CHOICES: A VARIETY OF COMPOSITION COURSE READINGS

Madeline Hamermesh
Normandale Community College
Bloomington, Minnesota

Not least among the many problems we teachers of composition face is that of content in student themes. We are quite used to emphasizing the obviously and easily corrigible errors in spelling, punctuation, usage, sentence structure, paragraph coherence, and strategies of rhetorical development, but what can we make of a theme that is free of bleeding red marks, is structured so tightly that the outline bones protrude, but yet is replete with banal and superficial assertions about tired topics? Do we give A's to that kind of paper? The student is, after all, writing correct and structured prose. Or, recognizing that verbal expression is the outward dress of the inner idea, do we also demand of our students stimulating thought about significant subjects? I believe that this choice between mechanical correctness and interesting content (though they are not mutually exclusive) presents a common dilemma in theme evaluation.

But if this is an accurate assessment, we should ask why the intellectual vacuum. I think that the reasons are several: Our community college students are typically young (preponderantly in their late teens) and therefore lack much in simple living experience. Further, they bring to college a background poor in information and concepts, for college is, after all, the place where one acquires both, a process of acquisition that freshmen are only just beginning. Finally (and obviously) our students are part of a culture whose dominant disease is creeping illiteracy, of which television is both symptom and partial cause. Given these conditions, where then are our students to find the stuff of A essays?

Traditionally, theme topics assigned to freshman students in the first composition course have been based on essays in readers. These readers typically include essays grouped according to various subjects: war and peace, community and individuality, love and hate, men and women, youth and age, blacks and whites, and whatever other issue is being currently bruited. For the second and third composition courses, readings have been in literature anthologies. Here instructors have played on their own turf, happily defining and characterizing genres as well as themes and, not coincidentally, exposing students to the most artful uses of language.

But, like many traditions in the last decade, these freshman composition readings have been subjected to pressures for change, pressures composed of many elements: the cry for "relevance" and for courses that will "sell"; a loosening of the strictures of a lock-step curriculum; changes in freshman English requirements at the transfer institutions; a recognition of the varying interests of both vocational and liberal arts students in a comprehensive community college; and, quite possibly too, instructors' desires to explore and present different subjects and newer writings. In response to these influences, the English Discipline of Normandale Community College several years ago began to offer courses in the transfer freshman English sequence that have worked to the advantage of both students and instructors.

This revision of the freshman composition program represents less a radical overhaul than an expansion of the traditional sequence. The first course, English 101, has been left unchanged and remains a brief review of the principles of paragraphing and a presentation of techniques for building longer papers. THE

FIVE-HUNDRED-WORD-THEME or a similar textbook or a rhetoric-handbook combination is one of the basic texts of the course. Combined with an essay reader, often focused on language, such rhetorics offer students the techniques of theme-writing, show them how to fashion the matrix. The filler or the content may then come from class discussion or private ruminations on the essays read or, just as frequently, from subjects common to the students' experience and interests.

The second- and third-quarter courses, however, have been expanded to include more than the conventional study and reading of the literary genres of fiction, poetry, and drama. For now the student may choose from an array of specialized readings of subjects ranging from alienation to archetypes, from Shakespeare to science fiction, from terror to the twenties' literature, and including as well traditional literary genres. Not all the courses are offered each quarter or even each year, but typically seven or eight choices are listed and described in the class schedule for any given quarter.

Incidentally, one small technical problem arose about how to record these courses on student transcripts. They are all titled "Freshman English," but each has a different number so as to preclude any duplication of courses. More important, however, is the fact that all these courses, numbered 104 to 130, share a common objective of correct, coherent, clear theme-writing, so that they remain primarily writing courses, merely having different reading emphases.

The "vertical" concentrated readings in these courses inspire thought-provoking theme topics that will be apparent in some examples of course titles and writing assignments which follow. As you will observe, these writing topics also suggest to the student ways of structuring a paper, thus showing how rhetoric

and content interweave and reinforce each other.

