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PART I**

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The *Journal of Basic Writing* (JBW) invites manuscripts of 10-20 pages on topics related to Basic Writing (BW). Lynn Quitman Troyka will serve as editor starting with the 1986 semiannual issues. Authors need not limit themselves to topics previously announced for JBW because issues will no longer be devoted to single topics.

Articles will be refereed. For this purpose, please submit manuscripts in quadruplicate, with author information and a biographical note on the cover page only. The new MLA style is required. See *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 1984 (also *MLA Handbook for Scholars*, forthcoming 1985). For style matters specific to JBW, please consult the new one-page JBW "Style Sheet," available by sending a stamped letter-size, self-addressed envelope to JBW.

JBW wishes to continue its tradition of advancing knowledge about BW by publishing material that is original, stimulating, well-grounded in theory, and clearly related to practice. *All manuscripts, therefore, should clearly focus their discussions on BW and should add substantively to the existing literature.* Authors might wish to consider, but need not be limited to, these areas: linguistics, including text analyses, error studies, and cohesion studies; rhetoric; discourse theory; cognitive theory; English as a second language; assessment and evaluation; the social and/or psychological implications of literacy; observational studies as well as theoretical discussions on relationships between BW and reading, or speech, or listening, or the study of literature, or any combination; cross-disciplinary insights for BW from fields including psychology, sociology, anthropology, journalism, biology, art; the uses and misuses of word processing, computer-assisted instruction, and other technologies.

The new editor will welcome a variety of manuscripts, including: speculative discussions that venture fresh interpretations; essays that draw heavily on student writing as supportive evidence for new observations; research reports, written in nontechnical language, that offer observations previously unknown or unsubstantiated; collaborative writings that provocatively debate more than one side of a central controversy; teaching logs that trace the development of original insights; and others. Work that reiterates what is known or work previously published will not be considered.

The term "basic writer" is used with wide diversity today, in some cases referring to a student from a highly oral tradition with little experience in writing academic discourse, and in other cases referring to a student whose academic writing is fluent but otherwise deficient. To help readers, therefore, authors should describe clearly the student population to which they are referring.

INTRODUCTION

The articles published in "Basic Writing and Social Science Research Part I" return to the theme of *JBW*'s inaugural issue—the problem of persistent error in writing: its sources, its effects on readers and writers, and strategies for addressing it.

The first article, a monograph-length study by Mary Epes, presents the results of her study of the sources of persistent errors, in highly motivated adult basic writers, in a variety of places: in nonstandard dialect, in low reading comprehension, in various cognitive, perceptual, and linguistic processes which underlie writing. She concludes that the relationship between nonstandard dialect and error is even stronger and more complicated than basic writing teachers may have assumed. When composing and cognitive skills are on the same level, nonstandard dialect speakers are likely to produce many more errors than standard dialect speakers. Furthermore, differences in reading comprehension skills do not account for differences in the numbers or types of errors. Indeed, there is no correlation whatsoever between reading comprehension skills and errors; exceptionally good readers can be very error-prone writers. Finally, nonstandard dialect patterns account entirely for incorrect whole-word verb forms (*she have, they was*) and hypercorrections (*she droved*)—two of the most stigmatized types of errors—and for a substantial portion of omitted inflections. In the light of these findings, Epes concludes that basic skills courses aimed at improving reading comprehension and writing fluency will not significantly affect the student's ability to perceive errors in his writing and that direct instruction in the grammar of standard English is, for the nonstandard dialect student, necessary. As a way to handle the necessary instruction in grammar without exacerbating the student's insecurity about writing, she suggests separating composing and encoding problems in instruction and separating composing from editing for correctness in the student's writing process. She concludes, in addition, that tests of writing skill must provide enough extra time for basic writers to edit their work.

Looking into the works of cognitive psychologists, Marilyn Goldberg attempts to discover why students and teachers err—why students fail to learn information and concepts to which they are repeatedly exposed, and why teachers have so much trouble structuring instruction more effectively. She finds in Piaget's concepts of assimilation and accommodation an explanation of the importance of achieving a close fit between the student's prior knowledge and the new information to be presented. Polanyi's concepts of focal knowledge (consciously operating perception) and subsidiary knowledge (the knowledge base that informs focal

knowledge) explain the student's inability to focus on meaning when preoccupied by correctness—and, paradoxically, the necessity of focusing on form and correctness at some point in instruction, in order to bring them into subsidiary knowledge, where they can ultimately operate unconsciously. The concepts of habituation and overfamiliarity explain the difficulty students have whenever they are asked to look at structures in language and thought, such structures as generalizations and verbs being so completely familiar and deeply intuitive as to be utterly invisible. They remain invisible unless, by sharp focusing that excises them from context that disrupts the student's intuitive routines, the teacher can raise them to focal knowledge for conceptualization. The concepts of "over-accommodation" and "pseudo-conceptualization" explain how students can *appear* to understand the topic we have presented, by rote memorization, without having worked out the connection between the concept and the data from which it should have been derived. She suggests a number of specific strategies for teaching inductively as the best way for disrupting intuitive routines and minimizing rote learning.

Allison Wilson analyzes the effect of nonstandard dialect errors on teaching strategies, showing four ways teachers have perceived and reacted to error, particularly the errors of Black dialect. In one approach to student error, teachers assume that the nonstandard oral code will meet the needs of written discourse equally well. Thus they ignore most surface feature mistakes, arguing that errors do not seriously impede understanding. In another approach, teachers assume that using "relevant" materials and congenial methods will enable students to tap into their alienated creative impulses and into correct linguistic forms as a concomitant. So this method avoids confronting error also. The third approach, however, focuses on error obsessively. Meaningful assignments in reading and writing give way to endless grammatical analysis and drills, so that the student gains little or no practice solving the larger problems of discourse. In the fourth approach—the one she, like Epes, recommends—teachers separate composing and redrafting from copy-editing in how they structure assignments, thus, in how they encourage their students to write, limiting grammatical instruction to specific problem areas.

Irvin Hashimoto looks at the mistakes we make when we teach basic writing to adult learners. His experiences have persuaded him that adults are sufficiently different from younger college students in their self-directedness; no-frills, goal-oriented pragmatism; prior experience; and rigidity; as to require different teaching methods and materials. Adults will strongly resist instruction where they do not help to define goals or do not see the immediate usefulness of activities and strongly resist instruction which they perceive as condescending or as an attack on deeply entrenched beliefs and values. Hashimoto's excerpts from freshman texts show that much we say (and fail to say) to traditional students unintentionally condescends to or otherwise offends more mature students.

Finally, Tom Reigstad summarizes a number of studies focused on writing anxiety and the basic writer. Highly apprehensive writers are, in fact, usually less skillful than their low-apprehensive counterparts. They drop

writing courses more often. Increases in writing anxiety correlate strongly with the assignment of argumentative essays, with students' increased absenteeism, and with teaching styles and grading procedures students perceive as threatening. He reports on a number of methods which appear to reduce anxiety: intensive "learning-centered" writing tasks in content courses; a student-centered, workshop format for writing instruction; student-selected writing topics; student analyses of their own writing processes; writing anxiety workshops; tightly sequenced, highly structured practice (such as sentence combining) which maximizes opportunities for experiencing success; and delayed grading; among others. He concludes that attempts to build confidence and reduce anxiety must simultaneously address (not simply replace) the task of moving students toward the forms and norms of academic writing.

TRACING ERRORS TO THEIR SOURCES: A STUDY OF THE ENCODING PROCESSES OF ADULT BASIC WRITERS

To select approaches which will be predictably effective in reducing errors in writing, it is clearly important for teachers to know *why* their students make specific errors. Mina Shaughnessy, of course, was driven by this insight as she probed for the roots of students' problems with the written language; and the patterns of error which she found in her large sample of basic writing texts have certainly convinced us that error is not random. But precisely how specific errors relate to specific sources of error for specific writers remains a complicated question, as a number of investigations have shown. Bartholomae has found that errors that look identical on the page can have very different causes, depending on the writer,¹ and recent studies in reading suggest that the presumed correlation between spelling errors and deficient reading skills does not hold up in individual cases.²

My own early interest in the question had been focused almost exclusively on dialect influence, that is, the ways in which oral language

Mary Epes, an associate professor of English, York College/CUNY, has worked in basic writing research and curriculum development for the past ten years. She is coauthor of the self-instructional workbook, The Comp-Lab Exercises (Prentice-Hall, 1980).

Acknowledgments. For many of the theoretical constructs and some of the procedures on which this study relies, I owe a large debt to my long-time collaborators at York College, Carolyn Kirkpatrick and Michael Southwell. In fact, the idea for this study itself originated in our joint development of a prior grant proposal. More specifically, in regard to this report, I want to thank Carolyn for her considerable assistance in shaping and editing the manuscript, and Michael for his help in analyzing the data. I also want to thank my friend Helen Gorman for extensive statistical consultation. For their support in carrying out this project, I'm grateful to my old friends at Elizabeth Seton College; to Dr. Sandra Rosenblum, former director of the Bronx Psychiatric Center Staff Education Program, and her staff; to The City University of New York; and, of course, to the National Endowment for the Humanities.

¹ David Bartholomae, "The Study of Error," *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (1980), 253-269.

² See Linnea Ehri, "The Role of Orthographic Images in Learning Printed Words," in *Orthography, Reading, and Dyslexia*, ed. James Kavanaugh and R. L. Venezky (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1980), pp. 155-170; Charles Read, "Writing Is Not the Inverse of Reading," in *Writing: The Nature, Development, and Teaching of Written Communication*, ed. Carl H. Fredrickson and Joseph F. Dominic (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981) II, pp. 105-115.

patterns seem to account for particular deviations from the linguistic norms of standard written English. As I became familiar with recent research in this area, I realized I must also consider the possibility that other influences might be at work in producing errors which I had been uncritically ascribing to writers' speech patterns. Whiteman, in her study of the writing of black and white working class American children, had noted a "non-dialect-specific tendency to omit certain inflectional suffixes."³ Investigations by Kirschner and Poteet and by Sternglass had demonstrated that the pattern of errors of college remedial groups, assumed to have different speech patterns, did *not* show substantial qualitative differences.⁴ Hartwell had asserted bluntly that "'dialect interference in writing,' in and of itself, does not exist," postulating instead a single cause for errors, namely, unfamiliarity with the print code.⁵

While I was reading these reports, I was simultaneously experimenting with a variety of instructional approaches, noting which ones worked best with whom, and speculating on their relative success in reducing different kinds of error. By degrees, it became clear to me that the precise parameters of dialect influence on error could not be determined except in the context of a study which considered not only dialect but other possible causes of error as well. My colleagues at York College/CUNY, Carolyn Kirkpatrick and Michael Southwell, joined with me in these speculations and together we came up with some strong hunches about the various sources of error in the cognitive, perceptual, and linguistic processes which underlie writing. Even as we struggled with the complexity of the question, we remained convinced that spoken language, in one way or another, is a major, if not *the* major source of problems with the written language. This interest led to the research I am reporting here, a recently completed case-study investigation of the encoding process, with emphasis on sources of error. (My work was supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities under a College Teachers Fellowship award, 1982-83.) In the course of this study, I wanted to resolve, if I could, some of the existing disputes and ambiguities about the sources of common errors, and in the process to develop some diagnostic procedures which would be not only reliable but also simple enough for classroom teachers to use as part of their normal assessment of students' writing skills.

³ Marcia Farr Whiteman, "Dialect Influence and the Writing of Black and White Americans," Diss., Georgetown University 1976, p. 68.

⁴ Samuel A. Kirschner and G. Howard Poteet, "Non-Standard English Usage in the Writing of Black, White and Hispanic Remedial English Students in an Urban Community College," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 7 (1973), 351-355; Marilyn S. Sternglass, "Close Similarities in the Dialect Features of Black and White College Students in Remedial Composition Classes," *TESOL Quarterly*, 8 (1974), 271-283.

⁵ Patrick Hartwell, "Dialect Interference in Writing: A Critical View," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 14 (1980), 101-118.

DEFINITIONS

A few definitions at this point may head off confusion about the goals and design of my study. The distinction between *composing* (controlling meaning in writing) and *encoding* (controlling the visual symbols which represent meaning on the page) is basic to this study's design and method of analysis. As a skill, encoding includes control over all the *norms* of the written language—the norms relating both to its *visual* forms (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, indentation, etc.) and to its *linguistic* forms (denoting tense, number, case, word-class, etc.). Encoding is distinct from composing inasmuch as it is concerned with the *givens* of the written *code*, whereas composing is concerned with the *options* of the written *language* which that code represents, the almost infinitely various ways of conveying meaning in writing. However, insofar as encoding has to do with linguistic forms, it has a crucial area of overlap with composing. This is one of the reasons why error analysis is so complex. And it's a point to which I shall return in the interpretation of my findings.

For the purposes of this investigation, I define *error* narrowly as any clear deviation from the norms of standard written English. This definition places error in the domain of right/wrong, not of better/worse. So defined, errors manifest weaknesses in encoding skills, not in composing skills.

A further distinction seems important to make—that between *dialect* and *grapholect*, two terms which help to define each other, and which also suggest what I mean when I use the terms *standard* and *nonstandard* to describe language patterns. Dialect, as I use the term here, refers to varieties of the vernacular, the spoken as distinct from the written language. In contrast, the grapholect is both written and, to a large extent, standardized.⁶ Indeed, in this connection, my colleagues and I would argue that the term *standard* is used most accurately to describe the written (not spoken) language. However, a certain dialect may approximate the linguistic forms which characterize the grapholect, and can in this way (rather loosely, but without distortion) be called *standard*. And a dialect which does not approximate these forms is in the same way called *nonstandard*. As these definitions imply, I consider that "error" is not an appropriate term to apply to speech-form variants, but is an entirely appropriate one to apply to deviations from the established norms of the written language.

DESIGN

It was my hypothesis, then, that spoken language has a strong direct influence on the encoding process, and that speakers of nonstandard dialect have a different set of problems with the written language and make identifiably different errors than do speakers of standard dialect. Additionally, I suspected that dialect influence interacts with other sources of error, still further differentiating these two groups as writers. This hypothesis, clearly, was basic to my thinking about error, and therefore

⁶ See E. D. Hirsch's enlightening discussion in *The Philosophy of Composition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), Chaps. 1-3.

basic to the design of my study. It required that I study two types of error-prone writers, speakers of standard dialect, and speakers of nonstandard dialect, and that I also try to identify other factors which might be contributing to the patterns of error observed, such as variations in composing ability, reading proficiency, and level of cognitive skills. I decided to choose subjects in such a way as to control, insofar as possible, the presence of still other potential influences on kind and quantity of error. My task in trying to sort out multiple variables would certainly be easier if my subjects were all individuals with approximately the same level of post-secondary education, similar amounts of writing experience, and similarly strong motivation to overcome serious problems with the written language, but with identifiably different speech backgrounds and diverse reading, cognitive, and composing skills.

Further, I wanted to work exclusively with mature adult learners. For one thing, the persistence of their problems points to deep-seated processes at work. Also, because many older basic writers have been struggling to master the written language for years, their frustrations have made them aware of their difficulties with encoding. I had already learned that adult learners could sometimes analyze the reasons for their encoding problems with remarkable insight.

SUBJECTS

It was my original intention to observe six individuals, or cases, in close detail. In my search for subjects who were both alike and different in the various ways I have described, I drew on populations of adult basic writers at two sites well known to me. At the first site, Elizabeth Seton College in Yonkers (where I had previously taught), I collected specimens of student writing, primarily from weekend college, practical nursing, and evening school students. I identified the writers with the most serious encoding problems and then interviewed about twenty. At the other site, the Bronx Psychiatric Center Staff Education Program, I had the advantage of having recently worked closely with the students, all hospital staff members (clerical workers, mental health aides, and nurses), for whom I had set up a totally self-instructional model of the COMP-LAB Program, the experimental basic writing course which I had helped to initiate at York College. Most of the thirty error-prone writers I chose to interview at this site were native speakers of nonstandard English who had been taking college and other postsecondary education courses for several years. Because they were required to write daily reports on the job, they were highly motivated to improve their writing skills both for their career advancement and for their ongoing course work.

