case-study method to investigate the composing processes of students. It seems now to be an obvious method of gathering valuable information about processes that have baffled us for a long time. But maybe English teachers instinctively shy away from this method because it smacks of the empirical ways of sociologists -- and we don't have no truck with them kind of people. What we have done in the past is gather information from practiced writers -- mainly poets, dramatists, and fiction writers -- about how they went about composing their works. But we got surprisingly little useful information from them, even from such a self-conscious and introspective writer as Henry James. Even the Paris Review interviews were a disappointment. From those writers, we got a lot of pleasant chit-chat about work-habits and the agonies of revision but no real insights into what went on in their brain-pans when they were engaged in the act of writing. Where multiple drafts of a published text were available,

we have compared the successive versions and speculated about why the author made the changes. But even there, we were observing the surface features of a product and not the cognitive and affective processes of composition. And, of course, all these years we have had composition textbooks which prescribed the steps that a writer should go through in writing a piece of discourse. The presumption in many of those texts was that the same monolithic method would work for everyone.

In a serendipitous moment, it occurred to Janet Emig to ask a group of students what they did when they had to write a paper. So she engaged eight seniors in a Chicago high school and asked them to try to externalize for her their writing processes. She had them fill out questionnaires, she tape-recorded conversations with them, she had them keep logs on their writing activities, she analyzed various drafts of their writing, and she even had one of her subjects talk into a tape-recorder while she was engaged in the act of writing. There were lots of surprises in what the students revealed about their writing habits, not the least of which was that even the fairly good writers seldom followed the prudential advice given out by textbooks and teachers. The writing process for many of the students was largely a matter of trial-and-error, of stop-and-go, of a recursive ratner than a straight linear

movement -- and always a process attended by uncertainties and frustrations. While we might wish that Janet Emig had gathered testimony from a larger sampling of students, we can all gain something useful for our teaching of composition from the testimony she did gather.

The second book, The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18 by James Britton and others (London: Macmillan Education, 1975), is just now coming to the attention of American teachers of composition, and because it has not yet been published in an American edition, it is a hard book to come by. At the recent CCCC convention in Kansas City, an entire panel was devoted to a discussion of this book and its implications for teachers of writing. The book represents a report of a study conducted at the University of London Institute of Education from 1966 to 1971, under the direction of James Britton, of over 2100 papers written by over 500 students between the ages of 11 and 18 from 85 different classes at 65 different schools.

I call your attention to the plural noun in the title of the book, abilities. It is noteworthy that the researchers conceived of their task as an investigation, not of a writing ability but of a complex of writing abilities. They viewed the development of students' writing abilities as a "process of differentiation" -- that is, as the development of the students' abilities to be able to handle an

increasing variety and sophistication of writing tasks. To put some limits on their study of student writing, the researchers decided to concentrate on just two of the abilities that students needed to develop -- their sense of audience and their sense of the functions of various writing tasks. Dissatisfied with the traditional categories of audience and function, they devised their own categories. They divided audience into the four main categories of self, teacher, wider known audience, and wider unknown audience, and then divided the latter three of these into more specific audiences, so that they ended up with ten categories of audience. Dissatisfied with such traditional classifications as narration, exposition, argumentation, and description, they devised their own schema of three main function categories, which in turn were subdivided into more specific modes of discourse. The three main categories were (1) transactional ("Language to get things done, i.e., it is concerned with an end outside itself. It is the kind of writing that informs, persuades, and instructs"); (2) expressive (Language close to the self, revealing the speaker [or writer], verbalizing his consciousness, displaying his close relationship with the reader. Relatively unstructured"); (3) poetic ("A verbal construct, a patterned verbalization of the writer's feelings and ideas. This category would include such writings as a poem, a short

story, a play, a shaped autobiographic episode"). In studying the scripts for evidence of the students' developing abilities to deal with different audiences and difference functions, the researchers also observed what influences were exerted on the writings as the students assumed either the role of participant or the role of spectator in the communication act.

I don't want to burden you with even a summary of the findings of this fascinating study. This is a case where you must read the book to realize the fruits of it. But I will say that in addition to the revelations it presents about student writing, this book would be important simply as an example of the kind of inductive study of a substantial corpus of student writing that until recent years has not been done by teachers and theorists of composition. Like Janet Emig's case-study project, this study turned up a lot of surprises about student writing and undermined a lot of myths about adolescent writing.

Busy teachers can be excused for not engaging in empirical studies of this sort: most of them do not have the time, the energy, the resources, or the money to engage in such studies. But some of us need to do this kind of hardnosed, time-consuming research, either as a dissertation project or as a research project financed by some funding agency. Until we get more studies of this sort, we are not likely to crack the mystery of the composing process, and we are destined to continue to muddle through the teaching of composition.

I have reserved the best of these books for last, Mina F. Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). I call it the "best" because for teachers of writing it is the most illuminating and practical of the three books. In the advertising brochures for this book, I have already been quoted as saying that "this will be a basic book on basic writing for many years to come." But while I am in the blurb-writing mood, I might go further than that claim and say that this is the best book on the teaching of writing to be published in this century. You probably should view my superlative with caution, but I do not see how any serious teacher of composition can afford to ignore this book. Before reading this book, I prided myself on being an experienced, if not a particularly effective, teacher of writing; after reading the book, I realized that I am a bumbling neophyte at the game. That humbling realization could be the beginning of wisdom for me.

