IS COMPOSITION DECOMPOSING?

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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."
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> 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).

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Francis Christensen, Notes Toward a New Rhetoric (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).
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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.

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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