

The Writing Instructor

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This platitude is a lightly revised version of a paper which I read to Bernie van't Hul's TA's in Ann Arbor on December 8, 1978. I remembered it when Elspeth Stuckey asked me for something about basic writing. No doubt it was unkind to send her a stone when she asked for bread, but pontificators on the universal evils of universities have at least the rhetorical advantage of being their own best arguments from example. — James Sledd, May, 1982

And They Write Innumerable Books

James Sledd

A good deal more than thirty years ago, when I emerged from graduate school with a wife, two sons, and a new Ph.D., universities were just beginning three times as many fat years as the fat cows promised Pharaoh. Meanwhile those two sons have become English teachers in their turn, but the world they work in is grimly different from the world that was when for a second time all wars had just been ended and democracy made safe and when Americans hardly knew the name of the little country which theirs would devastate after only twenty years of the affluent society. When I look at my sons' academic world with the moderate detachment of one whose detachment from it will soon be total, what do I see?

I see first the majority of students whose life has given them no sense of any need to write the kinds of prose that we in English departments want them to. My present freshman class of two Mexican-Americans, three Blacks, and twenty-two Anglos is fairly typical of middle-class Texas. The average annual income of their families is \$32,000; most of their parents went to college, and many to graduate or professional schools; and both the parents and the children read for pleasure, though probably not as much as they watch TV. A questionnaire turned up just none of the commonly given reasons for inability to write; but neither did any of those twenty-seven students, all of them of average or superior intelligence, score as much as 550 on the College Board's English Composition Test, and not one reported so much as a single occasion when poor writing had caused him or her any serious difficulty. They are taking composition only because they have to. Like the banker who told me that bad grades in Freshman English had not kept him from becoming a vice-president, my students are convinced that English teachers are a little odd. Some of them report that their other teachers, who require no great amount of writing, are of the same opinion.

Wider experience might of course have changed my students' judgment. Whatever executive types may really do in what they think is the real world, they're fond of saying that communication's the name of their game, and at least some segments of our society do value and sometimes demand the ability to write workaday academic-professional prose. In particular, there are colleges which demand such prose of freshmen and use the failure to write it as reason to punish and reject. They make the freshman composition course a filter to strain out the oppressed, whose world has given them no chance to learn what they are punished for not knowing. Open admissions then become a trap. Minority students are admitted, even recruited; but when they cannot do what no one thinks they can, they serve their time in bonehead English, flunk out, and get sent home marked "Failure."

One group of academics sets its hopes considerably higher than the ability to write bread-and-butter prose. Some of our most intelligent and cultivated colleagues (the word *cultivated* dates its user) talk about writing not just as a way of knowing but a way of being, and exhort their pupils, in all earnestness, to find, create, announce themselves, in weekly themes. I cannot call those exhortations nonsense. I still remember a theme I wrote, in 1932, about a river I had fished in northwest Florida; and thirty years later my second son, as a senior in high school, wrote a paper that I wish that I had written, about a soon-to-be-desecrated valley in California's High Sierras. Loves strong enough to link the generations can be shaped and spoken in a classroom exercise. Only this year, when an inept syllabus demanded an inductive essay, a lanky, awkward, hill-country Texan wrote me ten pages to tell how as a boy he had learned to trap a fox. He will remember what induction is, long after his trapping-grounds have become a subdivision.

But my examples are nostalgic. If there really is such a thing as a literacy crisis, my generation of literary academics helped to cause it; and my sons' generation, whom we prepared to teach nothing but literature (or indeed to teach nothing if they could escape the classroom altogether), must set up shop today as composition specialists or technical writers. Even if they manage to justify their claims to those once scorned and rejected titles, they will find no gold-brick roads to the land of their dreams. Their seniors will continue to despise composition-teachers, and for some years those seniors will still dominate a professional structure which systematically penalizes the teaching of undergraduates, especially the teaching of freshman composition. The big pattern-setting state universities are not really univer-

sities any more. Instead they have made themselves research institutes for government, business, industry, and the military; and the professors' goal is to be the brains of the great interlocking national bureaucracies—and to be rewarded with an appropriate share of The System's goodies. In an advanced technological society, the scientists may well be able to pull that cupidinous trick.