Mina Shaughnessy set herself the task of analyzing over 4000 freshman themes written by some of the thousands of disadvantaged students who suddenly flooded into the CUNY system of schools in 1970 when that system announced its policy of open-admissions. She does three things in the book: (1) she analyzes and classifies the kinds of difficulties that these students exhibit in their written work;

(2) she explores the reasons or causes of those difficulties; (3) she suggests exercises to help students overcome those difficulties. The titles of the six central chapters of the book reveal the rock-bottom and practical level on which she operated: Handwriting and Punctuation, Syntax, Common Errors, Spelling, Vocabulary, and Beyond the Sentence.

The remedial program that Mina Shaughnessy and her colleagues devised has had a remarkable record of salvaging many of these severely handicapped students, and the program has become a model for other schools across the country that were setting up writing clinics. The success of that program is due largely to the attitude of the teachers who worked in the program under Mina Shaughnessy's supervision. They did not throw up their hands in disgust and despair; instead they approached the formidable task with a disposition of genuine concern and sympathy. That attitude is manifested in these words from Professor Shaughnessy's introductory chapter:

> Basic Writing students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes. These they make aplenty and for such a variety of reasons that the inexperienced teacher is almost certain to see nothing but the chaos of error when he first encounters their papers. Yet a closer look will reveal very little that is random or "illogical" in what they have written.

The salutary perception here was that these students, unlike those from better school systems or better home environments, were virtual beginners at the craft of writing, and accordingly they had to be met at ground-zero and moved slowly and patiently to higher ground. Mina Shaughnessy's peculiar genius was that she was able to perceive why they were making the mistakes they were making, and once she perceived that the reason for the errors was not stupidity or indifference but rather unfamiliarity or inexperience with a strange dialect, she was able to devise fruitful exercises to acquaint them with the conventions of this academic dialect. This book represents the triumph of sympathy, patience, and acumen over hostility, bewilderment, and chaos.

Because of the growing body of literature on the teaching of composition, present and future teachers of English will not have to learn this craft through trial and error, as I and hundreds of other teachers of my generation had to do. About ten years ago, NCTE conducted a survey among English teachers of all levels to discover what they considered to be the most serious deficiencies in their university training. Leading the list of deficiencies, by a wide margin, was the failure of English departments to provide them with adequate training in the teaching of composition, which for many of them constituted the major portion of their teaching load. That situation is beginning to change now. In response to

the current public outcry about writing, to the demands of students for more writing courses, and to the realization among graduate students that there are jobs available for properly trained teachers of composition, more and more English departments all over the country are beginning to offer courses in rhetoric and the teaching of composition. I know of at least four English departments that have instituted programs leading to M.A. and Ph. D. degrees in rhetoric (University of Southern California, University of Iowa, University of Tulsa, and a confederation of universities in Texas involving Texas Woman's University, North Texas State, and East Texas State), and I have heard recently of at least three more English departments that are planning such degree programs. From such programs will come not only formally trained teachers of composition, who will be snapped up as quickly as they can be produced, but future directors of writing programs and remedial clinics and teachers of prospective teachers of composition.

Sixteen years ago, NCTE published the monograph entitled The National Interest and the Teaching of English, in which the province of English was defined as consisting of language, literature, and composition. It is a wonder that it has taken many English departments that long to get around to offering formal training

for the teachers of the one course that, on the college level especially, absorbed the major portion of the departments' human and fiscal resources.

To answer my own question, I would say that far from decomposing, composition is presently recomposing. With the decline in the student population and with the concomitant decline of enrollment in our literature courses, what is likely to keep us in business during the next decade is the composition course. At my own university, the fastest-growing courses -- in fact the only growing courses -- are the writing courses, especially the courses in Technical Writing. Very shortly -- if it has not already happened -- all members of the staff of English departments everywhere will have to eke out their teaching load by taking on one or more writing courses. I have mixed feelings about that impending situation. On the face of it, the return to the writing class of all those experienced teachers, who during the boom years taught neat things like Milton and American Literature and Contemporary Fiction, would seem to be a consummation devoutly to be wished. But I wonder. Those teachers who thought they had once and for all escaped from the drudgery of the composition class are likely to be malcontent when they are dragooned back into it. Many of them are more oblivious of the new techniques of teaching

composition than some of the young teachers who are emerging from graduate schools now. And the Geritol set are likely to be less patient with the ineptitudes of student writers than they were in their greener years. It won't be an unadulterated gain to have all those veteran stars back in the composition classroom.

If the teaching of composition is to flourish in the schools, we teachers will have to compose ourselves. As Robert Heilman said near the eve of his retirement as chairman of the English department at the University of Washington in 1970,

> What I have seen symbolized in the composition process is the whole range of behavior implied in composing -- bringing together, giving form to, ordering, compromising with difficulties both inner and outer, with self and with others: peace-making. That composite of implicit values is one that I would be sorry to see fall apart. ("Except He Come to Composition," College Composition and Communication, 21 (October, 1970), 230-238.)