During the preliminary screening, which included extensive taped interviews and a brief reading test, I became aware of a wide range of variation in prospective subjects' oral language forms, reading skills, and the kinds and quantities of errors they made. I then realized I must enlarge the number of case studies I had originally planned to investigate, for I feared that I might be led astray by the idiosyncratic behaviors of a few individuals, and so miss the patterns which might cut across all these individual

differences. Additionally, in working with a larger number of subjects, I could combine the case-study method of investigation-in-depth with at least some of the advantages of a quantified study. Although the size of the sample must still necessarily be small, it would be large enough to suggest significant trends. At the same time, I would not be limited to heaps of faceless errors. That is, when I interpreted the statistical outcomes of my study, it would be in the light of the more personal knowledge (in Polanyi's sense of the term⁷) that I had gained from my sustained acquaintance with the real live authors of the texts in which these errors occurred.

For these reasons, I went from the six case studies of my research proposal—three standard dialect (SD) speakers and three nonstandard dialect (NSD) speakers—to twenty-six, or thirteen of each, chosen from a pool of fifty I had interviewed and tested. I chose subjects who seemed likeliest to meet the varied criteria explained above.

The most fundamental of these criteria related to language patterns. My task was to select from my pool of potential subjects, representing a spectrum of spoken dialect, two groups from the two ends of this spectrum such that each could be said to use identifiably standard or nonstandard grammatical forms.⁸ (As it happened, individuals from both sites were included in each group.) So identified, the SD group consisted of thirteen subjects (all native speakers, mostly middle class, and mostly white) who consistently used the inflectional forms of standard English. The NSD group consisted of thirteen subjects (all native speakers and all black except one) who had in common variability in their use of grammatical inflections. Six subjects habitually used NSD forms but none exclusively characteristic of Black English Vernacular, and seven habitually used BEV as well as other NSD forms. In identifying subjects as SD or NSD speakers, I was guided by my reading of the sociolinguists—Fasold, Labov, Shuy, Stewart, Wolfram, and others—and by an ear for dialect forms educated over two decades of working closely with urban and inner city students.

Language patterns, as indicated above, were not my only criteria for my choice of subjects. The students selected for both groups were, so far as I could judge, all mature and highly motivated individuals with similar amounts of writing experience. Most had already completed one to four semesters of college course work, and all but one in each group were in their twenties or older. And, of course, all had problems with error

⁷ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). See especially Chap. 1.

⁸ I considered mainly grammatical features in identifying subjects as speakers of standard or nonstandard dialect. Although linguists distinguish dialects by describing variations in phonological and lexical as well as grammatical features, they identify populations largely on the basis of grammatical features. See Walt Wolfram and R. W. Fasold, *The Study of Social Dialects in American English* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974).

ranging from serious to acute. At the same time, subjects within each group varied, apparently rather widely, in reading proficiency, level of cognitive skills, and composing abilities. However, I had good reason to believe, despite these necessary individual variations, that further testing would show that my two speech groups were similar in their *range* of differences. Under these circumstances, group comparisons in respect to error could be made more readily without fear that factors other than dialect were at the root of differences.

PROCEDURES

My primary measure was to count and categorize the errors in subjects' own writing (error categories are discussed below in connection with my predictions about the outcome of the count). As a control on the kinds of errors likely to be made by each subject, I assigned identical writing tasks to all, in a variety of modes. In completing these papers, most subjects generated about 2000 words.

As a possible check on my primary error count, I designed an additional "measure of encoding skills" in which subjects were asked to write a 416-word passage from dictation, mostly narrative with low-level vocabulary but rich in forms and structures likely to induce common errors. I recorded my own voice (by then familiar to subjects), reading the passage slowly and distinctly in standard English with suitable pauses to give subjects time to turn off the tape and write what they had heard. As an error measure, such an exercise has an advantage over freely composed writing in that it requires individual writers to use specific forms and conventions which might not happen to occur in samples of their own writing, or which they might avoid using. I planned to test the instrument's reliability by comparing the distribution of errors in the dictation exercise to the distribution of errors that occurred in subjects' own writing. (For those who are curious, or who may wish to use the dictation instrument themselves as a possible alternative to the time-consuming process of counting errors in students' own writing, the full text is given in Appendix A.)

Next, I designed instruments and mapped out procedures which would enable me to measure the relationship of subjects' errors not only to their speech patterns, but also to other possible influences on error: level of reading comprehension, of cognitive skills, and of composing ability. I also planned to question them about their reading habits and perceptions of the written code.

Reading specialists at CUNY recommended the College Board Degrees of Reading Power as the most suitable reading measure for my sample and in view of my purposes. The DRP assigns scores according to readers' ability to comprehend texts of gradually increasing difficulty, rather than by comparing their ability to that of average readers on various grade levels. Its norming method overcomes the drawbacks of conventional reading tests which cannot be used for comparing readers, like those in my study, with widely diverse skills. Another advantage of the DRP is that, in contrast to traditional reading tests, it measures skills *specific* to reading as a mental task, not those cognitive skills which can develop independently of

reading experience. Cloze procedures are used to measure readers' control of a passage's vocabulary, syntax, and basic meaning; the test does not ask them, as most other reading tasks do, to reason further about the passage (for example, to select the best title for it or to identify its main idea), thus calling on skills which are not peculiar to reading.

Two of the writing tasks used in the error count were designed to measure composing skills. One of these was in the expressive and the other in the extensive mode (in Emig's sense of those terms⁹). In a blind reading, we (an experienced basic writing teacher and I) rated these papers on a holistic scale of 1-5, using a simplified version of the Wilkinson model of writing maturity¹⁰ as a primary trait scoring guide. Because I wanted to separate out composing from encoding skills, ratings ignored errors as much as possible. The scores assigned by each rater to a given subject were added together and the results, on a scale of 2-10, are referred to as subjects' "composing scores."

Because I also wanted to get an idea of my subjects' reasoning abilities, I devised a task which required them to analyze a 1200-word piece of expository prose, an abbreviated version of an article from a magazine for educated adults¹¹—relatively uncomplicated in its syntax and vocabulary, but complex in its ideas—and then in their own words to write a brief summary (150 words or less), including only the author's main point and her most important supporting ideas. The DRP score assigned to this article by the College Board staff placed it well within the reading competency (as also measured on the DRP scale) of all but a few of my subjects. For these, the vocabulary (not the syntax) was too difficult, so I let them use a dictionary. Although success on this summarizing task is conditioned somewhat by reading and writing skills, it calls more on the ability to analyze and synthesize than the other reading and writing tasks which the subjects performed. Evidence of these abilities was the primary consideration in assigning scores. The resulting "summary scores" (obtained by following procedures similar to those used for obtaining the composing scores) confirmed my impressions (gathered in interviews with subjects, in conferences with their instructors, and in reading all the other written work in their folders) of the levels of cognitive skills which individual subjects brought to academic tasks. It's my belief that the summary score is a fairly accurate indication of cognitive skills for the subjects in my study. (Analysis showed that the interrater reliability coefficient for both scores was high—.88 for the summary scores and .80 for the composing scores.)

Finally, I spent many fruitful hours with subjects, applying the more exploratory procedures of the case-study approach to writing research.

⁹ Janet A. Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, Research Report No. 13 (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971).

¹⁰ See Marilyn Sternglass, "Applications of the Wilkinson Model of Writing Maturity to College Writing," *College Composition and Communication*, 33 (1982), 167-175.

¹¹ Katherine Davis Fishman, "The Joyful Elite," *New York Magazine*, 18 Jan. 1982, pp. 43-48.

These included reading protocols, editing protocols, and interviews, or, more accurately, informal and spontaneous questioning of subjects during protocol sessions. I also made limited use of composing protocols.

To produce reading protocols, I taped subjects reading samples of their own writing and other texts characterized by both standard and non-standard English forms. Using the insights of miscue analysis, I examined these tapes for evidence of differences between subjects' spoken language forms as reflected in their oral performance and the language forms appearing in the texts. For the editing protocols, subjects tried to correct errors, and as they did so, explained why they were making specific corrections. These protocols gave me a clear idea of subjects' ability to detect differences between their oral reading and the text they were editing, and whether or not the rules they applied (if any) in making corrections were appropriate.¹²

PREDICTIONS

My predictions about the kinds and quantities of errors which would appear in the writing of each speech group in my study were based on my hypotheses about the sources of error. I counted the most common, serious, and systematic errors that occurred in the writing of my sample. Most basic writing teachers would no doubt find the list of errors counted, as it appears below, entirely familiar, but the specification of some of the items and their order might strike them as a bit strange. The format of my list, however, is far from random; my hypotheses dictated these specifications and shaped that sequence as I shall explain shortly.

These are the categories of errors counted in subjects' writing (for a fuller description and example of each category, see Appendix B):

- A 1. Errors in sentence punctuation
- 2. Basic errors in pronouns and adverbs
- 3. Subject-verb agreement errors which involve intervening words
- B 4. Errors in writing conventions, that is, the visual conventions of the written code (like capitalization, use of apostrophes, etc.)
- 5. Spelling errors
- 6. "Wrong words," including homophone confusions
- C 7. Omitted words, including copulae
- 8. Omitted inflectional suffixes
- D 9. Inflectional suffixes added inappropriately
- 10. Wrong whole-word verb forms

¹² Elaine O. Lees of Pittsburgh University is currently doing some interesting research using editing protocols, but mostly with SD speakers.

The list is sequenced in four clusters: (A) errors which I intended to count but not try to trace to their sources (categories 1-3), (B) errors which I speculated were not traceable to spoken language habits (phonological or grammatical), but rather might reflect unfamiliarity with print-code conventions, or alternatively, be perceptual in origin (categories 4-6), (C) errors which might be traceable to spoken language habits (phonological or grammatical), or perhaps to some other sources (categories 7-8), and (D) errors which I hypothesized have their origins unambiguously in the grammatical patterns of spoken language (categories 9-10). Errors were counted in the first category in which they might be placed. This insured a bias *against* my hypothesis: If a way of accounting for an error apart from spoken language habits were possible, it would be accepted.

Categories 1-3 were of peripheral interest to my study because too little is clearly understood about their causes to make their occurrence or nonoccurrence as specific error types susceptible to interpretation. However, such errors are too common to exclude from the overall error count. Category 3 is inserted where it is on the list to make sure that errors in verb agreement which occur in complicated constructions (common enough even among English teachers) are not included in categories 8 or 10 where they may occur for very different reasons. About the remaining categories, my reasoning was as follows: Errors in categories 4-6 ought to be non-dialect-related since they involve visual symbolization, not linguistic forms. (I believed that these problems could be traced to some failure to adequately control the learned visual code, stemming perhaps from simple ignorance of its norms or from faulty visual discrimination skills, that is, difficulties in fully *seeing* the symbols on the page.) On the other hand, errors in group 10, I reasoned, must be linguistically based. A person might omit the -s ending in *he dance* for any one of several reasons, as Whiteman, Bartholomae, and others¹³ have pointed out. But it's hard to see any reason why a writer would produce a whole-word verb form as in the phrase *she have* except that it occurs in his dialect. Similarly, it appeared that errors in category 9 (hypercorrections, like *she droved*) are most likely also to be linguistically-based, although less directly—arising perhaps from the conflict which writers experience between their acquired nonstandard speech patterns and those demanded by standard written English. Errors in categories 7-8 (omitted words and omitted suffixes) were ambiguous; they might or might not be linguistically-based.

In the light of this reasoning, I made the following predictions about the kinds and quantities of errors which would occur in the writing of the two speech groups in my study. Since I was convinced that errors in categories 4-6 were due to deficient mastery of the print code and not to the influence of nonstandard dialect, and since I had done all that I could to insure that the range of factors related to literacy (level of formal schooling, reading proficiency, etc.) was the same for both speech groups, I predicted that these errors would occur in equal quantities in the writing of

¹³ Whiteman, pp. 68ff.; Bartholomae, pp. 262-264.

both groups. And since I attributed the errors in categories 9 and 10 exclusively to the influence of nonstandard dialect, I predicted that these errors would occur only in the writing of subjects who spoke NSD. Further, since errors in categories 7 and 8 might occur for either reason, I predicted that they would occur for both reasons and so be more frequent in the writing of the NSD group. Finally, because of the large number of errors likely to be traceable exclusively to nonstandard dialect, I predicted that the NSD speakers would make more errors overall than the SD group.

FINDINGS

Since this study was designed most basically to provide the opportunity to observe individual behavior, the quantity of data collected was limited. In some but not all instances, it turned out to be adequate for statistical reliability. Keeping in mind the relatively small amount of data available for analysis, I will indicate in my discussion the confidence that can be placed in particular findings.

As Table 1 shows, NSD speakers' total error rates, both in their own writing and in the dictation exercise, are, as hypothesized, indeed significantly higher than those of the SD speakers. The quantity of errors counted and the consistency of the distribution of errors in the two measures used (a finding to be discussed below) give confidence that the error rates do in fact accurately reflect the quantities of errors which subjects normally make in their writing.

TABLE 1
Comparison of Standard and Nonstandard Dialect
Speakers' Error Rates
(Based on errors per 100 words)

	SD Speakers N=13	NSD Speakers N=13	
	Mean	Mean	t-value
Own writing	5.03	8.61	2.691 *
Dictation	9.61	15.01	2.713 *

* $p < .05$

As noted, an effort was made to match the two groups of subjects in ways considered most relevant to literacy skills. It's necessary to consider whether this attempt was successful before concluding that speech differences account for the differences in quantity of error. Table 2 presents data bearing on this question. T-tests applied to composing and summary scores show that the two speech groups are not significantly different in their performance on these two measures. As a further check on the relationship of summary and composing scores to quantity of errors, all subjects' individual scores on the measures were compared to

their individual error rates. Analysis showed a zero-order correlation between composing scores and error rates both in subjects' own writing, and in the dictation exercise; that is, no relationship whatsoever was found between composing scores and error rates. Also, no significant relationship between summary scores and error rates in subjects' own writing ($r=.27$), nor in the dictation exercise ($r=.36$) was found. So it seems that the two groups are equivalent in cognitive and composing abilities, and that neither differences in these skills between the two groups as a whole nor differences among individual subjects account for their differences in error rates.

TABLE 2

Comparison of Standard and Nonstandard Dialect Speakers' Summary and Composing Scores

	SD Speakers N = 13	NSD Speakers N=13	
	Mean	Mean	t-value
Summary Scores	5.54	5.33	.265
Composing Scores	6.45	5.70	.834

This outcome corresponds with my own impressions that some of the best composers and clearest thinkers among my subjects, and indeed among my students over the years, were among the poorest encoders, and vice versa. Because of the absence of validated instruments for measuring adults' ability to reason in verbal terms apart from reading, and for measuring their composing skills apart from encoding, the measures and procedures I used for these purposes are necessarily experimental and exploratory. Still, the caution I'm inclined to feel about the above findings is tempered when I consider how consistent they are with my sustained impressions of subjects' cognitive and composing competencies.

Despite efforts to match the two groups for reading level, Table 3 reveals that they belong to significantly different populations of readers. Mean scores of the two groups are 13.9 points apart and are significantly different at the .01 confidence level. Furthermore, the NSD group's speed of reading is significantly lower than that of the SD group (the test has no time limit, but sixty minutes to complete the test, according to the DRP manual, is average). Here, we may suspect, is a clue other than dialect to the differences in error rates between the two groups (particularly if we recall the research indicating that deficient reading skills generally predict poor writing skills¹⁴). But this is not so: further analysis shows no

¹⁴ Walter Loban, *The Language of Elementary School Children*, Research Report No. 1 (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963).

significant correlations between subjects' DRP scores and their corresponding error rates across the groups, both in their own writing ($r = -.36$) and in the dictation exercise ($r = -.27$). And within the groups, analysis shows zero-order correlations between error rates and reading scores. In other words, no significant relationships were found between the number of errors individual subjects made in writing and how well they performed on the reading test.¹⁵ This finding invites confidence since it is based on a comparison between the reading scores of a substantial number of subjects (26) on an exhaustively tested instrument and on error rates derived from two sizable counts. (Although I was surprised at the large difference in the range of the reading scores of the two groups, which I had tried to match with one another in that respect, I had anticipated that error rates and reading scores for individuals would not correlate, for I had observed that some of the best readers in both groups made many more encoding errors than some of the poorest readers did.)

TABLE 3

Comparison of Standard and Nonstandard Dialect Speakers'
Reading Scores

	SD Speakers N = 13	NSD Speakers N = 13	
	Mean	Mean	t-value
DRP (Reading)	76.00	62.15	3.419 * *
Time (in minutes)	77.69	108.46	2.310 *

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

The negative evidence, then, is that differences in cognitive, composing, and reading skills do not seem to account for the differences in the error rates of the two groups. At the same time, Tables 4 and 5 below provide evidence that dialect differences do in fact account for the differences observed.