The young humanists' chances for privileged affluence are by no means good. Even if my generation's leaders had been wise, they could not have played Canute to the flood-tide of brutal materialism, could not have checked inflation or the decline in the quality of our lives which profit-seeking guarantees; and in fact our incredible self-indulgence and sullen refusal to meet legitimate social needs or to adapt to changing circumstances have brought on the crisis which the young now must suffer. Multiplying mediocre graduate programs, we devoted ourselves for a full decade to over-production. We needed graduate students as cannon-fodder for our seminars and as slaveys to keep us from having to teach freshmen, and when the graduate students finally caught on and left us, we found new slaveys among faculty wives and the army of unemployed Ph.D.'s and ABD's. So we created the wage-section or resource pool, the company of unranked unfortunates who teach four classes a semester for a thousand dollars a class; and by so doing we destroyed any plausible argument we might once have had for our cherished tenure-system, for we cannot claim tenure is essential to the protection of academic freedom if we choose to have half our classes taught by people who have no chance for tenure.

We ourselves are reasonably well protected in our ancientry. Instead of firing us, our boards of regents will probably think it less bothersome to let us die on the vine; but new Ph.D.'s will have to play dog-eat-dog. Even if the outcry about a crisis in writing makes administrations generous, assistant professors now in office will resist the appointment of enough tenure-track competitors to replace the wage-section; and since the professoriat has selfishly argued for years that untrained people can teach freshman composition well enough, the most generous administration is likely to encourage defenestration or maybe operate a revolving door.

The logical consequent choice for the young humanist is to get out of English now unless he or she has a real vocation and the patience to endure. By a *real vocation* I do not mean only the urge to read, the love of good books. I also mean the urge to write as well as one can, and a zeal for literacy (whatever may motivate that zeal) which will survive years

of elementary teaching. For as much of the future as it makes any sense to predict, most English teaching in most colleges will be the teaching of freshmen and sophomores, and those who hope to live by such teaching while their hearts are somewhere else will quickly be exhausted and embittered. Unless the country abandons universal education altogether and settles for technocratic rule by one-hundredth of one per cent of the citizenry, the young English teacher's foreseeable future is less likely to be *graduate* studies than *Basic* studies.

That pedagogic territory is uncharted — almost a great blank, like the interior of Africa on old maps; and the teacher who enters it fresh from graduate school will quickly discover that many elephants now trumpeting in the composition-jungle are there just because research in composition is the coming racket, the label *composition specialist* the passport to scarce jobs. I am superior to most of my generation in that I have at least kept trying to teach composition for forty years; I am typical in that I have never learned how to do it.

That is the first bit of practical wisdom that I've gathered — the knowledge that I do not know. I will risk obscurantism by saying that I doubt that anyone knows much (despite much silly chatter about a "new paradigm"), for learning and teaching to write are mysteries, like learning or teaching a native or foreign language. After all, we probably can't *teach* anyone to write, certainly not unless the student wants to learn. If the student lacks that desire, we can do nothing. If the student has it, he or she will not so much be taught as helped in learning.

That help can be of as many kinds as there are students and teachers; for there are no fast, hard rules for people helping people, and if there were, the truly helpful would soon learn how to break them. But the mechanical operators of the Research Machine will see an opportunity in the fact itself that there *are* no universal answers and very little simply formulable knowledge. Research and publication bring promotion; and research and publication, if they cannot give us answers, will provide an endless series of always changing fads, so that one year we will talk about pre-writing and *the* writing process (as if there were just one), and the next year we will clamor for certified assessors of writing quality or shout "One lobe good, two lobes better!" like the sheep on Animal Farm.