As Heilman went on to say, "Many of us have experienced the sense of being put together by the process of putting together. We have composed, and in a sense we are composed." We would all be better teachers of composition if we wrote more ourselves. Did you ever stop to think that unlike the music teacher or the tennis coach, we teachers of composition rarely if ever perform for our students? Writing, of course, is a private act. But if we teachers cannot put ourselves on public display in the act of writing, we can at least edify our students by occasionally

displaying the products of our private scribbling. How many of us would have the fortitude to do what Jim Corder did recently? At the beginning of a new semester, he promised his students that he would write all nine of the essays that he was going to assign during the term. What he learned from the experience was not only that many of his assignments were inane or unmanageable but that "I often did precisely what I urged my students not to do: I hurried; I waited until the last moment, because that was the only moment there was; I accepted unavailable subjects that came easily to mind; I wrote some 'nice' essays and some 'acceptable' essays; once or twice I turned in rough drafts as if they were finished papers" ("What I Learned at School," College Composition and Communication, 26 (December, 1975), 330-334).

What would also help to compose us would be to observe our students in the act of composition. The next time you give an essay examination or an in-class theme, instead of reading a book or grading a set of papers, spend the hour observing your students in the act of writing. You will learn a lot about the process of composition from watching them writhe in the toils of composition. You will see them chew their pens, dashing off a sentence and then scratching it out, then a sudden run of consecutive sentences, followed by a bemused smile as they pause to reread what they have written...then a hesitant groping toward the darkness that lies ahead.

Last Christmas, I was given a five-string banjo. I decided that if I was ever to become an Earl Scruggs in the years that remained to me, I had better get at it. Well, I have never felt so cloddish in all my life as I did when I started to finger and pick that joyful instrument. Night after night, I holed up in my bedroom because I could not bear the humiliation of having someone see my contortions as I tried to finger the chords with my left hand and hear the stuttering cacophony that issued from the strings as I strummed them. I have made some progress since Christmas Eve, but I am still not ready to give a public performance and won't be ready for many months. But what this experience has done for me as a teacher is make me realize the bewilderment and frustration my students feel when they come to my composition class as rank beginners. Everything about the act of writing must seem impossible for those beginning students. It is no wonder that they often despair. And all these years, I have really not been aware of how bewildered and frustrated they felt when they faced a blank sheet of paper. Mina Shaughnessy had that epiphany very early in her dealings with her students. If we succeed in bringing ourselves to "composition," we can compose our students and help them compose their thoughts for transmittal to others. And then we will be helping to prevent the decomposition of composition.

Some books and articles mentioned or discussed in the talk:

Janet Emig, The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971).
James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen, The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18 (London: Macmillan Education, 1975).
Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
Gary Tate, ed., Teaching Composition: 10 Bibliographical Essays (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1976).
Robert Heilman, "Except He Come to Composition," College Composition 21(October, 1970), 230-238.
Jim W. Corder, "What I Learned at School," College Composition and Communication, 26 (December, 1975), 330-334.

Some innovative writing texts:

James Moffett and Betty Jane Wagner, Student-Centered Language Arts, K-13, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).
Ken Macrorie, Telling Writing, 2nd ed. (Rochelle, NJ: Hayden Book Co., 1976) a college freshman text; Writing To Be Read (Hayden, 1968), a high school text; Uptaught (Hayden, 1970), an entertaining exposition of Macrorie's philosophy of teaching composition.
James Miller, Word, Self, Reality: The Rhetoric of Imagination (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972).
Peter Elbow, Writing without Teachers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
Donald Hall, Writing Well, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA:Little, Brown, 1976).
Richard Young, Alton Becker, Kenneth Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1970).

Some important theoretical books on rhetoric and composition:

Francis Christensen, Notes Toward a New Rhetoric (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).
James Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).
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Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1958).
Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
Herbert Ginsburg and Sylvia Opper, Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development: an Introduction (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

Writing Without Teachers by Peter Elbow (Oxford University Press, 1973) 196 pages.

Reviewed by Patricia M. Fergus
Director, Writing Center
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

Although the title suggests that the author is proclaiming teachers persona non grata, he is not. Peter Elbow admits that good writing teachers exist, but that "they are exceedingly rare," and whatever they do to be good they should continue doing. But he believes that traditional approaches to writing are not meeting student needs.

In Writing Without Teachers he tries to deny a common assumption that there is a necessary connection between learning and teaching: "It is possible to be a student and not have a teacher." He readily succeeds because the premise is true. He also succeeds in two other attempts: to help readers generate words better, "more

freely, lucidly and powerfully," and to help them judge what in their own writing to retain and what to reject.

What makes this book credible is the author's candor. The authority on which he bases his beliefs and premises is his own "long-standing difficulty in writing," and his years as a frustrated teacher of writing. He acknowledges basing many universal generalizations on a sample of one, but all he asks is that readers try the approach and judge it, building their own theory of progression and success. What makes the book interesting are his concrete suggestions, any or all of which can be applied to writing classes, and his style: straightforward, sometimes earthy prose, sprinkled liberally with apt and illuminating figures of speech.
Recognizing that writing in any form can be, and usually is, an arduous task, Elbow has as his goal the readers' gaining of control over words. He begins with a discussion of free writing exercises, proceeds to the writing process, and climaxes with concrete do's and don't's for writing classes without teachers.