¹⁵ A significant relationship was found between reading scores and composing scores for the SD group only ($r = .83$; $p < .01$). This finding together with the one just cited (that reading ability and encoding skills do *not* correlate) underscore the importance of the distinction between composing and encoding to research on reading/writing relationships. Attention to this distinction could help unravel some of the apparent contradictions and also address some of the gaps Sandra Stotsky finds in this body of research: see her article, "Research on Reading/Writing Relationships: A Synthesis and Suggested Directions for Future Research," *Language Arts*, 60 (1983), 627-642.

TABLE 4

Mean Number of Errors per Error Type for Standard and Nonstandard
Dialect Speakers in Own Writing and in Dictation

	SD N=13	NSD N=13	SD N=13	NSD N=13
Error Categories	Own Writing		Dictation	
Sentence punctuation	10.8	12.8	1.8	2.8
Sub-vb agr/pronoun/adverb	6.2	7.5	0.0	0.0
Writing conventions	30.8	37.3	18.0	22.8
Spelling	27.9	25.3	9.8	12.8
Wrong words	13.6	18.8	7.8	9.5
Omitted words	1.6	2.2	0.7	2.0
Suffixes omitted	6.4	29.2	1.7	8.4
Suffixes added	0.0	4.5	0.0	1.8
Wrong whole-word verb forms	0.0	5.6	0.0	0.9

TABLE 5

Distribution of Error Types by Percentages:
Standard vs. Nonstandard Dialect Speakers

	SD N=13	NSD N=13	SD N=13	NSD N=13
Error Categories	Own Writing		Dictation	
Sentence punctuation	11.1%	9.1%	4.5%	4.6%
Sub-vb agr/pronoun/adverb	6.4	5.3	0.0	0.0
Writing conventions	31.6	26.6	45.2	37.3
Spelling	28.7	18.1	24.6	21.0
Wrong words	14.0	11.3	19.6	15.5
Omitted words	1.6	1.6	1.8	3.3
Suffixes omitted	6.6	20.8	4.3	13.8
Suffixes added	0.0	3.2	0.0	3.0
Wrong whole-word verb forms	0.0	4.0	0.0	1.5
Totals	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

As seen in Table 4, NSD speakers make more errors in almost every category than SD speakers do, including categories 4-6, where I had expected no differences. But, as I had hypothesized, NSD speakers make many more errors in the categories for which a dialect-related differential was predicted (8-10). Indeed, "suffixes added" (hypercorrect linguistic forms) and "wrong whole-word verb forms" occur *only* in the writing of

NSD speakers. As Table 5 demonstrates, 7.2% of all the errors committed by this group in their own writing occur in these categories, and up to 28% of their total errors (depending on the attribution of omitted suffixes) may have their source in NSD. Just as revealing is the fact that, if we exclude all categories of error which could be rooted in grammatical differences between the two groups, the distribution of error in the remaining categories presents an essentially consistent picture, as shown in Table 6. In sum, the two speech groups make errors in roughly the same proportions except for the categories where there is the possibility of nonstandard grammatical influence.

TABLE 6

Distribution of Error Types When Errors of Possible Grammatical Origin Are Excluded: Standard vs. Nonstandard Dialect Speakers

Error Categories	SD	NSD
	N=13	N=13
Own Writing		
Sentence punctuation	11.9%	12.8%
Sub-vb agr/pronoun/adverb	6.8	7.4
Writing conventions	33.9	37.0
Spelling	30.7	25.0
Wrong words	14.9	15.6
Omitted words	1.8	2.2
Totals	100.0%	100.0%

To test whether the observed differences in quantities of errors made by the two speech groups are statistically significant, the numbers of errors each group made in particular categories were compared. Analysis of the number of errors in categories 8-10 (suffixes omitted, suffixes added, and wrong whole-word verb forms), those posited to be possibly or definitely grammar-based, suggests that the two groups are fundamentally different in respect to these errors. The obtained F-ratio was found to be 21.1 for grammatical error in their own writing and 15.31 for grammatical error in the dictation exercise. Since two different populations exist, further comparison is unwarranted. In an analysis of the number of errors in categories 4-6, those posited to be nonlinguistically based (writing conventions, spelling, and wrong words), the two groups were found to be significantly different (t -value=2.169; $p<.05$). In the dictation exercise, however, no significant difference was found between the two groups in numbers of errors in these categories (t -value=1.101). In statistical terms, then, in respect to errors posited to be grammar-based, the study

sample has been drawn from two different populations. In respect to other errors, the difference between the two groups is measurable, but not dramatic.

Table 5 allows us to compare the distribution of errors in the dictation exercise and in subjects' own writing. In the first three categories, the dictation exercise fails as a predictor of error. But when we compare the percentage of errors which each speech group commits in the remaining categories in their own writing to the percentage in the dictation, the amounts are found to be approximately the same. This consistency suggests that the dictation exercise could be a fairly reliable alternative to counting most types of errors in subjects' own writing, at least all those types with which this study is concerned.

To test further for possible connections between reading skills and error, subjects' numbers of errors in category clusters 8-10 and 4-6 were compared to reading scores. Since SD and NSD groups belong to different populations of readers, the difference was controlled by analyzing the scores of SD and NSD speakers separately. In both groups, for both types of errors (those hypothesized to be dialect-related and those not dialect-related), in their own writing and in the dictation exercise, zero-order correlations were found between reading scores and numbers of errors. In other words, in both speech groups, no relationships whatsoever were found between quantities of specific types of errors committed and reading scores.

CONCLUSIONS

Although (as previously noted) from a statistical perspective the scope of this study is limited, the quantity of data examined is not negligible, and the investigation analyzes variables and relationships among them not previously considered. Moreover, the findings discussed so far are entirely consistent with my case-study observations. It would seem, then, that the following conclusions can be drawn from these findings with considerable confidence: 1. Among adult basic writers,¹⁶ differences in reading comprehension skills seem not to account for differences in total quantities of errors, nor for differences in types of errors committed. 2. Among adult basic writers, such is the overriding influence of nonstandard dialect on encoding behavior, that even when composing and cognitive skills are on the same level, nonstandard dialect speakers are likely to produce many more errors than standard dialect speakers. 3. Among adult basic writers, nonstandard speech patterns apparently account entirely for two highly stigmatized categories of errors, hypercorrect linguistic forms and wrong whole-word verb forms, and also for a substantial portion of omitted inflectional suffixes.

¹⁶ It is important to stress that this study's sample is composed entirely of adults, that is, students of at least college age, and mostly older. Teachers who may wish to make extrapolations to instruction should keep this limitation in mind.

CASE-STUDY FINDINGS

The results of the above quantitative analyses are clear, but cast no light on *why* nonstandard dialect is a source of error, or on the causes of error not based in NSD, or on how to distinguish one cause from another in ambiguous cases. Closer examination into the patterns of error for each group and the results of reading and editing protocols help provide some of the answers.

A composite picture of errors typically committed by each group in writing from dictation gives an illuminating overview. Italics indicate the types of errors which are common to both groups; bold face indicates those types of error which are limited to NSD speakers. To indicate misspellings, which tended to be highly idiosyncratic, the most common or a representative misspelling is given. It is revealing that there are no types of errors peculiar to the SD group. (Refer to Appendix A for the original passage.)

Standard Dialect Speakers' Transcription

Some people have strange fears. For example, after a shower of *mediors* passed over New Mexico a *women* in Vermont refused to leave her house for five years. A man who has a *violant* fear of *lightening* swears that he's going to find a place to live where rain never falls. Several *woman* who live in an ideal *enviorment* in *Arizona* are so *frighten* of germs that they *reecently* bought *sergical* masks which they wear night and day *weather* at home or at work. Even though people with these *fobias* are often *quit inteligant*, *there to terified* to listen to reason. *Its* no use telling them that *their* being silly. *There* minds are *parilized* by fear and they just *cant* hear what *your* saying. On the other hand some *peoples* fears are based on personal experience. A friend of mine is *frighten* of elevators, but she certainly has a good reason. *When ever* she gets on a *crowed* elevator, this shocking memory always comes back to haunt her. It all began in Georgia where my friend *usaly* spends her vacation with her cousins. Once she *when* to stay with them in a old *manshion* which they had leased for the summer. The first night she slept *their* around midnight *their where* strange noises under her window. She jumped up and looked out, *in* the moonlight she saw a coach....

Nonstandard Dialect Speakers' Transcription

Some people **has** strange fears, for example, after a shower of *medior* **pass** over New Mexico a *women* in *Vermount* *refuse* to leave her house for five years. A man who **have** a *vilent* fear of *lighting* **swear** that **he** going to find a place to live *were* rain never falls. *Sevral* *woman* who *lived* in **a idea** *enviorment* in *Arziona* are so *frighten* of germs that they *reasonly* brought *sugrical* **masses** which they wear night and day *weather* at home or at work. Even *thought* people with these **fobia** are *offten* *quiet intelegent* *there to terify* to *lisson* to **reasons**. *Its* *know* use telling them that *there* being silly. *There* **mines** are **parilize** by **fears** *an* they just **can** hear what *your*

saying. On the other hand some **people fear** are **base** on *personnel experiance*. A friend of **mines** is *frighten* of *elavators* but she *cer-tenly* **have** a good reason. *When ever* she gets on a *crowed elavator* this shocking memory **alway come** back to *hunt* her. It all began in Georgia where my friend *usally* spends her vacation with her *cousin*. Once she went to stay with them in a old *mansion* which they had *lease* for the summer. The *frist* night she slept *their* around midnight *their* **was** strange noises under her window. She *jump* up and *look* out, *in* the moonlight she saw a coach....

The differences here clearly dramatize my finding that these two speech groups represent two different populations of basic writers. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the NSD transcription is the transformation of whole-word verb forms (dictated in standard English) into nonstandard forms, as in the phrases "people *has...*", "A man who *have...*", and "their *was* strange noises..." Subjects literally heard one word and wrote an entirely different word. These category 10 errors naturally do not occur in the dictation exercise as often as they do in subjects' own writing, but the fact that they occur at all attests to the strength of these forms as vehicles of meaning for NSD speakers. Such manifestations of the working of deep inner linguistic processes have been well-documented in reading¹⁷ and in speech.¹⁸ Here we see a dramatic instance of this transformational process at work in writing, as standard forms, spoken slowly and distinctly into subjects' intently listening ears, emerge from their pens in what are to them more meaningful and familiar nonstandard shapes.

In editing sessions with SD speakers reading NSD texts, I saw the same process at work in reverse. For example, the sentence, "Two clients on Ward 14 was moving chairs" was read aloud by an SD speaker, a proficient reader, as "The client on Ward 14 was moving chairs"—so powerfully does the form *was* signal the singular for SD speakers!¹⁹ (If, gentle SD reader, you're confused, read the sentences again, slowly.) This phenomenon illustrates a truth that some critics of the theory of nonstandard dialect influence on writing seem to have missed: Spoken language is not just a string of sounds any more than a text is just a string of symbols; both are manifestations of underlying language patterns. As a consequence, writers who speak a somewhat different language from the one they must encode

¹⁷ See Kenneth S. Goodman and Catherine Buck, "Dialect Barriers to Reading Comprehension Revisited," *The Reading Teacher*, 27 (October 1973), 6-12; see also Yetta Goodman and Carolyn Burke, "Do They Read What They Speak?" in *Language and the Language Arts*, ed. Johanna S. Destefano and Sharon E. Fox (Boston: Little Brown, 1974), pp. 244-250.

¹⁸ See Courtney B. Cazden, "Suggestions from Early Language Acquisition," in *Language and the Language Arts*, pp. 42-48; see also William Labov, "The Logic of Nonstandard English," *The Florida FL Reporter*, 7 (Spring/Summer 1969), 60-74, 169.

¹⁹ See Frank Smith, *Writing and the Writer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), Chapter 5, for an explanation of one theory accounting for this process.

have more to learn than the differences between the sound of isolated lexical items and the way they look in writing.

Subjects in my SD group, though error-prone writers themselves, found the NSD verb forms in the reading protocols highly distracting. (One of them, who five minutes before had been complaining with some asperity about his teacher's obsession with his own mistakes, exclaimed with horror as he read a report containing NSD verb forms.) The contrary was true for the NSD group: the editing protocols showed that NSD verb forms are precisely the errors which the NSD speakers are least able to detect. They might notice lapses in writing conventions like a missing apostrophe in a *he don't*, but they tended to read over and past grammar-based errors both in their own writing and in the writing of others. I found that ignorance of standard written English was usually not the problem. When I underlined several verbs at random and asked subjects which ones were wrong, most could not only identify the errors but could tell me why they were wrong and how to fix them. But in reading for meaning, and even in reading for correctness, they tended not to notice such errors if they were left unmarked. Perl also documents this phenomenon when she reports that of the 550 "editizing" changes made by her subjects (all apparently nonstandard dialect speakers), only 26 were verbs. She reports, on the other hand, that 191 were spelling changes.²⁰ The data resulting from analysis of editing and composing protocols in the course of the current study support Perl's data and suggest that conventions peculiar to writing, like spelling and punctuation, are much easier to objectify than features which are common to speech and writing, particularly grammatical forms.

Because their natural language forms happen to be unacceptable in writing does not make it any easier for NSD speakers to see, much less to avoid them. It appears, not only from their performance on the dictation exercise and in the reading protocols, but also from their own introspective reports, that these forms are basic components of the language in which they *think*, and therefore in which they compose—and so in which they inevitably encode. As one subject remarked, "Whatever you think is just what you write down. And that's the way I was thinking" (when she wrote *was* instead of *were*). It follows that the more that she and all NSD speakers are urged to compose in standard English, the more they experience this area of overlap between the composing and encoding processes as an area of conflict. I will say more later about the pedagogical implications of this fact.

Hypercorrections (category 9) are almost as much of a problem for NSD speakers as incorrect whole-word verb forms. Examples in the dictation passage are "lisson [listen] to reasons" and "a friend of mines." Instances which occurred further on in the exercise are "gaved up," "droved off," and "doesn't seems." Subjects used two-part carbonless forms and had been instructed when finished to read over their transcriptions while listening to

²⁰ Sondra Perl, "Five Writers Writing: Case Studies of the Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers," Diss., New York University 1978, p. 320.

a replay of the tape and to make corrections as necessary on the second copy. Errors in whole-word verb forms almost always appeared on the original copy and were mostly left uncorrected, but hypercorrections were usually introduced as corrections on the second copy. Some of these errors (like "a friend of mines"), I discovered from the protocols, are carryovers from spoken language habits and so can be accounted for in the same way as category 10 errors. But when I asked subjects to explain hypercorrections that they did not use in speech, they only occasionally were able to do so in terms of an understandable misapplication of the rules of standard English (as in constructions like "it makes her looks better"). Much more often subjects expressed only a vague fear that the form they had originally written wasn't quite right. As I looked at some of these timid emendations, added in an uncertain hand, I felt, regretfully, that these writers related to the written language as to Simon Legree. But in certain cases, these hypercorrect forms, often from the same writer, seemed to be confidently written and completely spontaneous, such as, typically, a *-d* or *-s* on the infinitive form. I never heard this hypercorrection uttered in conversation, but it did turn up on several reading protocols. In other words, this hypercorrect form had apparently become an established part of some subjects' formal usage in reading and writing.

For this group of writers, multiple hypercorrect forms may be the clearest indicators both of their struggle to resolve the conflict between their spoken language and the one they're trying to write, as well as of the linguistic insecurity which grips them as soon as they pick up a pen. Over the years when they should and could be growing in literacy skills, this insecurity apparently becomes for many a generalized malaise which affects every aspect of their experience as writers, and, unfortunately, their overall self-image as learners. As one of them mourned, "There's a root word and a ending to it, basically, and if I connect these two.... I can understand it while I'm doing it, but then I put the book down and that's it.... A paper just terrifies me."