The process people are the most tiresome now. They talk about "intervening in the writing process" as if they had made some glorious new discovery, but until they define the indefinable or at least set some chronological limits on it, their catch-phrase is inane. It would make

sense to say, for people who really learn to write, that a whole semester is one long writing process, or even a whole career; and a college teacher's best chance to intervene successfully in the production of her students' papers has usually been lost before the students get to college. Even if one arbitrarily limits the writing process to the time between the assignment and the final submission of a single paper, at some point every teacher has always intervened, even if only to require correction and rewriting before assigning a final grade. The real questions have always been when to intervene, and how; and since I am not aware that those questions have been authoritatively answered, I take the process talk as mainly another salespitch. I would never buy an automobile from a manufacturer who told me he was interested in the process, not the product.

Besides the scarcity of knowledge and abundance of fads, most of the researchers in composition and many of its teachers, forgetting that example teaches at least as well as precept, will suffer the further handicap that they themselves don't write — and maybe can't. There is no better suggestion in the "literature" than the old one that teachers should write together with their students; and I would add that students can teach together with their teachers. When both parties want to write, each learns from each and from the other. The old familiar is a good trick for a good class: to keep photocopies of the week's papers in a quiet, accessible workplace, so that students if they wish can add their comments to the teacher's — and to the teacher's writing.

Such public criticism is a good antidote for the kind of pompous self-righteousness I suffer from. To cite an instance: because all of us, however we try to protect our individuality, are subject to the pressures of the encompassing society, we are tempted to evade our moral responsibilities by such devices as linguistic relativism or the proclamation of "upward mobility in the mainstream culture" as a proper motive for learning and teaching. I have made great fun of relativists and the anxious climbers, and I will continue to make fun of them; but it has been good for me to have students ask why then do I resist the imposition of a standard language or how then do I differ from the classic Southern reactionary.

Though I still have no patience with relativism, good linguists have taught me much of what little I know. They can help us think about the nature, history, and social functions of standard languages — essentially instruments of dominance, potentially means to liberation; they can illuminate the problem of the colonial writer or — more generally — of any provincial as he tries to take what he needs from the dominant, perhaps superior culture, and its linguistic traditions without

betraying himself or his native speech; and they can protect us against fashionable absurdities like the claim that written English — the imperial grapholect — has not significantly changed since Johnson wrote his *Dictionary*.

Of other, more direct applications of linguistic knowledge and method I am often sceptical. For example, though the teacher of composition must have a grammatical vocabulary to talk about the linguistic surface of his students' papers, a grammar should be learned outside the composition class, and learned mainly for its own sake. Without universalizing, one can agree that in present circumstances formal grammatical instruction in the composition class is at best a forced diversion from writing and at worst an actual impediment to it, and I am inclined to pass the same hard judgment on transformational sentence-combining, which strikes me as usually the making of aimless big sentences out of aimless little ones. Neither long sentences nor short ones, Flesch's sentences nor Francis Christensen's, are either good or bad in themselves; and my fogysm is better content with the popular title if not with the popular book: *Writing with a Purpose*.

"What purpose?" is of course the great question which we must not dodge by talking about relative readability or the impossibility of agreement in the judgment of semantic intentions; and in a way my objection to E.D. Hirsch is the same as my objection to an equally influential writer whom I deeply respect despite the objection, Mina Shaughnessy. Repeated readings of her book have left me with the unhappy feeling that aside from her hardly original attempt to describe some causes of error, she offered us only some more elaborate ways to teach traditional grammar, no hard evidence that her methods were genuinely successful, and no serious examination of the purposes of the whole undertaking. Hirsch's deep purpose is sufficiently clear: he is the ideologist of bureaucratized assent. So far as I can tell, Shaughnessy asked no questions about the aims of education but instead accepted whatever purposes bring students and teachers together in composition classes and proceeded to devise techniques for reducing the number of conventionally defined errors to a level which middle-class academics might be expected to tolerate. But the CEEB should have taught us long ago that the unexamined examination is not worth giving.