His shattering of the conventional two-step concept of writing: "First you figure out your meaning, then you put it into language," may disturb, even shock the tradition-minded. But the full impact of what he is saying certainly suggests that an approach capable of producing words on otherwise blank sheets of paper must have merit.

Elbow presents a strong case for the unorthodox. Germane to his approach is this simple belief: You must produce before you can edit. Considering the definitions of edit -- to take out, to prepare a manuscript for presentation or publication -- the truth of the statement seems only too obvious. And what does he advocate for production? Free writing-- those short, usually five-to-ten-minute exercises in which the writer's pen moves freely across the paper. Some will say that much of what is produced is "garbage," and Elbow agrees, but (and it is a big but) there may be a word, a phrase buried in that mound of garbage that will spark an idea.

The author describes the writing process metaphorically as "growing" and "cooking." In growing, the writer starts writing and keeps on writing, going through periods of disorientation and chaos, but eventually realizing an emerging center of gravity. Then comes the mop-up or editing stage. In cooking, the writer expe-riences interaction with words and ideas, modes, metaphors, with symbols on paper, and with other people. Although this stage sounds like a collossal undertaking, it need not be. Take the interaction with ideas, for example -- what Elbow encourages is conflicts or contradictions in the writer's thinking, a process we are often taught to avoid or naturally avoid because it is easier. Or take the interaction with modes: let the writing fall into poetry,

or fiction, and back to prose, or from first person to third, each way contributing to the illumination of ideas, the subject itself, or the writer's voice.

In promoting the teacherless class, Elbow bases its viability on the fact that writing as a transaction with oneself is a lonely and frustrating business and that a writer must have interaction with others. This interaction may not eliminate all the loneliness and frustration, but it can help the writer see and experience the penned words through others. The key here is "others" -- not just a teacher who may be a better reader but who may not "listen" and be "genuinely affected" by the writer's words. Whether these suppositions are always correct is unimportant; a writer, particularly a novice, does need interaction with someone else.

To assist writers in starting teacherless classes, Elbow explores such topics as ingredients of a good class, motivation, down to business, patience and understanding, with do's and don't's for the best results of this kind of endeavor: "learning for all and criticism for none."

Lest one deduce that Elbow is simply wool-gathering, be assured he is not. His approach, although unorthodox alongside the traditional, is not that fanciful. Though it may not work for

everyone, it has special merit for those spending endless hours heads bowed, pens motionless on blank sheets of paper.

For those young people and adults out of school (or in school for that matter) who want to work on their writing, and for teachers of composition at all levels, Writing Without Teachers should be must reading. But Elbow's forewarning should be heeded: "This book is dedicated to those people who actually use it -- not just read it."

St. Clair Street

Stephen Dunning

Those summer nights, at nine
darkness coming fast around
our house on St. Clair Street
I crept outside to feel the air
and squint the sombre sky
then flew, a secret swallow
low over rows of purpling hedge

Bird throat tight I dived
thin-eyed into night.
A perfect air would hold me
high forever.

My bird and lovely body flies
no more but gladly would it
fly again, hover over flowers
startle things of night
Gladly would it plunge and glide
swoop and soar again! escape
the wingless persons of my house

AN APPROACH TO DESIGNING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

John P. Schifsky
Scholastica College
Duluth, Minnesota

Eleanor M. Hoffman
University of Minnesota
Duluth, Minnesota

In another article which appears in this issue, Edward Corbett remarks that students in his composition classes were bewildered and frustrated: "Everything about the act of writing must seem impossible for these beginning students." But, he continues, a sympathetic and competent writing teacher can help students overcome these feelings and assist them in composing their thoughts for communication with others. One way in which the teacher can realize this goal is by making writing assignments which recognize the students' abilities as well as their maturity. These assignments should guide the student's prewriting, his writing, and his rewriting of each paper, and they should coherently guide his progress from using the writing skills he knows to learning those skills he has not yet developed.

Traditionally, our assignments have been tied to the content of the discourse or to the material to be written about rather than tied to those aspects of writing which frame and determine content: aim, audience, and the writer's role. Frequently also, we have been frustrated to discover that our students did not produce what we expected and that their writing seems to remain much the same in spite of all our efforts to improve it.

While good assignments do not replace or substitute for good teaching, good assignments reinforce good teaching and enable the student to put his learning effectively into practice. Let us now look at two sets of assignments. The assignments in the first set are not in any particular order, and each is written in an Unsatisfactory and a More satisfactory version. The assignments in the second set are sequential, their order determined by presumptions about the relative level of student maturity as well as by the assumption that students are more comfortable and facile with certain forms of discourse than with others.

> Unsatisfactory assignment: Describe your town. Use colorful words.

This assignment exploits colorful words as desirable in themselves; it establishes no need or occasion for them. The assignment wrongly assumes such words are valuable apart from any written context.