In respect to omitted suffixes (category 8), researchers have noted their occurrence in the writing of both speech groups. This study found that they occurred about five times more frequently in the writing of the NSD group. However, this was a frequent error for SD speakers as well. Why should an SD speaker make such an error? As the transcription composite shows, many SD speakers omitted the suffix on the participial form *frighten(ed)*; and later in the exercise some SD speakers dropped the ending on the past-tense verbs *jump*, *look*, *pack*, and *ask*. Omissions like these sometimes suggest the influence of pronunciation patterns, where the *-ed* has been reduced, or assimilated to a following consonant. However, phonological structure or environment in no way explains dozens of other instances of omitted suffixes, including *-ing* omissions, which turned up in the SD group's own writing. One thing is clear: for the SD group missing inflections did not reflect underlying grammatical patterns. The literature on miscue analysis shows that when subjects read for meaning, their underlying grammatical patterns prevail in their oral performance, regardless of the forms, standard or nonstandard, which characterize the text. So

I relied on subjects' reading protocols to reveal such grammar-based patterns. If the forms used in writing matched oral patterns (for example, if a subject wrote "he walk" and then read it aloud as "he walk"), I could be reasonably sure that the error was grammar-based. However, when SD speakers would read their writing aloud, they would consistently pronounce endings which they had omitted on the page. Under these circumstances, some other influence must be at work producing the error, perhaps weakness in perceptual skills, for example, or Whiteman's "non-dialect-specific tendency to omit inflectional endings."

The fact that dialect manifestly does not seem to account for SD speakers' omission of inflectional endings means that we cannot assume that dialect will always explain their omission by NSD speakers. For one thing, they make many of the same types of nonlinguistic errors as the SD group, like omitted *-ings*. More important, I found that I could not dependably extrapolate from a generalized impression of a subject's language patterns to specific errors in her writing. Neither did the quantity of NSD forms in speech reliably predict the quantity which characterized the speaker's writing, for a subject often added endings in speech which he omitted in writing, and *vice versa*. Moreover, the pattern of these discrepancies differed with different NSD speakers.

Analysis of subjects' reading and editing protocols suggests that more than half of my NSD subjects' missing *-ed* suffixes in writing reflect their language patterns (with wide variance from subject to subject), whereas missing *-ed* inflections in the writing of SD speakers are unrelated to spoken forms, except for an occasional truncated participle or a finite verb ending in a consonant cluster as in the verb *asked*. The *-s* endings seem to be a much less separable inflection than *-ed* endings for SD speakers, since they much less seldom omitted them, or if they did, rarely failed to correct them in editing. The same, actually, seems to be true for the NSD speakers; they omitted the *-s* less often than the *-ed* inflections, and when they did, the omission appeared to be almost always a reflection of their individual speech patterns. The most common omissions in writing for both groups in order of diminishing frequency were the *-ed* on participles, the *-ed* on past tense verbs, *-s* endings on present tense verbs, and *-s* endings on nouns.

Too few errors occurred in category 7 (omitted words) to learn much about it. But it is interesting to note that the larger number of words omitted by NSD speakers, in comparison to SD, on the dictation exercise is accounted for mostly by omitted copulae, a dominant feature of Black English Vernacular. This outcome suggests that this category should be divided into two categories in future studies.

"Wrong words" (error category 6) mark the frontier of the domain of the print code, the written language in its learned and visual aspect. Although I had hypothesized that the number of errors in this category would be equal for both groups, the NSD group made more "wrong word" errors than the SD group. Nevertheless, after close examination of specific errors committed in this category, I concluded that both groups made them for the same reason. This is clearly the case for homophones like

you/you're, or near homophones like *than/then*.²¹ Since these pairs of words are pronounced alike or almost alike by all native speakers, regardless of dialect differences, writers must confuse them for reasons that are equally relevant to both speech groups in my study.

How then to account for the difference in quantity of errors in category 6? Here we must examine one sub-category of wrong words which raises thorny questions, questions which must be clarified at this point because failure to do so in the past has resulted in continuing confusion about the whole issue of dialect influence on writing.²² This sub-category is composed of errors like *when* for *went*, *cause* for *cost*, and *mines* for *minds*, which some error-analysts attribute to dialect differences.²³ These errors may indeed be dialect-related inasmuch as there is a tendency in nonstandard dialects like BEV to reduce final consonant clusters, producing many more homonyms or near-homonyms in nonstandard spoken language than exist in standard dialects. But we cannot infer from that fact that dialect differences are the root cause of any category 6 errors. Reliance on sound/letter correspondences tricks all speakers into "wrong word" errors, SD and NSD alike. But it is important to note that these are of an entirely different order from the errors produced by the grammatical influence of NSD. Phonologically influenced error is common when children are learning to write. When an NSD-speaking child writes *mouf* for *mouth* and an SD-speaking child writes *hafto* for *have to*, we have two manifestations of the same phenomenon. These errors underscore the differences between the sounds of lexical items in speech and their representation in writing, differences which all learners must cope with regardless of differences in their dialects. And both errors are susceptible to the same remedy: mastery of the print-code equivalents for these spoken words. On the other hand, if one child writes *they hafto* and another writes *she have to*, we are dealing with errors which are traceable to different sources—one to the sounds of speech and the other to underlying grammatical patterns; one to erroneous symbolization of language (a print-code error), the other to the use of an alternate grammatical form correctly symbolized.

Research on spelling has shown that the influence of the sounds of speech on error for both SD and NSD speakers tends to diminish radically as young learners become more literate, but not so the grammatical influence of NSD. For example, errors like *nes* for *nest* occur much less often among sixth graders than among second graders, but BEV-speaking

²¹ For a brilliant commentary by one of the few students of the grapholect on this feature of written English and the problem it creates for writers, see Henry Bradley, "On the Relations between Spoken and Written Language, with Special Reference to English," in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1913-1914 (London: Oxford University Press, 1915).

²² See in particular Hartwell, pp. 101-118, and Gary N. Underwood, "Bidialectal Freshman Handbooks—The Next Flim-Flam," *The Florida FL Reporter*, 12 (Spring/Fall 1974), 45-48.

²³ See James L. Funkhouser, "Black English: From Speech to Writing," Diss. (St. Louis University 1976).

sixth graders, unlike their SD-speaking counterparts, continue to write the uninflected form *nest* for the inflected form *nests*.²⁴ That is, as children gain experience with and control over the print code, phonetic spellings tend to decrease rapidly, whereas the stronger persistence of uninflected forms reflects the overriding influence of much deeper grammatical habits.

In fact, among my NSD speakers the direct encoding of distinctive pronunciations to sound/letter correspondence which results in misspellings like *nes* for *nest* was rare. Much more common were so-called wrong words reflecting the *dual* influence of distinctive pronunciation patterns and of the print code *interacting* to produce errors like *hole* (but never *hol*) for *hold*.²⁵ This phenomenon accounts for the fact that the NSD speakers as a group made more errors in category 6 (wrong words, including homophones) than did SD speakers. I do not believe that the NSD group overall had weaker control of the print code; indeed, NSD speakers in my sample spelled other kinds of words somewhat more correctly in their own writing than the SD group. But, probably because their pronunciation patterns were more at variance with the sound/letter correspondences of many common English spellings, a few BEV-speaking subjects made an excessively large number of "wrong word" errors, far more than did equally weak encoders in the SD group, and drove up the group error rate in this category. Only subjects with very high error rates made many of these phonologically based errors: To the extent that an NSD-speaking subject was conversant with the print code (as indicated, for example, by her control over other spelling and writing conventions), to that extent she did not tend to make errors in this category. Her control of the print code, however, bore no relationship to the number of grammar-based errors she made. In sum, phonologically based errors were observed to be in proportion to other print-code errors and diminished with increased literacy, but grammar-based errors (categories 8-10) persisted in the writing of NSD speakers who otherwise had largely achieved control over the code.

With this apparent exception noted, errors in writing conventions, spelling, and wrong words (categories 4-6), along with most of the errors in omitted words (7), and some of those in omitted suffixes (8), are presumably print-code territory where errors should be attributed to some failure to control the visual code rather than to the overriding influence of acquired language habits.

In studying their shared difficulties with the print code, I tested individual subjects in both groups on the norms which they most frequently

²⁴ Patrick Groff, "Children's Spelling of Features of BE," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 12 (1978), 21-28; see also Bruce Cronnell, "Black English and Spelling," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 13 (1979), 81-90.

²⁵ Although errors like these, I found, usually reflect the writer's pronunciation patterns, there seem to be occasional exceptions indicating that an error of this kind is not necessarily phonologically based (note *when* for *went* in the SD speakers' transcription). Subjects in both groups pronounced some of the final consonants which they omitted in writing. See Bartholomae, p. 264, on this phenomenon.

violated. I found, for a few individuals, that ignorance of these norms accounted for most of their errors. When these subjects read their own writing and texts produced by other basic writers, I found that they were able to pick out almost all the errors that they knew how to correct. If they passed over an error, it was because they did not know that it was an error. The opposite, however, was true of other individuals. Despite exhortations to read for correctness, they read past their errors, even when they understood the "rule" in question. As they read aloud, these subjects supplied missing endings, even missing words, stumbled over only the most outrageous misspellings, and showed no awareness of the differences between their oral performance and the texts before them.

For the majority of the subjects, however, print-code errors seemed to stem from both sources: ignorance of the rule in some cases, inability to detect errors in context in other cases. But problems of perception were well in the ascendancy over ignorance. Most of my subjects were aware of the difficulty they had in finding their errors but were unable to make the shift from the role of writer, already in possession of the meaning intended by the symbols on the page, to that of reader, getting meaning not from their heads but from those symbols. One student was able to explain lucidly what was demanded by this shift of perception even though he was not often able to meet these demands:

In my head I was saying "bringing up my son," but when I wrote it down I wrote *bring*, b-r-i-n-g. But then when I went over it I still be saying what the thought was in my mind, 'I was bringing up my son.' I read *bringing* but it wasn't on the paper.... But if I put what I'm writing down, and walk away somewhere and come back five minutes later, and pick it up and read it again, I can find my mistakes.... Because by that time, what I've written is out of my mind, and then I can come back—it's like I'm a new person reading it over again. Then I can say comma missing there, period here.

Reasoning from behavioral clues, I have tentatively concluded that the difficulty which this young man and most basic writers have in trying to shift their attention from meaning to code may be the key to the finding that quantity of error and level of reading comprehension do not correlate for these writers. Proficient writers, as they read a text, give *focal* attention to meaning, but characteristically reserve a certain amount of *subsidiary* attention for the code (to borrow Polanyi's useful terminology²⁶). Typographical errors in the text catch their eye even when they're preoccupied with meaning and the code is of no concern to them whatsoever. In editing, they easily reverse the emphasis. Basic writers, in contrast, seem to read almost exclusively for meaning and objectify the code with difficulty. To read at all, of course, they must perceive the code, or at least as much of it as they need to perceive in order to grasp the meaning. These perceptions, however, operate below the level of conscious awareness, and

²⁶ Polanyi, pp. 55-57.

support comprehension while failing to influence the more overt process of editing. Their habit of reading exclusively for meaning is reinforced when they read their own writing, since they already know what they mean without benefit of the written symbols.

While most of the subjects in my study manifested difficulties in objectifying the code, I found this problem to be particularly severe among the NSD speakers. I derived a strong clue to the reason for this from the anomalous writing behavior of three SD-speaking subjects; they omitted *-ed* endings in writing four times as frequently as the others in the SD group. It turned out that all three had spoken NSD as children. Conversations with these subjects and observation of their reading behavior suggested to me that in learning to read, most NSD-speaking children may form the habit of ignoring in particular those details of the code which, for them, are irrelevant and not especially helpful to comprehension. The habit of not only skipping over but even actively suppressing many details of the code as they read (at least insofar as these features are superfluous and even disruptive to comprehension) may make the acquisition of perceptual skills even harder for NSD speakers than for SD. For it has been observed that the habit of inaccurate reading, that is, on the level of *form*, may affect the ability to write with formal accuracy.²⁷ And even among those whose acquired nonstandard grammatical patterns are no longer perceptible in speech, like these three subjects, the habit of decoding with little attention to detail apparently persists. While this habit does not affect reading comprehension, it is a serious liability in writing, especially in editing, which is essentially a process of reading one's own writing.

In yet another way, I observed, the distance between their dialect forms and the forms demanded by the code affected the visual discrimination skills of my NSD-speaking subjects. While SD speakers derived positive if not consistently reliable support from their spoken language in remedying inadvertent lacunae and inaccuracies in their writing, NSD speakers groped for this support in editing and were frustrated by its absence, or worse, by the error traps into which reliance on speech patterns led them. Some had apparently compensated for this lack by developing a strong visual sense of how words appear on the page, unconnected to the way they sound, but the majority had not. In any case, I observed that the NSD speakers in editing seemed not to connect the sounds of words as they pronounced them to their visual configurations as readily as SD speakers did. The two senses, sight and hearing, were less coordinated as they searched for errors during oral editing sessions.²⁸

²⁷ See Edmund H. Henderson, *Learning to Read and Spell* (DeKalb, IL: Northern University Press, 1981), pp. 7-8.

²⁸ For an effort to study this apparent handicap for NSD speakers in the acquisition of literacy, see Sylvia Farnham-Diggory, "How to Study Reading: Some Language Information Processing Ways," in *The Acquisition of Reading*, ed. Frank B. Murray and John J. Pikulski (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1978), pp. 61-89.

In respect to this complex problem, the remarks of the NSD speakers who had worked on the self-instructional exercises in the COMP-LAB were illuminating. All were in agreement that it was an immense help to *hear* on the audiotapes, a component of the program, the inflectional endings not pronounced in their dialect in order to *visualize* these lexical items with their endings when they had to write them. They did not necessarily feel the need to use these pronunciations in their own speech. Instead, as one of them put it, "When I was writing that word [*task*] with a -s on it, I just had to hear the sound of it in my *head*."

An alternate, or perhaps concomitant explanation for the editing problems I've been discussing was brought to my attention by some of the NSD speakers who were working hard to learn how to "speak right," as they put it. In conversation they had succeeded in avoiding some of their acquired nonstandard forms, but reported that, when they were involved in composing, they tended to "slip back" and use "bad English" in their writing. This happened, I speculated, because this usage was still part of their inner speech patterns, that is, the language in which the mind speaks to itself. One, for example, had almost beaten her difficulty with the *was/were* distinction, and used the "right word" fairly spontaneously in speech. When she came across the phrase "there was several patients" in one of her own reports, she said, "There I go again. I don't say that no more. It's out of my past. That only happens when I'm thinking about what I'm trying to write." This kind of remark was so common among my subjects, including those mentioned above whose speech patterns are now fully standard, that I've tentatively concluded that the influence of NSD is even stronger and more lasting on inner speech than it is on spoken language patterns. Inner speech habits, then, may reinforce faulty perceptual habits to produce errors in the writing of those whose present spoken language would suggest little influence from NSD in respect to specific errors. In communing with themselves, particularly in the difficult act of composing, they tend to revert to their earliest acquired language patterns, those with which they feel most comfortable, and which effectively reduce the tension created by writing.

I'll conclude these speculations with comments on another quite different problem adding to the NSD speakers' insecurity about writing. This stumbling block to growth in literacy has not, to my knowledge, been explored at all, perhaps because researchers rarely follow handicapped writers into academic settings beyond the remedial classroom. In any case, it's commonly asserted that nonstandard forms don't impede the comprehensibility of writing. And for most of the writing produced in the basic writing classroom, this is certainly true. However, to communicate intelligibly in the more complex and tightly organized sentence patterns characteristic of mature prose, it is necessary to control the inflections of standard English. My NSD-speaking subjects had gained receptive control over these constructions in the reading they had to do for their college course work, but some were at a loss when they had to produce them in writing for college courses or on the job. One of them was as puzzled as I was when she tried to read this sentence aloud from her own notes on a

mental patient, "The doctor she assign to feel this client is highly suicidal." But when I deciphered her meaning and wrote in the missing letters as follows, "The doctor she's assigned to feels this client is highly suicidal," the writer too saw what she had meant, and understood her errors (with a groan). She remarked, "That's what happens. That's why I get F's on my papers. My teachers don't know what I'm trying to say." It's no wonder that profoundly insecure but intelligent writers like this young woman often deliberately avoid complex constructions, and, in consequence, simplify their ideas, projecting the impression in their writing of immature, childlike thinkers.

Thus, in a variety of ways, nonstandard dialect appears to extend its influence beyond simply introducing errors rooted in speech patterns into writing, actually creating problems of perception and insecurity which make mastery of the print code harder for them than it is for SD speakers. This indirect influence may account for the larger amounts of print-code error in the writing of the NSD group as compared with the SD.

