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## A NAME WITH A VIEW

**ABSTRACT:** *The title of an academic journal should identify its subject area, embody the spirit of the discipline, distinguish its orientation to the field, present a positive image of its subject, and accommodate—if not reflect—the current state of the art. Because the scope of Journal of Basic Writing has been expansive over the years, and because the connotations of “basic writing” have changed since the journal’s inception, it is appropriate, under new editorial management, to consider changing the journal name to reflect these changes.*

To exist humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it.

—Paolo Freire

A man’s life proceeds from his name, in the way  
a river proceeds from its source.

—N. Scott Momaday, *The Names*

### A Story of Names, with Many Morals

I always loved my name, even before I could spell it. *Lynn*. Feminine, but not cute, it was easy to pronounce and, as a one-syllable word, hard to nickname. Best of all, it was unique and

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therefore special. No one else in my entire elementary school in Durham, New Hampshire—or even at Dover High, or for that matter no one I knew at the University of Michigan, had that name. If people said “Lynn,” they had to mean me. Whatever my name was, I was.

During my first pregnancy, as a graduate student in literature and linguistics, I became aware of the profound significance of naming. To name is to be human. We prepare to name our children all our lives. Every person we meet (and sometimes places and animals, as well), every book and newspaper we read, every film or TV program we watch provides a host of possibilities—to accept, reject, or ponder. Our repertoire is continually under revision; as the present becomes the past, tastes and namesakes change. The Mildreds become the Patricias who become the Tammys who become the Kimberleys and so they go—each more beautiful, then ultimately more dated than the next, full of unanticipated, unacknowledged but nevertheless powerful connotations, public and private.

Thus in the hope, faith that children will grow to fit their names, Martin and I named our firstborn son *Bard*, for you know who; and our second son *Laird*, for you know where. Masculine, timeless, unusual; tough to nickname, and easy to say. Fitting companions for brothers and for a mother with a one-syllable, still avant-garde name. You already know, or can infer, these public connotations. But you know scarcely a whisper, until I give you a hint here, of the private connotations. To us these British names symbolize my academic major and Martin’s graduate year at Edinburgh. They also embed our marriage in Epsom, Surrey, exiled by my parents’ threat that if I married “that Jew,” they would have “nothing to do with him, or you, or any children you might have”—the motif of a complicated story that, with luck and grace, our children may outlive. With your new knowledge, the character of our community—as writer and readers—has changed. Oh—and yes, I married Martin and embraced his name as my own.

### **Academic Journal Names**

A name, any name, is both a manifestation of the namer’s authority, and a code word to the cognoscenti. In “The Power of Naming,” Armstrong and Fontaine discuss the negotiations that govern writing program administrators’ authority to name and rename courses, job titles, program descriptions, and the discipline itself. The names themselves “create and define the disci-

pline." The arrival of a new WPA on the scene, they explain, provides the opportunity to examine the status quo and—at "important points of growth or tension in the field"—to initiate changes reflected in changes of name (5).

Similar considerations apply to the naming, or renaming, of academic journals.<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Basic Writing*—not *The Journal*, although from both grammar and habit we supply the *the*—will turn 21 in 1995, though having given precocious evidence of maturity right from the start. *JBW* has reached this milestone, and has at the same time acquired new coeditors, who are examining the title at this juncture and asking the questions, "Should *JBW* have a new name? If so, why? And, what should it be?" The first two questions are easier to answer than the third.

Yes, *Journal of Basic Writing* should have a new name. Here's why.

**A journal title should identify its subject area, and embody the spirit of the discipline** (see note 1). *JBW* has been published, since its first issue in 1975, under the auspices of the CUNY Instructional Resource Center—a fitting, perhaps inevitable affiliation, given Mina Shaughnessy's landmark work with basic writers at CUNY in the 1970s. That Shaughnessy from the very first page of *Errors and Expectations* chose to call "severely unprepared" freshman *basic writers* was a carefully calculated choice of name.