> More satisfactory assignment: Make a list of specific facts about your town. Be as neutral but as accurate as possible. Write a one-paragraph description such as might appear in a Gazetteer or Almanac or Fact Sheet. Then write two more descriptions of your town, one which makes your town appear as inviting as possible (for a tourist bulletin), and one which makes it as uninviting as possible (disappointed tourist writes letter to the editor.) You may not change the facts or give any directly untruthful data. Concentrate on word choice and the way you relate the facts to one another to achieve the positive, negative, and neutral effects. Your audience is all of us in the class.

This assignment supplies a sample form with each part of the assignment. A resourceful teacher could have numerous samples on hand for students to look at and discuss. Because the papers can be compared one with another, this version also allows the students to analyze later,when the compositions are discussed, the appropriateness of word choices and the treatment of facts. Naming the class as the audience makes this discussion more meaningful. The forms supplied subtly dictate a shift in aim from informing to persuading. Discussion of this shift should arise when appropriateness of word choice is discussed. Students then learn that words which are neutral (of low connotative value) are usually more appropriate in informational writing and words with higher connotative value more useful in persuasive writing.

This next assignment asks the student to demonstrate a working knowledge of evaluation (critical) methods taught in class.

> Unsatisfactory assignment: Explain whether or not this is a good classroom and why.

First, explanation is not what is called for; critical evaluation is what is being asked of the student. Further, audience and aim are left vague and the student is given no sense of how to proceed. There is no specific teaching involved. It's another "write a paper" assignment.

> More satisfactory assignment: You are a member of the Committee on Classroom Design. You have been asked to evaluate this classroom as a writing classroom. To do so, you will need to:
>
> 1. determine what makes a good writing classroom. Make a list of these things.
> 2. determine which items on the list are 1) necessary, 2) less necessary, 3) optional. Organize your list into the appropriate categories.
> 3. measure the classroom against the good one.
> 4. write up your report, giving criticisms, suggestions, overall evaluation.
>
> Your report is designed for those administrators in charge of modifying and equipping classrooms. They intend to act upon your report.

This assignment is more satisfactory as a followup for some teaching about evaluative methods because it provides a specific framework to guide the student in gathering and sorting his information. It also identifies aim and audience, and sets a context which allows the teacher to be of service to the student because both teacher and student share the classroom. There is an information base sufficient that the student might be able to make a valid judgment. A further assignment in evaluation might be so phrased as to require the student to invent steps 1 - 4 for himself in order to show proficiency.

This last assignment in this set, like the one above it, asks the student to evaluate and make a choice. However, it asks him to use comparison and contrast as the means for communicating his

choice and the reasons for it to the reader. The aim is information.

> Unsatisfactory assignment: Write a paper in which you compare several things of the same kind in order to let the reader know which one is the preferred buy.

This assignment is unsatisfactory because the emphasis is on the things rather than on the technique to be demonstrated. No hints are given about selecting the items or about methods of comparing and contrasting. Further, the appropriate language level is not clear because aim and audience are not clear. How hard is the student to push his choice?

> More satisfactory assignment: You are going to comparison shop and then write a report of your findings for all of us in the class. Choose a kind of item and compare several brands: milk-chocolate bars, tennis shoes, shampoos, hair-spray -- some limited and inexpensive item which you know about or are willing to find out about. Purchase or arrange to try out 3 - 5 different brands of the item. Beforehand, make a list of things you need to know about each brand in order to compare them and choose among them. When you try on or use each brand, make notes according to your list. Write a report in which you say how the brands are alike and how they differ. Which brand would you recommend and why?

This version establishes a clearly informational aim and relevant audience. The major pre-writing or data-gathering steps are given and the organization--likenesses, differences, choice, reasons--is given. The student is free to manipulate these as he wishes, but he knows what is required to be in the report.

It is important to note that assignments should not only be considered more or less satisfactory in themselves; they must also

be evaluated within the context of an entire set or series of assignments and with the goals of the particular course in mind. Thus a teacher might design an effective assignment to elicit complex argumentative discourse, but if he is in the first weeks of an introductory course and if his intent is to help students express their own ideas and feelings with some facility and satisfaction, then that assignment should be shelved and used in a more appropriate context. Writing assignments can and should be written so that the students develop particular skills and gain a sense of confidence at a particular level of performance. In most cases, in the opening weeks of a term, students in a writing class are considerably less proficient than the teacher would like them to be. But they are in the class to develop writing skills and the teacher should take into consideration their present level of proficiency when designing the first writing assignments. As the term passes, later assignments build upon skills which have been developed and demonstrated until, in the final assignments, the majority of the students can demonstrate the desired level of proficiency.

The three assignments which follow are part of an eleven assignment set. They are the third, fifth and eleventh assignments, respectively. Their order reflects the conviction that students can

share effectively, in writing, personal experiences with familiar audiences much more readily and with greater facility than they can shape an argument to convince an audience they do not know as well. Thus the initial assignments ask the students to draw from their own experience and write for their peers. Once they have gained confidence and demonstrated some ability, they are then asked to produce discourse which is more strictly referential or argumentative.

> 1. Describe some favorite spring phenomenon -- water, flowers, birds, grass, sounds, smells, etc. Your audience is the class and your purpose is to share your enthusiasm with this group and relate your feelings in enough detail so that others can share them.