SUMMARY OF INSIGHTS FROM CASE STUDIES

My case-study observations have led me to two conclusions about sources of error as they apply generally to adult basic writers, regardless of speech patterns: (1) Weaknesses in perceptual skills prevent the writers' detection of many of their own omitted inflectional suffixes and other errors in writing. Such weaknesses may even be the most comprehensive single source of encoding error for these writers. (2) Phonological influence (the influence of the sounds of speech, not of the grammatical structures of language) operates for both standard and nonstandard dialect speakers, can be much more readily remedied by reading and writing practice than NSD grammatical influence is likely to be, and is strongly symptomatic of inadequate mastery of the print code.

The findings of my case-study analysis confirm my general hypothesis that there are peculiarly linguistic (as distinct from sociological and psychological) reasons for the severe problems with the written language almost universally experienced by nonstandard dialect speakers. Specifically, in this connection, I have concluded that: (1) Nonstandard whole-word verb forms, hypercorrections, and, more often than not, omitted suffixes have deep roots in underlying language patterns, and writers who produce these forms cannot detect or correct them nearly so easily as they can detect and correct errors in the learned visual conventions of the print code. (2) Because NSD speakers must write a language which is in certain ways in conflict with the language they speak, they are more subject than SD speakers to an insecurity which can have a highly adverse effect on their development as learners and writers. (3) Although the distinctive pronunciation patterns of Black English Vernacular are a weaker source of error than grammatical influence, and yield more readily to the counter-influence of increased mastery of the print code, nevertheless phonological influence is an added handicap for BEV-speakers in learning the written language. (4) For a variety of reasons traceable to nonstandard speech patterns, NSD speakers do not develop the perceptual skills necessary to

control some aspects of the written code at the same pace that SD speakers generally do.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Additional intensive case-study investigations would be useful to gain a more precise understanding of the sources of error this study has defined and explored, and to test the extent to which its findings apply to younger learners. Also, further empirical research along the lines initiated by this study—using a similar design but a larger sample—is clearly needed to confirm and refine the basic conclusions drawn from the quantitative measures. An important component of this effort would be to develop and validate instruments to measure adults' cognitive and composing abilities.

Beyond sources of error in writing, this study points up the need to reopen the long and currently inconclusive controversy over whether or not NSD interferes with reading.²⁹ For it is certainly anomalous that when cognitive skills, composing ability, motivation to succeed academically, personal maturity, and level of formal schooling are similar, NSD speakers fail to demonstrate the same level of reading proficiency as SD speakers. My speculations about NSD speakers' reading behavior and its possible impact on encoding reinforce the suggestion that continued research in this area is needed.

This study suggests possible new directions in the diagnosis of error. Further research refining the diagnostic instruments used—the error category list, the dictation exercise, and reading and editing protocols—might facilitate their use by classroom teachers as a basis for selecting appropriate pedagogies.

Finally, the implications of this study for teaching basic writing must be examined. Different teaching strategies from those commonly advocated are surely indicated in the light of its major conclusions. Its implications for basic writing courses which concentrate on reading/writing immersion are most obvious. If level of reading comprehension does not correlate with quantity of error in writing, then it is hardly likely that improving students' reading proficiency (helpful though this may be in developing their composing skills) will reduce their error in writing. Nor will writing practice for improved fluency, in and of itself, have any impact (except possibly a negative one) on what this study identifies as an overwhelming problem for error-prone writers, the inability to perceive errors on the page. To address this particular difficulty, instructional activities designed to develop perceptual skills in transcribing and editing are of paramount importance to basic writers.

²⁹ For an excellent summation of the status of the issue, which has moved forward little in the intervening decade, see Joan C. Baratz, "The Relationship of Black English to Reading: A Review of Research," in *Language Differences: Do They Interfere?*, ed. James L. Laffey and Roger Shuy (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1973), pp. 101-113.

The findings also clearly suggest that grammar instruction cannot be dismissed (as it so often is) as useless. If the influence of nonstandard dialect on writing is not less than but even greater than has been assumed, then direct instruction in the grammar of standard written English is essential for NSD speakers. (In this matter, their needs may be quite different from those of SD speakers, for whom grammar instruction is perhaps a waste of time.) *Not* to teach grammar to NSD speakers is inadvisable, but of course how to teach it without derailing the composing process is a knotty problem. For if composing takes place naturally and spontaneously in the language of one's nurture, a language which for NSD speakers is in conflict with the norms of the written code, then stress on these norms is likely to exacerbate these students' conflicts between composing and encoding.

As many have suggested, the way out of this dilemma is to teach NSD-speaking students (and indeed all basic writing students) to treat composing and editing for correctness as two completely different stages in the writing process, postponing attention to grammar and other aspects of encoding until they have finished drafting. However, simple exhortation to do this does not show basic writers *how* to do this, nor does writing theorists' lamentation over "premature preoccupation with matters of correctness" show teachers *how* to show basic writers how to do this. For starts, teachers must begin to underscore the separation of encoding from composing in their response to student writings. For example, they can distinguish between remarks on composing problems and those on encoding problems, instead of confronting students with a jumble of AWK, AGR, REP, DEV, and CAP, shuttling them back and forth between two very different kinds of writing processes. But even more important, the separation of encoding from composing activities in *instruction* must become a major concern in research on basic writing pedagogy.³⁰

Last, my findings invite reconsideration of many exit tests in writing courses. NSD speakers are severely handicapped by any test that does not recognize their need for adequate time to edit their writing for grammatical error. Most testmakers and indeed most members of our profession find it easier to recognize the special needs of ESL students than those of nonstandard-dialect-speakers. My hope is that this study will contribute something toward a better understanding of those needs.

³⁰ The most significant advances in developing encoding skills apart from composing have been achieved on the sentence level by the research on sentence-combining (although such research has not been formulated in those terms by most of its proponents); for work on the level of morphological and print-code error, see Mary Epes, Carolyn Kirkpatrick, and Michael Southwell, "The COMP-LAB Project: An Experimental Basic Writing Course," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 2 (Spring/Summer 1979), 19-37.

APPENDIX A

Dictation Exercise

NOTE: Slashes indicate a signal to stop the tape and write what has been heard.

Some people have strange fears./ For example,/ after a shower of meteors passed over New Mexico,/ a woman in Vermont/ refused to leave her house for five years./ A man who has a violent fear of lightning/ swears that he's going to find a place to live/ where rain never falls./ Several women/ who live in an ideal environment in Arizona/ are so frightened of germs/ that they recently bought surgical masks/ which they wear night and day,/ whether at home or at work./ Even though people with these phobias/ are often quite intelligent,/ they're too terrified to listen to reason./ It's no use telling them/ that they're being silly./ Their minds are paralyzed by fear,/ and they just can't hear what you're saying./

On the other hand,/ some people's fears are based on personal experience./ A friend of mine is frightened of elevators,/ but she certainly has a good reason./ Whenever she gets on a crowded elevator,/ this shocking memory always comes back to haunt her./ It all began in Georgia/ where my friend usually spends her vacation/ with her cousins./ Once she went to stay with them/ in an old mansion/ which they had leased for the summer./ The first night she slept there,/ around midnight/ there were strange noises under her window./ She jumped up and looked out./ In the moonlight,/ she saw a coach and four horses./ A coachman with a big hooked nose/ said in a harsh voice,/ "There's room for one more."/ And then he cracked his whip/ and drove off./ My friend tried to laugh it off/ as a bad dream,/ but the same thing happened the next two nights./ Finally, she gave up,/ packed all her bags,/ and flew home to Chicago./ She was so worried that she went straight to a psychiatrist./ As she rode up in the elevator,/ she asked herself/ if she was losing her mind./ But the psychiatrist told her/ that she was taking the whole thing too seriously./ As she walked back toward the elevator,/ she began to feel a lot better./ When the doors opened,/ the operator, who had a big hooked nose, announced,/ "There is room for one more."/ My friend stepped back out of the elevator in terror,/ and, as the doors shut in her face,/ she heard screams./ The elevator had plunged straight down forty floors./

So it doesn't seem at all strange/ that my friend begins to tremble/ every time an elevator stops/ and someone says,/ "There is room for one more!"

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APPENDIX B

Error Category List

1. **ERRORS IN SENTENCE PUNCTUATION:** misused or omitted periods, commas, and semicolons resulting in run-together sentences, comma splices, and sentence fragments.
2. **ERRORS IN PRONOUNS AND ADVERBS:** incorrect forms (e.g.: *Her* and *me* are just alike; They treat *theirselves* well; She goes too *quick* for me).
3. **SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT ERRORS INVOLVING INTERVENING WORDS** (e.g.: One of the keys *were* missing).
4. **ERRORS IN WRITING CONVENTIONS:** (1) Failure to indent paragraphs; blank space on a line not followed by paragraph indentation on the next line (2) Writing two words or more as one, or one word as two or more (e.g.: *alot*, *never the less*) (3) Failure to use capital letters appropriately (e.g.: *new york city*, my *High School*) (4) A comma used in a manifestly inappropriate way (e.g.: Too many people, are out of work) (5) Omission or misuse of apostrophes in contractions or possessive forms (e.g.: That *cant* be *her's*.) (6) Misuse of quotation marks or omission of quotation marks in a context that demands them (e.g.: He yelled stop "*thief*").
5. **SPELLING ERRORS:** word spellings which are not listed in a dictionary (e.g.: *thier*, *enviorment*).
6. **"WRONG WORDS":** confusion in the use of common homophones (e.g.: *their/there/they're*); or in the use of words which are similarly pronounced or look alike in print (e.g.: *than/then*, *when/went*, *quit/quite*, *since/sense*). These words are listed in the dictionary but have meanings obviously different from the one intended by the writer.
7. **OMITTED WORDS**, including omitted copulae (e.g.: She reached into her and took out five dollars; He working).
8. **SUFFIXES OMITTED** where they belong: *-s*, *-es*, *-d*, *-ed*, *-t* and *-ing* suffixes missing from nouns, verbs, and participial forms (e.g.: The *follow* is about a friend of mine who got *marry* two *year* ago; Now she *say* she *hate* her *husband* mother; The key *belong* to me). Also included in this category are these two common errors: *sometime* for *sometimes*, and *alway* for *always*. Note: Errors like "One of the keys *belong* to me" which may appear to belong in this category have already been counted in #2 above.
9. **SUFFIXES ADDED** where they don't belong (e.g.: The *childrens* didn't *seemed upsetted* even though the money they had *losted* was *mines*). Note: Errors are counted in this category only if the word is correct when the inappropriate suffix is removed (e.g.: "Yesterday she *drowed*" belongs here, but "Yesterday she *drived*" belongs in category #10 below).
10. **WHOLE-WORD VERB FORMS** used in a way which is plainly wrong in standard written English. These are forms which are not inflected by adding a suffix like those in #8 (e.g.: The keys *was* missing; She *don't* care; He *be* working; She *seen* the doctor yesterday; Last year she *run* away twice).

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OVERFAMILIARITY: A COGNITIVE BARRIER IN TEACHING COMPOSITION

"Theory," wrote Douglas Park, "in the form of widely shared wisdom and sophistication should help us progress to better conditions and assumptions" about the teaching of composition. Park was urging us to step back from pedagogy and "see composition studies as whole and defined." But about cognitive psychology, one major source of wisdom on consciousness and learning, Park said, "It...risks immersing us in an ungo-vernably various mishmash of terms and approaches."¹ As I have found in my efforts to understand cognitive theory, the approaches are not as vari-ous as they seem; in fact, summarizing the results of research, Jeremy Anglin found remarkable similarities among independently operating cog-nitivists.² In spite of the diversity of terms, there is sufficient agreement to provide an overview of some aspects of cognition relevant to teaching composition to basic writing students. Specifically, by adapting theories about selected major cognitive operations to composition classes, we can understand an important barrier to learning, a barrier I am calling "over-familiarity." This concept can enable us to understand why students enter our classes ignorant of information they have already studied. It can sug-gest practices that help us to avoid the failures of our predecessors.

Cognitive theory describes two interactive and interdependent com-ponents of learning/perception and conceptualization. Perception operates on the external environment, continually scanning and delimiting its flux, so that the internally functional structures of conceptualization can process the information further, possibly storing it permanently. Among the cog-nitivists who have provided us with models of these operations, none is more justly well-known than Jean Piaget. His tandem and invariant opera-tions, assimilation and accommodation, roughly correspond to perception and conception. They function constantly, spontaneously, and recursively,

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¹ Douglas Park, "Theories and Expectations: On Conceiving Composition and Rhe-toric as a Discipline," *College English*, 41 (1979), 53.

² Jerome S. Bruner, *Beyond the Information Given*, ed. Jeremy M. Anglin (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1973), p. xxii.

at times in a more consciously controlled way, at times more vigorously. As assimilation and accommodation continuously operate, the individual's structure of intellect—his or her stored conceptual pool—evolves, ideally growing more expansive and operating more skillfully.

Piaget's model describes the spontaneous motivational principle that activates the perceptual/conceptual learning operations. He uses the terms "equilibration" and "disequilibration" to explain the human drive to seek new information. Like the whole and integrated system of the human body, the human mind needs nourishment. But nature overprovides; the abundance of information available to the senses would overfeed the mind if a self-regulating, self-selecting process were not operating. Spontaneously, the mind creates the need for answers or knowledge by creating questions, and spontaneously it seeks out the information that can satisfy that need. In other words, all learning produces new questions—new disequilibrations—which produce new learning—new equilibrations—which in turn produces new disequilibrations, and so on. Piaget's model is a model of dialectical growth and change. In his terminology, the structured is constantly structuring, improving and perfecting itself.

Some features of this model—match and change—are particularly relevant to teachers of composition. First, as noted above, the individual's structure of intellect perceives new data on the basis of what is already stored. That is, what we perceive at any given time results from the match between the sensory data and the then operating conceptual structures. If our students do not understand what a thesis sentence is, they are not able to perceive one when they read it. Second, as we can clearly discern in the model described, in the course of matching individual and environment, both the perceptions of the data and the conceptual structures change. Change—accommodation—is a necessary consequence of real learning. The increments may be small and imperceptible, but they exist. Once a person has mastered the concept of "thesis sentence," that person has changed; he or she is now capable of recognizing a thesis sentence whenever a thesis sentence is present to his or her senses. Even more important in a writing class, a person can use a thesis sentence when it is needed. It is essential for us to understand that the changes we seek depend upon our ability to find some match between what our students already know and what we want them to learn.

We need to understand that learning—or change—depends upon this match in spontaneous learning behavior because schooled learning behavior operates very much the same way. Schooling simply creates a scientific mode of activity out of what otherwise continually and often effortlessly operates in a non directed, non deliberate, non conscious way. Schooling regulates the model; it negotiates the match and controls the change, often with the learner fully aware of the process. Piaget's model describes spontaneous operations, the operations that account for most learning. L.S. Vygotsky analyzed more carefully the activities and advantages of school or "scientific" learning. To him, school was a place where success in learning resulted largely from conscious understanding of spontaneous learning. "School instruction," he wrote, "...plays a decisive role in

making the child conscious of his own mental processes." Agreeing with an observation by Piaget, he goes on to say, "In operating with spontaneous concepts, the child is not conscious of them because his attention is always centered on the object to which the concept refers, never on the act of thought itself."³ Thus teachers refocus the perceptual/conceptual model on consciousness itself both contextually and operationally. Vygotsky claims that the great gain from this new consciousness is the systematization of thought—the beginning of scientific understanding. For the purposes of improving the skills of writing, we understand that the gain can be measured in the degree of conscious control over the otherwise spontaneously operating activities of thinking and using language, the activities that determine writing skill. Attending to these activities of thinking and using language, then, means attending to ordinary operations of the mind.

In trying to understand the ways human beings perceive the ordinary operations of the mind, we can add the perspective and terminology that Michael Polanyi's theories provide. Polanyi conceived of two strata of knowledge—focal knowledge or consciously operating perception above and, below, subsidiary knowledge, that which informs and quite literally determines the power and direction of focal knowledge. Polanyi, a scientist by training, was urging his readers to recognize that focal knowledge, which is so often associated with scientific "objective" understanding, is firmly attached to the often unavailable, deeper subjective structures that inevitably control so-called objective inquiry. Focal knowledge or attention, however, can be trained upon subsidiary knowledge. In the triadic relationship among focal attention, subsidiary attention, and the person controlling both operations, that person—the executive—through an act of will, can seek to perceive those deeper structures. Thus, the person who so wills can consciously probe his or her own unconscious structures.