For the term *basic writers* sent a humane political message not just to the profession but to a world which even in the mid 1970s had to be convinced that these students were not to be seen as *remedial*; they were not retarded or sick; they should not be disciplined or punished or medicated or flushed out of the system. In the political manifesto for educators with which she concludes *Errors and Expectations* Shaughnessy summarizes—and castigates—"the remedial model":

Colleges must be prepared to make more than a graceless and begrudging accommodation to this unpreparedness, opening their doors with one hand and then leading students into an endless corridor of remedial anterooms with the other. We already begin to see that the remedial model, which isolates the student and the skill from real college contexts, imposes a "fix-it station" tempo and mentality upon both teachers and students. (293)

Instead, says Shaughnessy, these students should be met wherever on the educational continuum they begin college.

They should be understood and respected as human beings and therefore as language users; their teachers, says Shaughnessy, "confronted by what at first appears to be a hopeless tangle of errors and inadequacies, must learn to see below the surface of these failures the intelligence and linguistic aptitudes" of their students (292). Teachers thus have the moral as well as pedagogical obligation to treat their students not as hopeless failures but as *basic writers*, "capable of learning what [the teacher] has learned, and what he now teaches" (292).

*JBW* has faithfully reflected Shaughnessy's spirit in the language of its title. For its first decade of publication the journal issued calls for papers on specific topics, some of which were framed in terms of basic writers. For example, a Fall/Winter 1978 call for articles on vocabulary invited submissions

which discuss successful methods of teaching vocabulary to Basic Writing Students. Articles should justify the choice of methods, analyze Basic Writing students' central difficulties with words, and discuss the features of academic language that pose the most serious problem for Basic Writing students. (62)

Yet even in the same issue, the call for articles on *Reinforcement* focused on learning to produce the kinds of writing "demanded" in the "physical and natural sciences, the social sciences, business or technical writing"—a facility that, as the theme of *Reinforcement* implies, might be developed later in a student's academic career than would basic writing.

Comparable calls in 1980 for submissions for *JBW* issues on *Revision* and *Academic and Non-Academic Writing* could elicit papers dealing with a student population more diverse than "basic writers." That right from *JBW*'s inception its scope was conceived of more broadly than its title implies is apparent from what the editors actually published. Between 1975-85, as indicated from their titles, 31 of its 98 articles—31.61%—were not necessarily on basic writing.

**A journal title should distinguish its orientation to, and particular niche in, the broader field.** Since 1985, the *Call for Articles* has explicitly acknowledged the "wide diversity" in the term *basic writer*. Editor Lynn Troyka and her successors, Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller, define *basic writer* as "sometimes referring to a student from a highly oral tradition with little experience in writing academic discourse, and sometimes referring to a student whose academic writing is fluent but otherwise deficient" ("Call," n.p., 1985 ff). For the editors this

descriptive term has no pejorative connotations (but see the next section, below).

If we look at the *Call for Articles* regularly printed in *JBW* since 1985, the term *basic writing* can scarcely encompass the vast and varied range of topics the editors suggest:

We invite authors to write about matters such as the social, psychological, and cultural implications of literacy; discourse theory; cognitive theory; grammar; linguistics, including text analysis, error descriptions, and cohesion studies; English as a second language; and assessment and evaluation. We publish observational studies as well as theoretical discussions on relationships between basic writing and reading, or the study of literature, or speech, or listening; cross-disciplinary insights for basic writing from psychology, sociology, anthropology, journalism, biology, or art; the uses and misuses of technology for basic writing, and the like (n.p., with slight variations, every issue).

Many of the articles published in response to this call inevitably spill over even the loose boundaries implied by a title that over the years may have become more restrictive than its current use warrants. For instance, over 50% of the articles in a typical recent issue (Fall 1990), could with few, if any, modifications, transcend the designated niche of *basic writing*: Zak's "Exclusively Positive Responses to Student Writing," Slattery's "Applying Intellectual Development Theory to Composition," Moberg's bibliographic essay, "The Revival of Rhetoric," and my own essay on teaching new writing teachers, "Finding a Family, Finding a Voice." This diversity is reinforced by an examination of the titles of all the articles published in *JBW* 1986-Spring 1994. Between 1986-88, 11 of 45 articles (24.4%) were on topics broader than basic writing, a figure that rose to 37.8% (14/37) 1989-91 and attained 33% (12/36) 1992-94.<sup>2</sup> This eclecticism is not only appropriate but inevitable in such an amorphous and diverse field as composition. It would be regrettable if a title originally intended to be liberatory had a ghettoizing effect on its subject.