In this assignment the audience has been carefully specified, the aim or purpose clarified, and the subject matter limited to some degree. The assignment is intended to elicit a subjective, personal response: expressive discourse. However, there is the matter of detail and the suggestion that the reader share the writer's experience. These directions force the writer to take his audience into consideration and not merely drift off in an ego-centric reverie. Furthermore, the rubric about sharing the experience provides both audience and teacher criteria upon which to judge the effectiveness of the assignment. Because the audience is significant and must be communicated with, the writer learns how important detail is in gaining and holding their attention.

> 2. Make a generalization about your present surroundings or your friends, your weekend, the food in the cafeteria, the weather, your class schedule, your vocational hopes, school life, some aspect of local or national politics, etc. Then support that generalization with appropriate detail. You might use examples, develop arguments, provide descriptions, catalogue details, whatever. Your audience is your peers, and they will be reading your paper with an eye to your ability to make your generalization believable.

This assignment is more referential, demanding a more objective response than the first. Again, the audience and aim are clearly identified, while the subject matter is defined broadly enough to encourage a diversity of responses. Furthermore, the actual outline of the paper is specified: "Make a generalization..." The student is provided a specific framework in which to arrange his information. And like the first, the assignment provides the criteria upon which the product can be judged. Is the generalization clearly stated? Is there sufficient support for the generalization? If the generalization is not believable, why not? Discussion about framing generalizations, kinds of support, organization, etc., will inevitably follow as students consider their papers together.

> 3. For a final assignment, I want you to recall some occasion on which you made a decision which had a significant influence on your life. Doubtless when you verbalized your decision to work part-time, attend college, join the football team, tryout for a play, etc., some individuals offered advice on a variety of subjects relating to your choice.

> And you found some of the advice helpful and some not so. Recall some advice from the latter category and write a letter to the individual who gave it, reminding him of his advice and then point out, in sufficient detail, why you believe it was misleading. Your goal should be to convince that individual that he misled you, and to suggest, (more or less directly, depending upon your audience) that he should not offer such advice to others.

This assignment is both referential and argumentative, with an emphasis on the latter. There is room for egocentric, expressive discourse, but the aim is such that the writer should have to strictly limit any egocentric response for fear of alienating his audience with a highly emotional or bombastic reaction. As in the two previous assignments, the aim and audience are identified, and the student is provided with a framework upon which to organize the paper: the addressee is first to be reminded, then persuaded to reevaluate his position. Furthermore, the student is being asked to write a letter, so the conventions appropriate to that form of communication apply. The student shapes his discourse to convince that particular audience and no other. Evaluating this exercise is more difficult both for peers and teacher, as they are probably not familiar with the advice-giver. However, the tone which the writer adopts, his choice of detail and incident, and his closing suggestions give the reader some insight into the character of the audience and allow him to make some guesses

about the effectiveness of the letter.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to judge a particular assignment's quality until students have responded to it. Nevertheless, it is important to design assignments with care. The act of writing will seem less formidable to the student when he is given an assignment which not only recognizes his ability as a creator of discourse, but also provides some guidance for the writing process. And a carefully developed sequence of such assignments will be much more effective in helping students reach a desired level of proficiency.

BOOK PREFERENCES OF MINNESOTA STUDENTS

Early in 1977, Norine Odland and Richard Beach of the College of Education at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, sent a request to all school librarians in Minnesota asking each one to list the five titles most popular in the school library. Because of limited returns from middle schools, those results are included in the junior high statistics. The following are the results:

Elementary School Results

Number of responses from librarians: 515

Title:	Number of times named:
Little House Books	218
Charlotte's Web	168
Are You There, God? It's Me Margaret	116
Curious George	111

Title:

Guiness Book of World Records
Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing
Boxcar Children
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
Encyclopedia Brown
Freaky Friday
Hardy Boys
Nancy Drew
Where the Red Fern Grows
Great Monsters of the Movies
Mouse and the Motorcycle

Total number of titles named: 434

Middle School/Junior High School Results

Number of responses from librarians: 203

Outsiders
Are You There, God, It's Me Margaret
Go Ask Alice
Guiness Book of Records
Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones
That Was Then, This Is Now
Sunshine
My Darling, My Hamburger
Deenie
Where the Red Fern Grows
Roots
The Other Side of the Mountain
Eric
Rumblefish
Alive
Carrie

183 titles named once Total number of titles named: 296

Senior High School Results

Number of responses from librarians: 171

Outsiders	31
Go Ask Alice	30
Roots	28

Title:	Number of times named:
Guiness Book of World Records	26
Carrie	24
Alive	22
Sunshine	18
That Was Then, This Is Now	17
My Darling, My Hamburger	16
The Other Side of the Mountain	16
Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones	16
Eric	15
Jaws	14
Sybil	13
Rumblefish	11
Forever	9

207 titles named once Total number of titles: 322

IDEA EXCHANGE

At the Idea Exchange at last spring's conference innumerable useful suggestions were exchanged. We wish that we might print all of them, but space does not permit that. Many were submitted without names. If one of the following ideas is yours, let us know. We would like to give belated credit in the next issue.