Indeed, if I were addicted to prayer, I suppose my daily petition would be, "Lord, I am tempted to believe; help thou my unbelief." In our world of television and Jimmy Carter [Eheu! — author] and professional societies and advertising, one is driven to the primitive retreat of believing only what one's own experience confirms, and my experi-

ence tells me that students may parse like demons and get all their verb-forms right like prosperous white folks yet still be incompetent to write a decent paragraph. For the same reason, I remain sceptical of the presently voguish talk about heuristics. I had the privilege, long ago, of taking a fine seminar with Kenneth Burke, but I've never used his pentad to explore a subject. Such writing as I've done, as a run-of-the-mill academic, has in one way or another been done to order, so that circumstances forcefully hinted at what I should say; and on the occasions when my writing has been to any extent successful, it has been so because my whole mind was involved. When one's mind is fully involved, one wakes up in the middle of the night to write down ideas which have come from God knows where. A fully active mind doesn't need a vulgarization of Aristotle's topics or of Jakobson's analysis of the communication situation, complete with distracting geometric figures.

How does a teacher strike the spark of full involvement? In as many ways as there are teachers and students, as I've said. But experience always brings me back to the matter of felt need. The dentist's son who has written me a dozen adequate, dull papers is a fifth-generation resident of the little town of Marble Falls, twenty miles away from my cottage on the banks of LBJ's Pedernales River. Mr. N wants to be Dr. N, like his father, and he knows that his father fills teeth skillfully but almost never writes. In a university where writing is of no importance in at least one-quarter of the courses, sensible Mr. N will remain content with marginal adequacy. Perhaps his work would be better in a university where at least a whole faculty and its administrators had dramatized their conviction that the ability to write is genuinely important. In such a university (Michigan once seemed likely to be the first), students might come to share that same conviction and might want to learn to write themselves.

To write? To write *themselves*? That one small difference hints a huge complexity, which we begin to uncover when the making of assignments compels us to ask *what*. Maybe we have the best chance for success if we guide our assignments by our students' likely needs -- needs both as students and afterwards, in their careers. Such writing as most of them may do will be that workaday writing, bread-and-butter writing, writing of useful but special kinds which we English teachers often aren't highly competent to teach. Once more, experience points us to the trite but true conclusion that whole faculties must teach composition if it is successfully to be taught. (I grant that Kenneth Burke would need all *ten* fingers to find arguments which might *persuade* whole faculties to that honorable work.)

Of the innumerable ways of helping student writers, the ways that English teachers favor will work best with students like themselves. For some students, the way of self-discovery, finding a voice, is more than a good wallow in egotism, an exercise in navel-watching. They need instruction less than they need a listening ear and grunts of friendly attention. For others among our special audience, the best way may be writing about literature, especially if the literature provides appropriate models. Without lots of practice, there can be no good writing of any kind; and there can be no useful practice without some formed and forming intention, some inner or outer model which the practice looks to.

But *All roads lead to Rome* is a better motto for composition teachers than *Strait is the gate*. Good writing is something made — made by a living human being, who most clearly calls his own number (as Burke says) when he himself doesn't know what his number is. Learning to write is learning to use all one's mind in making. Our enterprise therefore remains as various, as strange, as vexing, as absorbing, as people are; and we will be wrong past all recovery if ever we persuade ourselves that only we are wise. The final importance of our work, if we can keep from freezing in the snowstorm of student papers, is that in our petty way we cannot help dramatizing the essentiality of the free maker.

So I cannot see my sons' academic world as the generally comfortable place my undeserving generation lived in. I would no more blame them if they left it than I would be surprised to see English departments go the way of departments of Latin and Greek. But years spent in teaching composition have not all been wasted [in 1982 I am less self-congratulatory], and I would like to believe that the best rewards remain though the fat jobs are gone.

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