Polanyi suggests that this self-consciousness becomes an important aid in the development and activation of a skill. He describes this use of knowledge in the skills of speaking and playing a piano:

Thus we can concentrate on the sound and the action of our lips and tongue in producing a word, and this will cause us to lose the meaning of the word, although the loss can be instantly made good by casting the mind forward to the saying of something that makes use of the word. The same is true for a pianist who paralyzes his performance by intensely watching his own fingers: he too can promptly recover their skillful use by attending once more to his music. In these instances the path to the integrated relation—which may originally have taken months of labor to establish—is restored from its abeyance in a trice: in the same moment, the sight of the subsidiary particulars is lost.⁴

³ L.S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, ed. and trans. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1962), p. 92.

⁴ Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 40.

Polanyi could have been writing about the skills of composition. Teachers of writing in general and of basic writers in particular recognize the phenomenon of shifting focus between form and content, aware of the often deleterious impact of obsession with form on the invention of content. Nevertheless, a large part of the teaching of writing skill deliberately focuses attention on that subsidiary consciousness: "form" in writing is a series of human constructs that explain subsidiary consciousness. In order to produce skillful writing, especially among those whose subsidiary consciousness is unlikely to produce skillful writing spontaneously, we focus upon "form" deliberately.

In our efforts to teach students the forms of writing and thinking which they have already learned unconsciously and spontaneously—and often grammatically, unconventionally, and illogically—we confront the formidable barrier of overfamiliarity. Just as we often tune out the sounds of a frequently played musical recording, overfamiliarity of other data causes us to "tune them out." That is, we often fail to see what we look at when what we look at is ordinary or expected. This phenomenon of overfamiliarity has been recognized by linguists, neurobiologists, philosophers, and psychologists. It works to produce, for example, Murphy's Law. In fact, Murphy was wrong. Intellectually, probably all of us know that Murphy was wrong, and yet we find it hard to explain the apparent phenomenon that jelly bread always falls jelly side down. Overfamiliarity explains the discrepancy between what our senses tell us and what our intellect knows. We simply do not notice jelly bread falling when the bread falls jelly side up. That is the usual way, but the inconsequential and unemotional way, and we fail to perceive what is usual or unremarkable.

Given the nature of human thought processes, overfamiliar phenomena should remain peripheral or subsidiary in our consciousness: we cannot attend to all details. But this convenience produces mischief—even torment—in situations of deliberately induced scientific learning. What Chomsky noted about overfamiliarity in the psychological sciences is true for composition: "A certain intellectual effort is required to see how such phenomena can pose serious problems or call for intricate explanatory theories."⁵ The ordinariness of the intimate or customary habits of language and thought render language and thought not just overfamiliar but quite transparent.

Steven Rose, a neurobiologist who wrote *The Conscious Brain*, supports the theory with evidence for a "switching off" process of the conscious level of the brain, a process of "habituation" whereby sensations disappear from consciousness when we get used to them.⁶ Without this habituation, we would be afflicted with a Proustian hypersensitivity or with what John Barth calls "cosmopsis," a paralyzing awareness of the overwhelming

⁵ Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972), p. 24.

⁶ Steven Rose, *The Conscious Brain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), pp. 193-194.

number of possibilities inherent in each of our decisions. But as a consequence of this habituation, our most pervasive generalizations, our most powerful concepts, our most commonly practiced skills are out of consciousness, available only to the keenest penetration of our questioning and analyzing minds.

The cognitive processes enable us to understand how overfamiliarity operates in the consciousness of our students. Let us focus more intensively on its effects in the teaching of composition. Once again we follow the cognitive triad established earlier of perception, conception, and motivation.

I can still remember when I first learned to perceive some elements of a given painting in a fine arts class: recognizing the major outlines of composition and major elements like color, I still needed help from my teachers to make the finer discriminations of these and the other qualities of painting. I was then able to perceive many details that had aroused my initial responses of aesthetic satisfaction. The same learning procedure, it would seem, should apply to writing. But it doesn't. Apprentice appreciators of fine writing and apprentice writers cannot readily see the major structural qualities of the composition. Often, even after we point them out, they cannot perceive the structure of a sentence or a paragraph, and they miss our meanings about verbs and parallel constructions or fail to hear the language rhythms. Both the gross and the fine discriminations are difficult to make, not just because of the lineality of writing that makes it exist in time (as distinct from space where it can be seen), but because the qualities of the structure of thought and the structure of language are so commonplace, so integral to our functioning. If students cannot perceive these structures and sounds in the writing—and even in the speech—of others, they are not likely to perceive them in their own language. For adult learners ("formal-operational" learners in Piaget's terminology), perception need not attend to concrete objects; however, at least some representation, some symbol of a concrete object, should be clear. Overfamiliarity works most perniciously when it masks the information to which we need to attend by covering it with a cloak of invisibility.

The verb in a sentence is invisible; it is a kind of word students have used all their lives. We now attempt to focus their attention on this kind of word. We try to excise it from its field in language and sentences and make it available to conceptualizing structures so that students can understand how it operates and how to control its operations. We attempt to create this field independence for all kinds of details of ordinary language: clauses, phrases, pauses in speaking, relationships indicated by conjunctions and adverbs, and so on.

To correct errors, we urge our students, for example, to listen to themselves talk. (Perhaps for their own purposes, psychoanalysts invite their patients to listen to themselves think.) Hear, we say in effect, your own normal ways of forming the past tense. Do you end those verbs with the standard "ed"? Do you use the correct past participle in the perfect tenses? What we're asking them to do, in order to perceive the way standard English works, is to focus on their own subsidiary structures, the

structures that, according to Polanyi, usually operate out of consciousness. We ask them to perceive their ordinary thinking the same way. They constantly make generalizations and support them with details. The activities relating a topic sentence to the details within a paragraph are the same as those in which they engage when, spontaneously, they observe details of their English teacher and fellow students in a new class and then, spontaneously, size things up. It would take little time for them to create a topic sentence about their English teacher, possibly more time to think through the details that aroused that generalization, but most likely it would take a great amount of time to recognize the operation of that thinking experience to perceive its structure, and to implement that structure in the controlled and deliberate activity of writing. Physicists at least have the advantage of pointing to unfamiliar structures and strange new images, and their students can know at least that they are looking at something both discernible and real. But how real is "verbness" or "topic sentence" to people who have used verbs and created generalizations unconsciously all their lives?

The problem is one of tracing the figure in the carpet, of discriminating the hidden detail in the gestalt or field in which it is embedded. The gestalt, the habit of use, masks the detail, just as it prevents us from knowing when we are biting our nails or braking an automobile with annoying frequency.

I came to understand this problem when I read in *Thought and Language* Vygotsky's version of Claparede's "Law of Awareness": "awareness of difference precedes awareness of likeness," and elsewhere, "an impediment or disturbance in an automatic activity makes the actor aware of that activity." Claparede, in formulating the problem, also suggests a solution—unmasking the routines by creating a strangeness in their operations.⁷ If we can disturb intuitive routines, eliminating students' reliance on intuitive procedures like chronology, verb endings, and generalizations, perhaps we can enable them at least to perceive the object on which we are focusing. We can create deliberate and exaggerated constructions—even errors—like long lists of prepositional phrases that fail to do something or sentences that intuitively are wrong because the verb slot is filled with a word that obviously cannot be a verb, a word like a conjunction or an adverb for example. ("The girl by the dog." "The dog loudly the mailman.") We can have them write a string of simple sentences, intuitively obnoxious, like the sentences in reading primers: "See Spot. See Spot run. Spot runs fast. Find Spot, Mary." Again, if they have to write a series of run-ons, they might be able to perceive correct sentence form. Or we can use a passage from Molly Bloom's soliloquy in Joyce's *Ulysses* to demonstrate our natural dependency on periods. When teaching the whole structure of a composition or a paragraph, we may enable them to understand the well-hidden percept of the relationship between the thesis or topic sentence and the details that contribute to it by insisting that they withhold

⁷ Vygotsky, pp. 88 and 16.

the main idea until the end. Narrative, the most intuitively satisfying of the modes of writing, must be avoided if we are to help students control the logical modes of organization. (Conversely, when we want to eliminate consciousness of any given operation in order to focus attention on something else, then we need to take advantage of the fact that subsidiary knowledge works intuitively.) When we allow the intuitive to operate—and fail to create the circumstances under which the conceptual must operate—we are strengthening—or at the very least, not discouraging—the barrier of overfamiliarity.

I have deliberately avoided any suggestion of telling students what we mean; rather, I have described a process of discovery, of creating the sensory experience enabling them to perceive the concept, the reality behind the symbol. This inductive learning, suitably matched to what students already know and followed by experiences of application, will characterize further suggestions for eliminating the worst effects of the barrier of overfamiliarity.

It is possible for students to conceptualize without perceiving the information. That kind of learning, which Piaget called "overaccommodation," is rote learning. Perceiving alone does not turn the information into knowledge. Nor does conceptualizing alone. Successful learning in the Piagetian structural paradigm described above, occurs when, first, the mind's existing conceptual structures find some match with the new information, some fit with what is already known and, second, when those structures incorporate (as the body incorporates food) the information so that it becomes permanent and meaningful. As noted above, the result of this sequence of meeting, matching, and mastering is some change in the structure of intellect.

We must be constantly alert to the purpose of teaching this information: we expect it to change writing habits—linguistic and thought habits—in order to improve skill. In using a conceptual method of teaching (rather than, say, using repeated experiences in writing without the conceptual component), we accept two premises: that our students are capable of learning these concepts and that mastery of the information will provide them with a tool for change and control. I emphasize the word "mastery" here. The learning cannot be superficial; it carries a heavy burden. If we are teaching for conceptual mastery, then we need to be alert to the ease with which students can avoid the difficulty of that effort by substituting their intuitive responses and memorization. Memorizing, which Vygotsky called "pseudo-conceptualization," is at best a successful way to park information in short-term memory where it seems to serve academic experiences like examinations. It is useless afterwards. Rote memorization is more useless when the purpose of the knowledge is to change habits. Then the knowledge needs to penetrate the deep structures of learning from whence it can be repeatedly applied, eventually becoming part of the new, improved subsidiary consciousness.

For it is subsidiary consciousness—Polanyi's term—that we are attempting to re-form. By expecting our students to understand the concepts of composition, we are expecting them to raise to consciousness the

operations of the most out-of-consciousness parts of their minds. We cannot treat this learning as if it were easy to accomplish. That false attitude may be fostered by the apparent success some people had (or think they had) when they taught grammar to elementary school children. The students coming into our classes, however, failed to understand it then—a failure that no doubt contributes to their usual frustration with and antagonism towards it now—and now we must confront them with it again. This time, a "no nonsense" approach requires conceptualization of those hidden processes. Thinking further about the large quantity of information most of these students must master and about how few of their intuitive operations can be allowed to remain untouched by conceptual control, we realize that real learning in a composition class, especially a class for basic writers, demands great effort.

Not only are we quite literally teaching self-awareness, but we are attempting to do so with some highly complex, abstract terms. Among a population unlikely to be operating comfortably at the "formal operational" level—Piaget's name for the level of maturity at which people can readily manipulate abstractions—we need to resist the temptation to introduce concepts like "sentence" and "paragraph" by explaining them. The explanations become tedious, candidates for memorization. Rather, we need to use techniques like those designed to overcome the problems of perceptualization. Playing around with low-level exemplars of the great abstractions and talking about them, our students can usually create those abstractions for themselves. Andrea Lunsford urged this kind of classroom for basic writing students where "students learn by doing and then by extrapolating principles from their activities."⁸ This kind of classroom need not avoid teacher directions and summations; like Lunsford, I would suggest that the student-developed concepts be reinforced by clear statements from the teacher. But that reinforcement should not displace discovery learning.

When students are manipulating the low-level exemplars of the great abstractions, they need to work with material that they can readily understand, matching what they know with the learning they are trying to construct. If "sentence" is a meaningless unit, as it is likely to be, then we must go back further to its base, the verb. Students need to create a firm concept of verbs, using them deliberately and recognizing them in their own writing. After playing with them, talking about them (preferably in small groups where each of them must talk), inducing their own definitions, and demonstrating some accuracy and skill in their use, they can go on to "clause," again playing with clauses, talking about them, inducing their own definitions, and demonstrating that they can identify them. The process continues. With patience and proper sequencing and incrementalization, their successes can enable them to assimilate and accommodate an impressive quantity of well-learned information about their own language processes, information that will enable them to

⁸ Andrea A. Lunsford, "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," *College English* 41 (1979), 40.

exercise the control that skillful operations require.⁹

Is it possible to motivate these students to want to learn these concepts? They have learned the know-how spontaneously, but curiosity about *knowing that* (to borrow Gilbert Ryle's words for understanding the mechanics of know-how)¹⁰ is not likely to develop spontaneously. I sympathize with their indifference. When I studied physics, I knew that I didn't understand concepts like friction or gravitational forces, and I was eager to learn. When I studied English, I thought I understood (I didn't, but I didn't know that until I tried to teach it), and I was bored and restless throughout the course. If ever I talk about the abstractions of sentences to my students, I can see them listening for about five minutes, perhaps ten minutes if I can catch their interest with wit and create a good match of information, but I cannot speak to twenty-five different structures of intellect and match the needs and the knowledge of all.

To many basic writing students, the information we share poses threats, not questions. We ask them to learn it and to use it to change from comfortable behavior into new behavior, a process requiring patience, a change risking failure. They must confront a multitude of trivial details, a discouraging scenario. Altogether, this learning potentially attacks two significant bases of self-esteem—their natural language and their ability to think—among a population whose collective self-esteem needs to prosper, not to endure attack. It requires, as one group of psychologists phrased it, a "provisional self-devaluation ('I may be wrong') or recognition of the need for self-correction ('I'm not very good at this')." And yet, as they noted further, "In order to adopt a self-corrective orientation, the person must be sufficiently confident through past successful experiences that his admission of the inadequacy will not be threatening."¹¹ To motivate our students well means to solve the problem of how to initiate that self-corrective orientation in order to create the necessary openness for learning, the receptivity that comes naturally when disequilibrium creates its own curiosity and openness. We are more likely to pose a threat to their well-being than to arouse their curiosity.

Once again, a promising approach is the one suggested earlier: using exemplars, playing with sentences or verbs or structural plans or whatever we happen to be teaching, directing students' constructions of the generalizations, and then directing their implementation of those concepts. Mina Shaughnessy noted that one of three main approaches to teaching basic writing was concerned with "*confidence* as central to the writing act and [dismissed] concerns with form or process as incidental to the students' discovery of themselves..."¹² However, sensitivity to this need to avoid

⁹ Rita Phipps, "Teaching English from the Beginning: Lesson Plans for an Entry-Level College Writing Course Based on the Research of Jean Piaget." This book, in progress, will clarify theory and coordinate lesson plans according to that theory.

¹⁰ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1949).

¹¹ O.J. Harvey, David E. Hunt, and Harold M. Schroder, *Conceptual Systems and Personality Organization* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1961), p. 238.

¹² Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 73.

destroying confidence and to the potential for doing so by attacking the overfamiliar skills can be combined with conceptual study. The inductive procedures suggested above seem less threatening to their self-esteem and more likely to induce meaningful learning and successful implementation of that learning than deductive teaching techniques.

These suggestions for teaching are procedures that have helped me help my students to understand the concepts of composition. They don't always work the way I want them to work but, generally, the students do perceive the details and conceptualize the abstractions, and they do so without great frustration and overtaxed effort. There are other suggestions: to use the overfamiliar to isolate the discrete elements we are trying to teach conceptually; to require feedback—like utilization of the concepts—that will not let us fool ourselves into thinking that our students have successfully conceptualized when they have merely rote-learned the information; to select only the most essential elements and to introduce them in the most sequentially meaningful way possible; and to apply the concepts regularly and repeatedly, always using the same name for each of them. Whatever we do, we need to curry the feeling of success, noting it carefully when our students master a concept and building upon it to create confidence.

If many of these suggestions seem to many experienced teachers of basic writers as common sense, then they are reaffirming the value of the suggestions. Common sense tells us what we already know; the concept of overfamiliarity provides us with a way to analyze what we already know. Cognitive theories in general often seem to reaffirm our common perceptions of the ways we and all human beings learn; applied to the teaching of composition, the theories can provide us with ways to understand why a technique works or why it fails to work. If we understand some of the well-authenticated theories, we should be able to apply the widely shared cognitive wisdom, as Douglas Park urged us to do with theory, to enable us to see some important elements of composition studies as whole and defined.