Gems for Junior High Journals

1. The thing that worries me most about junior high is...
2. So far junior high has been...
3. Which month are you like? Explain.
4. I wish I were a grownup because...
5. Fathers are okay...
6. If only I had...
7. My favorite television show is _____ because...
8. My favorite food is...
9. If you could rename yourself, what name would you select?
10. Is it easier to do assignments at home or in school? Why?
11. What do you think you should work hard(er) at in the next weeks?
12. Why did your parents give you the name you have?

13. The biggest gripe I have is...
14. I was really proud of myself when I...
15. How could you make this world a better place?
16. What have you learned about yourself since last fall?
17. Write a letter of appreciation to your parents.
18. What do you think your teachers would want your parents to know if they came to a conference about you?
19. What is the best thing that happens to you at school?
20. What thoughts and feelings did you have after seeing your report card?
21. I have never liked...
22. I wish I could talk to _____ about...
23. What would the perfect school be like?
24. What is the first thing you would change about this school?
25. My day started off wrong when...
26. That day off was just what the doctor ordered!
27. When I come to this class, I feel...
28. These are a few of my favorite things...
29. I really would like to meet...
30. My idea of a true friend is...
31. What would happen if school lasted all year with no vacation?
32. The funniest thing I ever saw was...
33. What annoys me most about girls (boys) is...
34. What animal reminds you of yourself?
35. Tell me about a promise you have made yourself.

Music Stimulus

Music often evokes thoughts about people we know, places we've been, or events we have experienced. Also music can be a catalyst, or a starter, for our imagination to create things we've never seen, or to make happen things that never have been.

1. Pretend that the two banjos in "Dueling Banjos" are two people conversing. Imagine what they are saying to one another, or recreate the scene by describing the events surrounding the discussion, or write about both the conversation and events. Be sure you let the reader know who the two people are.

2. Songs by Weather Report are often atonal or dissonent. Sharp chords and sounds grate our ears and deny the listener a feeling of harmonious progression. We do not hear the satisfying sounds that we anticipate. Choose one of the following to write about.

A. If the music reminds you of a fight or disagreement, or evokes images of a fight, describe it.
B. Perhaps the music resembles a nightmare or storm. Describe it by showing.
C. Close your eyes to get inside the music. What are you doing?
D. Write about anything else the music evokes from your mind or fantasy.

Writing from a Specific Point of View

Ellie Kohner
St. Francis High School
St. Francis, Minnesota

A children's nursery rhyme is presented to the class. Each student selects one person from the rhyme and tells his story -- how he really saw it. Each person is to be serious in telling his version.

Examples:
Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater
Ding dong, bell, the cat's in the well
Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall
Hickory dickory dock
Little Miss Muffet
High Diddle Diddle.

Objectives:
1. To show the limits of a specific point of view.
2. To introduce the makings and problems of writing a story.
3. To show the effectiveness of keeping one point of view.

THE "REAL WORLD" KNOCKS AT THE CLASSROOM DOOR

Dorothy Rutishauser
Edina, Minnesota

After weeks of the prescribed and dutiful paragraphs using cause and effect, comparison and contrast, description with details, explanation and examples, character sketch,and other formal expository types, my sophomore composition class looked a bit bored, bleak and bedraggled. It was time for a new approach. I wanted to bring the real world into the course; I wanted them to feel that composition mattered more than the grade they earned, that it was a life skill, every bit as important as swimming or driver education. The solution seemed obvious: a practical composition unit. James Moffett, at the Minnesota Conference on Composition in June, 1977, said students need an authentic audience for writing; they need to write real kinds of composition, things seen and used. It was amazing to see how interest and effort perked as my students saw how composition could yield direct benefits. The unit covered a variety of real needs in written communication:

1. How to write an essay test.
2. How to prepare a job resume.
3. How to write a cover letter for a job application.
4. How to write an essay portion of a college application.
5. How to write a memo.
6. How to take dictation and handle punctuation.
7. How to structure a business letter.
8. How to write a review.
9. How to write a precis.
10. How to write an invitation.

As we approached each form, I gave a brief introduction, and we discussed how the purpose of writing and the intended audience controlled content and form, as I showed samples on the overhead projector or on dittos. For example, in a resume the idea is to be very brief and objective (business men are busy people, as their name suggests) yet give enough information to arouse interest so that prospective employers would schedule a personal interview to learn more. The college application, on the other hand, should encourage as much unfolding of the student's unique subjective self as is possible in response to specified questions and in limited space. The aim is to make the application catch the attention of the admissions officers from among the thousands that may cross their desks.

The essay test was of most immediate interest, as we were approaching the end of the semester, so we began there. Students are frequently asked to write essay answers on tests, but rarely does a teacher pause long enough to explain how to study for an essay test or how to go about writing one effectively. We listed on the blackboard the kinds of questions that essay tests usually ask: compare...explain the growth or development of...what is the theme or central idea of...what does the symbolism mean...why does... what is the difference between...what is the significance or importance of...and so on. It seemed clear, then, that when students

study for an essay test, they should "second guess" the teachers and anticipate the kinds of analytical and interpretive questions that could be asked, then organize data and materials to answer these, with concrete evidence to support their answers.