For example, a course titled "Poetry: An Introduction," includes a writing assignment in which the student is to "discuss and defend the meter and rhythm of the poem as a complement to the poet's meaning." In another course, "Myth and Archetype in Literature," the student may be asked to discuss the analogy between the character or event in a story or poem and the ritual archetype. The course which has as its reading emphasis science fiction may have as a writing assignment a theme comparing the values implicit in SF stories written in the 40's or 50's with those of the late 60's or 70's. "Terror," a course in which the distinction is made between Gothic horror and existential angst, may suggest a writing assignment that contrasts two stories which demonstrate each kind of terror. Still another course emphasizes the images of women in literature. Here a theme topic might be a discussion of women characters as submissive wives or as sex objects or as "old maids" in plays or stories. The instructor of a course titled "Satire" may assign a theme of definition of satire, "...its five or six essential characteristics. Tie each to specific satiric works." One final example is a course with the title "The Detective Story." Here the student may be asked to "Discuss the use of violence -- and its effect on the reader -- in Doyle, Hammett, Chandler, and Macdonald."

This variety of choices (a list of all the titles is appended) has, we feel, resulted in several benefits to students. For one, the very possibility of choice has given them a greater degree of control over their academic careers and perhaps lessened some of the distaste with which students approach the required courses in composition. Further, within such a selection, they are

sure to find one or more courses that appeal to their special interests or backgrounds or that have particular relevance to their other course work, whether occupational or academic. As obvious examples, the student in law enforcement will surely find the detective story of special interest, just as the pre-engineering or nursing student will be a "natural" for science fiction. Similarly, second-generation descendants of immigrants would be enlightened by and have much to contribute to the course in ethnic literature, just as black students bring to black literature a unique understanding, and as both young and mature women profit by and enliven discussions of readings of women in literature.

But of most importance for courses in composition is the benefit of giving students something to say. As they read with a narrowed focus in one particular genre or topic, students may become minor "experts" with informed opinions that they are able to support by references to a number of texts. Whether they become specialists in a literary genre or in a literary theme, they have something of substance to write about. For instance, those who write of the post-holocaust theme in science fiction can use numerous novels and stories as theme content (Earth Abides, A Canticle for Leibowitz, "To the Chicago Abyss," "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream," among others). Likewise, the readings of women in literature, whether as characters or as authors, surely furnish a galaxy of people whom students can analyze, classify, compare, and define. Students interested in their particular Scandinavian heritage, for example, will see parallels in the immigrant experiences of other national groups through the novels read in the course in ethnic literature (The Rise of David Levinsky,

Christ in Concrete, and Down These Mean Streets). Thus, rather than having a superficial and cursory acquaintance with unrelated literary works, students in these focused courses read pointedly and deeply, and thus have more to think and write about.

For these reasons — and incidentally because of instructor satisfaction — the English Discipline at Normandale Community College is on the whole pleased with this structuring of the freshman composition courses and has no immediate plans for change.

List of Course Titles — English 104-127

104 Black Literature
106 Science Fiction
107 Satire
108 Introduction to Literature
109 Myth and Archetype in Literature
110 "Bitch" in Literature
111 Introduction to American Folklore
113 Terror
114 Women in Literature
115 Poetry in Three Dimensions
116 Shakespeare: In His Time and Ours
117 Writing as Self-Expression
118 Philosophy in Literature
119 Greek Tragedy
120 Alienation in American Life
121 American Literature of the 1920's and 1930's
122 Detective Story
123 Women as Writers
125 Theme in Literature
126 Irish Literature: an Introduction
127 Ethnic Literature in America

Acknowledgement

Though I have been unable to include all of their contributions, I thank the following, my colleagues who so generously responded to my request for examples of their writing assignments: Ray Anschel, Waldo Asp, Joyce Birch, Philip Bly, James Chaffee, Mary Ann Deibel, Joyce Field, Don Flanagan, Karen Gleeman, Richard Guertin, Ken Hokeness, and George Miller.