BLACK DIALECT AND THE FRESHMAN WRITER

The integration and open admissions policies of the late sixties and early seventies introduced classroom conflicts, as evidenced by the professional literature of that period, that few educators had anticipated and that even fewer were prepared to confront. One problem was, as one college teacher suggested, the Black-English-speaking student's seemingly insurmountable difficulty in reading and writing.¹ In retrospect, however, the literature of that period reveals an additional (and still existent) problem—the freshman English instructor's "seemingly insurmountable difficulty" in discerning the true nature of these students' writing—his or her inability to look objectively at the texts of writers whose oral patterns include syntactical and morphological features that differ radically and systematically from those of the standard written dialect. And this inability to initiate the requisite linguistic analysis, coupled with the failure to acknowledge and eradicate attitudes that circumvent such analysis, led to three misguided approaches to teaching writing to students speaking a nonstandard Black dialect.

The first approach was motivated, apparently, by misunderstanding of the findings of such linguists as William Stewart, William Labov, and others, who undertook the serious study of Black English as a language system. Ironically, considering its origins, it might be called the divergence avoidance approach. It hinges on the belief that Black college students, either in or out of the academic setting, need not—or, in the more extreme view, should not—adhere to the forms and structures of standard American English (i.e., James Sledd's language of "white supremacy"²). This approach rests on the belief that the nonstandard code that obviously serves so adequately its oral function will also suffice in situations requiring written discourse.

The apparent logic of such well-intentioned, inherently democratic proposals rarely survives, however, the transition from concept to classroom. Instructors find themselves, curiously enough, both forced to ignore, in

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¹ San-su C. Lin, "A Developmental English Program for the Culturally Disadvantaged," *College Composition and Communication*, 16 (1965), 273.

² James Sledd, "Bi-Dialectalism: The Language of White Supremacy," *English Journal*, 58 (1969), 1307-1315.

the traditional way, the grammar of the nonstandard dialect and to avoid, in a nontraditional way, the grammar of standard English (if not, indeed, to deny the existence of both systems altogether). They adopt a theoretical stance that, in its unadulterated form, leads to denying all surface standards (which are, in this view, little more than a sadistic invention of Geneva Smitherman's "prescriptivist middle-class-aspirant-teacher"³) and, by analogy, even to rejecting all standard (i.e., white) rhetorical principles *per se*, since, as some scholars were quick to point out, "information-passing among Negroes" involves "subjects and methods of communication of knowledge and feeling...quite different from white middle-class norms."⁴ In practice, however, this approach seldom results in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom. Instead the systematic but linguistically unsound instruction of the past is superseded by varying amounts of haphazard--but still linguistically unsound--corrective measures.

The divergence avoidance method is, however, impractical, blithely disregarding the pre- and post-graduation reality of student goals and societal expectations about the command of written language of college graduates. It appears flawed even in theory, since it is based on the assumption, which Smitherman's Black idiom/standard English writings are apparently meant to illustrate, that texts containing nonstandard morphological and syntactical features erect between writer and audience no greater barriers than do texts composed of standard forms and structures. In my experience, however, such minimum terminable units as "Mrs. Costello Mr. Winterbourne aunt" are seriously disorienting to readers whose standard-English linguistic reserves do not include the two nonstandard grammatical principles involved in the actualization of such a construction (indeed, to whom such a construction appears syntactically and therefore semantically incomplete). They have also frequently proven distracting to readers whose reserves *do* include these principles; for familiarity with oral patterns appears not to assure effortless or even accurate decoding of exact but unfamiliar graphic representations. What is more, the ability to decipher intended meaning, whether the reader is competent in Black dialect or not, seems to decrease proportionately as the number of unfamiliar graphic forms increases, apparently because the opportunity for effective use of context clues decreases. Sentences like the one above, when bounded by a sufficient number of conventional sentences (that number varying with audience, purpose, and place) may cause only momentary confusion, thus allowing one to perceive the intended relationships between what appear to be three disconnected nouns. In actuality,

³ Geneva Smitherman, "White English in Blackface, Or Who Do I Be?" in *Exploring Language*, 3rd ed., ed. Gary Goshgarian (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983), p. 331. (Originally published in *The Black Scholar*, May/June, 1973.)

⁴ Roger D. Abrahams, "Black Views of Language Use: Rules of Decorum, Conflict, and Men-of-Words," in *Current Topics in Language: Introductory Readings*, ed. Nancy Ainsworth Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1976), p. 187. (Originally published in Roger D. Abrahams, *Positively Black* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970].)

however, student texts including one such construction usually include numerous others which are grammatical in Black dialect but ungrammatical in standard English. Such writing samples emphasize the fact that the nonstandard/standard contrasts that trouble even academically talented students, though confined to a small number of the thirty-eight Black English grammatical features identified by Fasold and Wolfram,⁵ include features encountered frequently in the preparation of academic discourse. Smitherman's articles, on the other hand, reveal only a sprinkling of non-standard features, many of which, being merely lexical, present few if any problems for readers, since most are mindful of the boundary between formal and informal diction.

A related assumption underlying this approach is that Black-English-speaking freshmen whose written language does not meet traditional standards are merely exercising their option to write as they speak. It deserves scrutiny. For while I have indeed encountered students whose compositions, like the paragraph mentioned above, are flawless representations of oral Black language patterns, I have discovered far more who compose in an "interdialect," a mixture of standard and nonstandard dialect features, and a host of forms that belong to neither. Failure to perceive this mixture has often led to the pedagogically disastrous conclusion, primarily among educators who know Black dialect exists but for whom its actual structure remains amorphous, that any written construction generated by a Black student is, by definition, Black English and therefore valid as a medium of communication. When one puts aside preconceptions and actually analyzes the written language produced by college freshmen, one concludes that the majority of their written language patterns are located well toward the standard end of a postcreole continuum. One recognizes not only points of conflict that reflect the "simple" transference of speech, i.e., nonstandard dialect, to paper but also an amazing range of idiosyncratic forms which create varying amounts of linguistic noise. Many students produce, not obvious spoken patterns, but a Black dialect/standard English/hypercorrect melange (sometimes also including traditional errors), as in the following sentence describing the main characters of *Daisy Miller*.

Mrs. Costello Mr. Winterbournes'es aunt, and Mrs. Walker were his friend, but they act so much alike they could of been the same peoples.

And such "transitional" prose, with its mix of features, reveals that these students are already struggling toward written standard English. Insufficient guidance at this crucial point could result in the fossilization of confusing approximations to the standard. The fact that close examination of nonstandard written forms reveals so many "traditional" handbook

⁵ Ralph W. Fasold and Walter A. Wolfram, "Some Linguistic Features of Negro Dialect," in *Contemporary English: Change and Variation*, ed. David L. Shores (New York: Lippincott, 1972), pp. 53-85. (Originally published in *Teaching Standard English in the Inner City*, ed. Ralph W. Fasold and Roger W. Shuy [Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970].)

errors and so many forms that do not belong in anyone's oral dialect renders the divergence avoidance approach, in my opinion, invalid.

Equally ineffective as a means of teaching writing is what I call the human relations approach. This term acknowledges an obvious kinship to the organizational theory of that name, which, according to Perrow, assumes one of two forms—the "leadership and productivity" model, focusing on the actions of particular leaders, and the "group relations" model, focusing on the alteration of the "organizational climate."⁶ It is the latter branch that closely parallels the administrative philosophy of those who maintain that the traditional college classroom is alien to the Black student and thereby fosters negative attitudes that impede development of standard English proficiency and communicative competence. Conversely, an atmosphere of "relevance" is expected to have the opposite effect: certain alterations—the substitution of Black-oriented stimulus materials for "white" materials, of writing activities that are "egocentered" and "concrete"⁷ or that "acquaint...students...with themselves"⁸ for impersonal academic topics, of tables for desks, of pens for pencils, of pencils for pens—will enable students to master traditional skills and release natural creative impulses that have been stifled by the hostile (i.e., white) educational environment.

Surely no one will object to some "personal" writing; a collaborative, friendly atmosphere; or to a richer and more diverse mix of ethnic materials for all students, one that reflects our common humanity. It is, however, a disservice to treat *any* group of students as if they exist within an isolated, homogeneous universe, and are too fragile to venture outside it. Moreover, immersion in "relevance" will not, in my experience, effect the promised linguistic and communicative improvements. My own classroom experience suggests that the human relations approach of relevant materials is no more effective—my substitution of *Invisible Man*, *Native Son*, and *Jubilee* for *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, *Daisy Miller*, and *The Great Gatsby* having elicited neither more nor less profound content nor more nor less effective written communication. However, the substitution of more mature subject matter for what I call spontaneous therapeutic topics did result, as I have discussed elsewhere,⁹ in increased standard English proficiency.

This is not to suggest however, that using a particular species, caliber, or volume of subject matter will, in and of itself, accomplish the task of altering habitual language patterns. It will not. Such a curriculum merely

⁶ Charles Perrow, *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1972), pp. 106-122.

⁷ James A. Banks, "A Profile of the Black American," *College Composition and Communication*, 19 (1968), 296.

⁸ Dorothy Wells, "Using the Journal to Build Competence in Standard English," in *Non-Native and Nonstandard Dialect Students* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982), p. 93.

⁹ Allison Wilson, "The Study of Literature and the Development of Standard English Proficiency: An Approach to the Teaching of Writing to Speakers of Black Dialect," *The Writing Instructor*, 2 (1983), 115-121.

constitutes inverted recapitulation of the theoretically flawed human relations approach. Even casual observation of actual written language reveals that certain Black dialect forms are particularly resistant to change even when students are constantly immersed in enormous amounts of written standard English.

It is the frequency and persistence of some errors, that apparently causes many college teachers who come into contact with Black-English-speakers, like those who encountered "the remedial student" of the past, to adopt what I must label the regressive approach to writing instruction. This pedagogy seems to presuppose that students who produce dialectal or interdialectal forms are students who hear no standard grammar, see no standard grammar, speak no standard grammar, and must therefore begin at the beginning—must concentrate on words before sentences, sentences before paragraphs, paragraphs before essays, must, in short, master the standard language in isolation before they are equipped to compose in that register. This is a method that was discredited, in general, several decades ago and that, when applied to Black nonstandard speakers in particular, has proven especially debilitating. Moreover, as with the idea of divergence avoidance, the "logic" of the regressive approach cannot withstand the test of reality. The major problem is that the postulatory intention of this preliminary grammar drill—to enable students to prepare final drafts that are free of confusing nonstandard forms and/or idiosyncratic standard approximations—gradually dissipates as instructors devote more and more instructional time to the study of minute facets of language. The disappearance of actual writing is the logical extension of the assumption that one must control morphology and syntax before one can use these forms and structures to create utterances. For proponents of this approach, therefore, there is no recourse but, in the interest of time, to slight college-level reading and writing assignments in favor of large, frequent doses of grammar exercises or of detailed contrastive analysis of the standard-nonstandard systems.

In actuality, examination of student writing indicates that most activities of both types are either superfluous or irrelevant. A student's habitual use of a certain few nonstandard features need not independently and automatically condemn him or her to endlessly labeling parts of speech, subjects and verbs, simple, compound, and complex sentences, and (most astounding) gerunds, participles, and infinitives or to an exhaustive study of language contrasts. In the examples given below (which were taken from first day essay pretests), the actual points of standard/nonstandard conflict in the academic writing of college students are very few indeed:

Whenever I ride a bus, stranger looks at me from head to toe
without saying a word.

They moves from one town to the next without tie, without
regrets, without saying goodbye to the many friend they have
made.

There several factor which determine the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a teacher.

To avoid colliding with Grandfather vehicle, the young man drive into the river.

There shadow of people inside, talking, laughing, and eating with chopstick.

Cover with crystal clear ice, the vine look like giant chandeliers.

Black dialect interference, then, in and of itself, appears, on close examination, not to cause the major syntactic "derailments" peculiar to basic writers. Instead, (to continue Shaughnessy's metaphor¹⁰) it allows both scheduled and unscheduled detours on alternate grammatical tracks, these either the solid, time-worn sidetracks open to speakers of nonstandard English or the makeshift, hastily constructed sidetracks of interdialects. In view of this, a detailed prewriting study of the entire corpus of standard English seems hardly tenable.

Even were one able to provide convincing empirical evidence that quasi-foreign language teaching methods improve the nonstandard speaker's ability to prepare future essays that are relatively free of Black English forms, the approach would be regressive. For it encourages instructors to ignore, for varying periods of time, all but the most superficial aspects of written discourse and to treat identically all students whose written language shows some degree of dialect interference. The failure to discriminate between inappropriate register and inadequate development (i.e., between typical freshman prose that contains dialect interference and basic writing that may or maynot contain dialect interference) can easily lead to classifying all Black-English-speaking freshmen as remedial writers—solely on the basis of isolated constructions like the above, regardless of the rhetorical strength of the compositions in which the nonstandard forms appeared. The following essay, for example, which was the first for a first-semester freshman and which was compiled in response to a poem provided in McCrimmon's critical essay chapter,¹¹ has strengths that can easily be overlooked by an evaluator who is concentrating solely on surface forms:

"An Endless Cycle of Departures"

The title of Eleanor Ross Taylor "The Going Away of Young People" refer to an endless cycle of departures. Taylor use four departure situation to relay her message about the cycle because she assume that the reader can discover the meaning of her poem by analyzing those examples. She use a different stanza to tell about

¹⁰ Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 10.

¹¹ James M. McCrimmon, *Writing with a Purpose*, 7th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), p. 303.

each of the departure situation and a fifth stanza to conclude her work and make the message clearer.

In stanza one, the first of the four departure situations is describe by the narrator, who merely tell of the departure of her child because she do not yet realize that her child's leaving home is part of a continuous cycle. The author uses this departure to let the reader know that the narrator have a problem and needs to adjust to it and except it as fact. The problem is that the narrator do not want to accept the fact that a love one has left and keeping the truth buried deep in her mind. The author try to let the reader see this through the use of various detail, such as:

Anyway it's stuff I'm used
To stumbling over in various
Recesses of my house
Wondering why I haven't
Given it away, put it
To some use
But keep on hoarding it, ashamed.

In the second stanza we see that the narrator neighbor children gone also and that the leaving of these children totally in keeping with the continuous cycle because it just another step in that cycle. The author use the leaving of those children to show that the poem was not focusing on just one departure. Here the author lets the narrator discover that not only has her child left, but some one else child or childrens also. This makes the narrator think and she begin to realize that her home is "Becalmed of young people" and subsequently all homes that have children in them will be "Becalmed of young people."

In stanza three, the narrator remember her own departure from home and try to imagine how her mother felt in a similar situation. Here, the narrator remember her "mother's face at the window/Like a postage stamp" watching her departure. The narrator had left home and her mother had felt sad. Now the narrator child have also left home. She realize that that part of a cycle and that in time, sooner or later a loved one will leave home. The irrelevance of time seems to be the major point she make here about departures.

Stanza four shows how someone else besides the narrator feels about a young love one leaving home. The narrator watch an "old friend fight tears" and offer her sympathy. She able to offer her sympathy because it something she could relate to because her situation similar. And again this departure from the narrator friend home in keeping with the endless cycle of departures from home by young people.

The fifth and final stanza brings us to the conclusion and the most interesting part of the poem. The four preceding stanza gave a general idea about a cycle that will sooner or later, effect everyone. This stanza enlarge on the idea that were laid down in the previous stanzas. The mother have realize that her child leaving is a part of a cycle and that in time she like other will come to except that. This reveal through the use of window:

Windows between Septembers
More and more windows
Muffling, fogging over,
At last reflect only me
In car window, kitchen window,
Across-the-street windows....

Therefore, the author let the reader know that there is a cycle of young people leaving home, and yet she make another point in the final stanza. She let the reader know that even though a young person have left, he always welcome to return to the place he left. "This window I open over your bed/In case you should come back/For what you forgot."