The next step was to learn a method to take the essay test. Each student ultimately develops a personal system, but I gave them my own as a starter. I recommended reading the entire test first, choosing to take quick mental inventory of what they know relevant to each question before they begin writing. They should jot in margins or on backs of sheets one or two word clues to important ideas before they forget, an impromptu micro-outline. Then the writing can begin. Attack the hardest question first while they're still fresh and adrenalin is pumping strongly. Use the most important idea in the micro-outline, relating it to the central thesis, and move on to cover less important ideas or examples if time permits. Follow the "rule of three" if possible, such as three examples to support a thesis, three aspects of a problem, or three steps to a solution.(One could be the exception, two might be skimpy, but three is generally accepted as adequate development.) Allocate time in the test according to the relative value of the questions. All of this seems pretty elementary after you've answered a few hundred essay questions, but sophomores are at the beginning of the process, and this information comes as a great revelation to them.

To give us a basis on which to write an essay test, I asked the class to read several short stories: Ray Bradbury's "2026: There Will Come Soft Rains," John Updike's "A Sense of Shelter," John Ciardi's "A Cadillac Full of Diamonds," and Robert Penn Warren's "A Christian Education." Using blue book exam forms, such as they might see in higher level courses or in college, I asked several questions on the short stories. It was an "open book" test, since method rather than memory was my goal. I based evaluation of their essays not on how right they were or on the literary merit of their interpretations, but on how directly they attacked the central issue of the question, organized their information, supported their ideas with concrete evidence drawn from the stories, and how well they divided their writing efforts relative to the points assigned to the questions. In marginal comments I suggested "explain this" or "more evidence needed here" or"how does this support your thesis?" or "omit this sort of generalization -- it doesn't add anything to your answer and wastes valuable writing time" or "you need to expand that answer and spend less time on this."

The next area we explored concerned the economic values of composition. We visited our school career learning center, where vocational information and college catalogs are available, and where student employment data is channeled. This was better than scouring the newspaper want ads because these job openings were specifically aimed at their age level. They looked over available part-time and

summer job opportunities and selected likely prospects. Using these, we prepared two items: a succinct resume, including personal information, education (including extracurricular activities), employment experience and specific aptitudes, and references; and a cover letter, in correct business letter form, addressed to a real employer explaining the student's interest in a particular job offered. The items were evaluated from the point of view of a prospective employer: how well did the student present self? How interested in the job as indicated by care with which application was prepared? How well focused was it upon what the student could offer the employer rather than on what the job could do for the student? How well matched were interests, experience and abilities to the needs of the job? Papers were marked "Hired," or "Hold for further consideration," or "Thank you for writing. We will place your application on file." If students wished, they could send a copy of their letters and resumes to employers, and some chose to follow through on these.

Since most of these students were college bound, we discussed the differences, advantages and disadvantages of private and public colleges and universities, then looked at application forms. State universities typically have fill-in-the-blank type applications, but private schools often combine the objective information with a subjective essay section. I obtained a sample application from an Ivy League college and students filled out the essay portion, substituting whatever school they wished in the first question, "Why do you want to attend _____? What about the college do you find most appealing?" In this exercise, they tried to rise above the ordinary and predictable, to show insights and aspects of themselves that would make their application stand out from the crowd. Again, I made marginal suggestions and used "real world" evaluation: I marked the papers, "Congratulations! You have been accepted as a member of the Class of 1983," or "Your application is being held for further consideration," or "Thank you for your application. We regret that due to the large number of highly qualified applicants this year, it is unlikely that your application will be accepted, but we appreciate your interest and wish you success in your endeavors."

We moved on to deal with composition as part of the business world. I had run off a supply of half sheets of paper with the standard "To...From...Subject..." headings, and for several days we handled all instructions and questions by memo, which meant complete silence in the class, except for dictation. Notes between students, questions directed to me, and instructions to the class were all by memo, and they learned the economy and value of crisp, direct, clear prose. As a part of this activity, we reviewed the business letter form and punctuation rules. Then I dictated several letters (slowly, as they did not have shorthand skill) to give them experience in

deciding proper paragraphing and punctuation.

This next activity involved some writing skills they might need for other academic purposes. We had already completed a major unit on the research paper, so I chose the review and the precis. For the review, I gave them information on what a review does, the principles of a good review, plus some suggestions on ways to begin reviews or structure them, and samples of reviews on a variety of subjects: books, plays, movies, TV programs, art shows, etc. They watched a provocative seven-minute film called "Up Is Down" as the subject matter for a review. Precis writing was even simpler to present. I explained the purpose and method (via memo, of course) and gave them two articles from Time.

We ran out of time; otherwise, we might have undertaken even more projects. The list of possibilities grew as we went: note taking from lectures, preparing questions for an interview, writing a letter of inquiry, writing a sympathy letter, writing a "warm fuzzy" to a person they respected; writing a letter to the editor, writing a petition to the principal or city council, designing an application form for a school activity, writing or updating a student handbook with tips and information for new students, writing instructions on how to get to an address or how to perform a process; writing an introduction for a guest speaker....

Moffett was right when he stressed the need for a real purpose and a real audience to put "the will behind the mind" in the process of composition. All that was needed was to open the door and let the real world come in.

minnesota council of teachers of english
English Department
University of Minnesota
Duluth, Minnesota 55812

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