Moreover, a title more fully reflective of *JBW's* actual breadth of subject would presumably attract an even wider range of contributors than *JBW's* current—and fairly diverse—roster, and would consequently broaden both its subscription and advertising base.

**A journal title should present a positive image of its subject.** Over the years so accustomed have we in the profession become to the term *basic writers* that we take it for granted; we no longer look *at* it, we look *through* it. Nevertheless, during the past two decades, its connotations have subtly changed, in two ways. One is in the direction of more diversity, as is indicated in the "Call for Papers" above.

The other direction is more negative. As *basic writing* became the normative term in the field, various negative connotations previously attached to *remedial* accrued to this new term, as well. As Tom Fox argued in his plenary address at the Fourth National Basic Writing Conference: "Easy claims about the relationship between language mastery and academic or economic access are false." They obscure "real social and political boundaries, such as racism, sexism, elitism, homophobia that really do prevent access." These underlying discriminatory features are incorporated, subtly or not so subtly, in the connotations of *basic writers* held not only by conservative commentators on education such as William Bennett and Dinesh D'Souza, but by mainstream writing teachers, as well (Fox 37). (See also Mike Rose, "The Politics of Remediation," in *Lives on the Boundary*.)

Even if the cognoscenti know, in their hearts and in their classrooms, what *basic writing* really means (*JBW* editors did not define the term until 1985), it may be preferable to effect a positive transformation in the field by changing an existing journal title which has ambiguous or creeping negative connotations. That minority and disadvantaged groups do this regularly is illustrated in the changing labels, positive and negative, for colored people/Negroes/Blacks/African Americans. . . . As Audre Lorde understood, "If we don't name ourselves we are nothing. If the world defines you it will define you to your disadvantage" (in Ostriker 59).

**A journal title should accommodate, if not reflect, the current state of the art.** This is not to be construed as license for idiosyncratic editorial caprice—with, say, a change of title every time there's a change of editor—but rather as an opportunity for the title to reflect changes in the field's prevailing paradigm(s) and terminology. Journal editors are chosen for their stature in the field and their commitment to the discipline, and Karen Greenberg and Trudy Smoke are no exceptions. Journal editors expand their already considerable contributions to the field by their willingness to undertake the labor

of love (there may be less elegant words for this) that editing a journal requires.

The contemplation by Greenberg and Smoke of a new journal title is not intended as a negative reflection on their predecessors' excellent work, but rather an acknowledgement of the numerous changes in the field which their work has influenced. Yet a title should allow some room to express the editors' philosophy; new managers of any enterprise want to initiate some changes to mark it as truly their own, to signal to their clientele their particular orientation. So they redecorate even if they don't remodel; they alter the menu; they change titles to convey nuances, subtle or more profound, in the community's operative code.

## Conclusion

It is not up to this occasional contributor to suggest what that new title should be. My own taste, signaled by my lifelong affection for my own name and reflected in the names of my children, is for a name that's short, functional, elegant, timeless, and on target. The journal's name should, of course, signal its membership in the writing family, and its particular location on the family tree. Ideally, the name should also reflect its history as well as forecast its future—a lot to do in three or four brief key words. But because, as Freire says, to name the world is a way to change that world, whatever the name is, the journal will become.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>It has not escaped my notice, however, that the most prestigious academic critical journal in America has had since its inception an extraordinarily ugly and unpronounceable name, whether written out in full or abbreviated to *PMLA*. This four-syllable abbreviation stands for *Publications of the Modern Language Association*—fifteen syllables, forty-two letters, an uncomfortable, inadvertent meter, and a weak rhyme. The title is inaccurate, since the plural refers to a single publication. Moreover, the title *PMLA* is difficult to find in standard bibliographic indexes, which catalog the journal not under *P*, or *PMLA*, but under *Modern Language Association*. That this title is not only tolerated but revered is a comment on the values, indeed the discourse, of the profession that promulgates it.

<sup>2</sup>Examination of the articles' content rather than their titles might change the percentages slightly, but it would not affect the point.

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