From the traditional viewpoint, this essay is, admittedly, saturated with surface error. It is obviously composed in a written register that would be unacceptable under most circumstances. But, again, obviously, most of the surface errors occur at points of standard/nonstandard conflict and are clearly confined to a few basic contrasts—plural nouns, possessive nouns, and verbs. Furthermore, when analyzed in terms of content and organization, this essay compares favorably with the standard English model provided by McCrimmon¹²—each having (1) an opening paragraph that explains what the poet is trying to say as well as how she says it, (2) four paragraphs that detail several related scenes and explain their relationship to the poem's message, and (3) a final paragraph that concludes rather than merely summarizes. Thus, it appears that degree of dialect interference is not necessarily indicative of degree of rhetorical competence nor is dialect interference *per se* indicative of the need for intensive drilling or grammar-study techniques. In the case of the above student, in fact, to delay further composing in favor of tedious, irrelevant (or even relevant) drill would be absurd.

The division between ineffective writing strategies (the "paratactic, disjoint progressions; ...overgeneralized and overpersonalized declarations; ...roughly hinged, isolated declamations, and...nonconciliatory, absolute moral announcements" delineated by Hoddeson¹³) and dialect interference becomes even more clear when one examines the essay of a classmate,

¹² McCrimmon, pp. 294-295.

¹³ David Hoddeson, "The Reviser's Voices," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 3:3 (Fall/Winter 1981), 92.

who was apparently attempting to make a similar point but whose unfamiliarity with written conventions far outweighs the intrusion of native speech patterns:

"Going Way of Young People"

Going way of young peoples mean everyone departure. Eleano describe the narrator very unhappy, her child have left home. It was going to be so quiet in her house. Her friend child had left also. So the narrator give her friend something to drink. So the narrator gave her friend sympathy. The narrator herself left home, she could remember how her mother face look in the window and how it look like a postage stamp hinges a faded septemer. In today modern world it can be very hard and disturbing on parent because they doesn't won't their child to leave home. But most parent would tell his/her child to keep that key they welcome anytime and they would like that child to keep that key. But always remeber this, never let your parent think they have fail you.

Even basic writers like this one (and I am speaking again from experience) rarely benefit from a course consisting of grammar drill, since, obviously, the ability to generate content and to perceive the organizing principles inherent in that content must of necessity precede any attempt to manipulate surface. I cannot discern, in short, how the substitution of standard for nonstandard forms will improve written discourse that is almost contentless in any register.

For quite some time it seemed to me that my freshmen and I would be forever hindered by the paradoxical nature of the situation. Concentration on the expurgation of dialect-based forms appeared, on the one hand, ludicrous in contrast to the profound tasks underlying the construction of effective written discourse but, on the other hand, essential in relation to societal expectations and needed competencies. The solution to this dilemma lay, however, in this dual nature itself, in the proper timing of selected aspects of the avoidance and regressive approaches.

The principles behind my discourse-based approach are these: I attempt to teach the student all the skills he will need in the complete composing process. The structure of Black dialect, as far as I can determine (the Whorfian hypothesis notwithstanding), is irrelevant to the acts of inventing and composing. Thus, my students and I have learned to ignore the presence of dialectal and interdialectal forms not only during the gathering of ideas (what we call "the prewriting stage") but also during the shaping of the first draft ("the writing stage"). Direct and (due to the vast range of interdialects encountered within a single classroom) personalized emphasis upon nonstandard written forms is reserved for a multisteped "revision stage," a term that refers not to a discrete hypothetical segment of an individual student's private writing processes but to the instructional time set aside for the manipulation of completed drafts.

In revising, students first reexamine the content and organization of their essays and attempt what might be called conceptual revision. They are encouraged, for instance, to verify generalizations by providing appropriate details, to consolidate isolated details by supplying appropriate generalizations, to clarify logical assertions by revealing intermediary conclusions, and to determine appropriate strategies either for inserting such material into existing essay structure or for modifying that structure to accommodate revised content. They are, in short, encouraged to discover and appropriately articulate, for the reader's benefit, the mental connections underlying the original body of generalizations, details, and assertions.

Then and only then do I introduce revision activities designed to emphasize surface features. We begin with those Black-dialect-based forms that actually appear in a particular set of essays. Students may be asked, for example, to extract from their compositions several sentences containing nouns and to explain to me, to the class, or to a group of students who are having particular difficulty with standard English plural inflections the difference between the standard singular and plural forms and the corresponding nonstandard forms. In the case of extreme confusion resulting from Black dialect/standard English contrasts, such as often occurs with past tense inflections, I may ask a student or even a whole class to underline all past tense verbs in their essays, to use their handbooks or dictionaries to determine whether each verb is considered to be regular or irregular in standard English, and to center attention on the elimination of first null, then hypercorrect forms. Such single-minded concentration on one troublesome feature at a time seems not only to clarify long-standing confusion but to increase sensitivity to individual weaknesses as well. Also, since students are aware that activities of this kind improve the possibility of effectively communicating their own knowledge and discoveries, the stifling atmosphere created by the use of similar grammar book exercises seems to be avoided. This step of "contrastive revision" cannot legitimately be described as mere "copyediting," primarily because these procedures necessitate the analysis and subsequent elimination of habitual and deep-seated language habits, both oral and written. In fact, instructors considering a discourse-based approach should be aware that most students must repeat this part of the revision process several times for each essay, not only to locate inappropriate forms but also to discern acceptable standard English equivalents; the average student, however, requires less and less time for such revision with each new writing assignment, both because freshman writers become gradually more adept at locating and altering dialect-based forms and because the number of inappropriate forms appearing in first drafts gradually lessens.

The final group of revision activities are true "copyediting" activities, for these center on the so-called "common errors" (vague pronoun references, awkward constructions, misspelled or missing words, etc.) that occur in the first drafts of many writers on all levels and that are easily corrected once brought to the author's attention.

Though some instructors may object to the concept of a three-stage writing process that culminates in a revision stage or to the use of any single model of the writing process at all, such a concept has proven invaluable to me in separating, analyzing, and confronting the disparate layers of written language difficulties that hinder Black-English-speaking freshmen. In contrast, the absence of such a perspective often leads, I believe, to either a counterproductive denial of these difficulties or to the time-consuming and baseless construction of "remedial" and/or "relevant" methods and materials which merely confound an educational issue that is already quite complex, even when based upon careful observation of actual written language behavior.

ADULT LEARNING AND COMPOSITION INSTRUCTION

According to the Census Bureau figures for 1980, 34.3 percent of the students currently enrolled in higher education are over twenty-five years old. Compared to 1972, that figure represents a 20 percent increase in men over twenty-five and over a 100 percent increase in women over twenty-five.¹ At many schools, such as the state university in southern Idaho at which I last taught, the percentage of older students is even higher. According to the director of institutional research, over 50 percent of the student population is over twenty-five years old, and only 15 percent of the entering freshman class can be considered "traditional," i.e. students who have entered college full-time directly after graduation from high school.²

Yet even with this large population of adult learners enrolled in college campuses across the country, little has been done to address the needs of adult learners. This is certainly true in the literature on composition instruction, which has given scant attention to the specific needs of this population.

Part of the problem, I suspect, is that teachers see no reason to separate the way adults learn from the way adolescents and children learn. Indeed, predominant models for learning at *all* levels have generally been based on assumptions about adolescent and child learning.³ Common sense would say that adults as well as adolescents and children share many of the same problems when they sit down to write. All suffer anxiety about their writing; all often do not know what they want to say; all must learn simple skills before they learn complex ones; all suffer problems that can be

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¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *School Enrollment: Social and Economic Characteristics of Students, October 1980*, Advance Report (Washington, DC: GPO, 1981), p. 6; National Center for Education Statistics. *The Condition of Education: Statistical Report* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1980), p. 104.

² For a similar description of students at Queensborough Community College of The City University of New York, see Lynn Quitman Troyka, "Perspectives on Legacies and Literacy in the 1980s," CCC, 32 (1982), 252-253.

³ See, for instance, Barry M. Kroll, "Developmental Perspectives and the Teaching of Composition," *College English*, 41 (1980), 741-752.

characterized as developmental: egocentrism, failure to abstract or form conceptions.⁴ Because adults and adolescents share many problems, teachers may see no pressing reason to treat adults differently from adolescents. Perhaps more important, however, even if they did, they might not know how to characterize the special developmental characteristics and needs of adults. There is, for instance, no generally accepted theory of adult learning and, indeed, the question continues to be raised whether or not there is such a thing as strictly "adult learning" as opposed to "child learning" or "learning."⁵

However, even if adults share many of the problems that children and adolescents have when they begin writing and even if we lack a generally accepted theory that describes adult learning and development, we can describe a number of ways that adults over twenty-five appear to differ from children and adolescents. And in doing so, we can begin to sketch out a rationale for methods that take into account some of the specific needs of a particularly large percentage of such students.

A first simple observation that can be made about adult learners is that they, much more than children or adolescents, tend to be self-directed.⁶ K. Patricia Cross, for instance, characterizes this self-direction as a function of self-concept and points out that at higher levels of ego, moral, and cognitive development, adults can assume increasing responsibility for their learning activities.⁷ Roger Gould points out that within different age groupings, there are different "themes": those aged 16-18 consistently express the theme "We have to get away from our parents"; those 18-20 tend to express the theme "We have to get away from our parents" from the perspective of individuals who are worried that they might not succeed in escaping family "pull"; while those 22-28 tend to express concern for living in the present and building for the future.⁸

Increased self-direction in adults reflects societal expectation: to become truly adult, individuals should become self-directed. They should move away from home, be independent and successful individuals. The flyleaf of a self-help book some relatives gave me reads:

A modest adjustment in our habits can enable us to move with greater agility, function with greater economy, maximize power,

⁴ See Andrea Lunsford, "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," *College English*, 41 (1979), 39-46; Karl Taylor, "DOORS English—The Cognitive Basis of Rhetorical Models," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 2 (Spring/Summer 1979), 52-65.

⁵ See Russell Knudson, "Humanagogy Anyone?" *Adult Education*, 29 (1979), 261-264; K. Patricia Cross, *Adults as Learners* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981).

⁶ For typical discussions, see Malcolm Knowles, "The Emergence of a Theory of Adult Learning: Andragogy," in *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, 2nd ed. (Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1978), 27-59; Shannon Widman, *Adult Learning* (ERIC ED 114 661); Alan Knox, "Adult Learning," in *Adult Development and Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), pp. 405-469.

⁷ Cross, p. 238.

⁸ Roger L. Gould, "The Phases of Adult Life: A Study in Developmental Psychology," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 127 (1972), 521-531.

minimize injuries, learn faster, score higher, and win more often. A better performer lies dormant in every one of us; in effect, for most of our lives we are driving a high-powered engine in low gear.⁹

Even if adults do not see themselves as high-powered engines, they do recognize the need to control their own lives, make their own decisions, set their own goals. Shannon S. Widman points out:

One major difference in adult learning vs. adolescent is the degree of voluntary determinism. In contrast to the typical high school and college age student, who learns (or at least is expected to learn) because older persons decide he has a need to know, the adult learner deliberately chooses to learn something because he has definite requirements for that knowledge or skill, and the reason directly relates to his own perception of his unique needs.¹⁰

Students who are *invited* to attend, rather than expected or required to attend, do not need to stay in college if college does not meet their needs and expectations.

It may seem obvious that adult learners are self-directed, but such self-directedness has implications that are often overlooked when composition teachers decide on materials and methods of instruction. Teachers and textbook authors, for instance, often spend much time trying to convince their students that writing is "good" for them, an observation which may be appropriate for many traditional freshmen but which most adults have already made. In a typical preface to a textbook on "essential college English," Norwood Selby writes, for example:

Think about how important communications is in all phases of day-to-day life and how you can benefit from having confidence in your use of language. If you couldn't communicate, how could you get a date, order a pizza, or pass your English course?¹¹

Ralph E. Loewe writes to students:

"Sick" compositions hurt your grades, not only in English classes but in every course where writing is required. Success in school, on the job, and even in your social life often depends on your ability to communicate effectively.¹²

Rory D. Stephens points out to students that they use language all the time:

Not only do you use it for conveying information, but you also use it for joking, being sarcastic, telling someone your feelings, singing, doing business, making love, playing games, and a

⁹ Laurence E. Morehouse and Leonard Gross, *Maximum Performance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977).

¹⁰ Widman, pp. 36-37.

¹¹ Norwood Selby, *Essential College English: A Grammar and Punctuation Workbook* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 3.

¹² Ralph E. Loewe, *The Writing Clinic*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. xiii.

hundred other activities. Language is a versatile tool you employ in a number of ways.¹³

He continues:

There are two groups of people in this society who can expect to do a lot of writing. The first group includes people whose jobs usually require a college education, such as business managers, social workers, journalists, lawyers, and medical personnel. The second group consists of people who are going to school to prepare themselves for those jobs: students like yourself. As a student, therefore, you are at the point where writing is a skill you need in order to survive, both in college and in your future profession.¹⁴

Stephens' assumption that students go to college to become "professional" is reasonable in many cases. Yet adult students often have many other goals, and such a statement is inappropriate for them. Certainly, adults who plan to be professionals already know that professionals write, and those with different career plans already have an idea of the value of writing in their lives and education. The real problem with such statements is that they may mask a more subtle and dangerous assumption and may send a subtle and dangerous message: students who don't share these goals are not motivated to learn; do not appreciate the value of their education; do not have the right incentives. Taking the traditional freshman as the audience may lead teachers and textbook authors to explain what is obvious to adults, thus to appear condescending, and to deny adults the validity of their own goals and expectations. And if adults do not respond well to materials clearly addressed to youngsters, teachers may wrongly blame the students or the methods, not the unintended condescension.

Although strongly goal-oriented, not all adults who enter college have a clear understanding of the kinds of goals they need to set for themselves, the kinds of activities that will prove fruitful, if they want to learn to write well. Unfortunately, teachers often do not give them the opportunity to evaluate teacher goals or to establish and perhaps reevaluate their own goals within their own learning contexts. Textbook authors often make claims for the effectiveness of the materials and methods used, but fail to provide just those explanations and proofs a critical adult learner wants. In an introduction to a book of copy exercises, for example, Donna Gorrell writes:

Probably the biggest difference between this textbook and others you have used is the copying. Called controlled composition, these copy assignments are an up-to-date method of improving writing. The approach is used not only by college freshmen but also, under the term *imitation*, by professional writers who want to improve their style.¹⁵

¹³ Rory D. Stephens, *Sequence: A Basic Writing Course* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), p. 1.

¹⁴ Stephens, p. 1.

¹⁵ Donna Gorrell, *Copy/Write: Basic Writing Through Controlled Composition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. xix.

Certainly such an explanation of copy exercises is adequate to instill a willingness to try the method if students accept textbook claims unquestioningly; yet such assurances do little to help more questioning and more perceptive students to understand the value of such copy exercises; to understand what "an up-to-date method of improving writing" is; to understand how professional writers' "imitations" are similar to copying a text word-for-word (a point many adult learners might question). Indeed, the explanation does not help adult students to weigh the value of such a method for their own writing problems. Later on, Gorrell writes a "final word":

As you use this textbook, think of yourself as a writer, with an audience of people who are interested in what you have to say.¹⁶

Any goal-oriented adult learner is liable to ask how copying something someone else has written can possibly lead to writing of his own that an audience is interested in.¹⁷

Many teachers have become excited about the possibilities of sentence combining as a classroom activity, yet the way they present such exercises in class may affect the perceived value of the exercises for many adults. William Stull, for instance, writes to students:

To help you master writing from the inside out, *Combining and Creating* brings together two proven strategies: sentence combining and generative rhetoric. Sentence combining is a way of improving writing without formal grammar instruction. It will help you translate into writing the grammar you already know as a speaker of English. It works by asking you to combine simple Dick-and-Jane sentences into more mature ones that establish close relationships among ideas.¹⁸

Stull emphasizes "proven" strategies, yet he does not say how the strategies have been "proven" to be useful without the "formal grammar instruction" that many older students are predisposed to see as more relevant—how, exactly, they will recognize "more mature" sentences or "close" relationships. Students who practice sentence combining are to compare their results with the versions written by professionals. Stull writes:

In some cases, you may feel that you have actually done a *better* job than the professional. But what's important is not whose version is best, but rather how the versions you and your classmates write are similar to, and different from, each other's and from the original author's. In other words, *Combining and Creating* puts you on an equal footing with the masters. And you will be surprised at

¹⁶ Gorrell, p. xxi.

¹⁷ I have written elsewhere on the usefulness of copy exercises. See "An Assessment of Controlled Composition as a Technique for Teaching Basic Writing," *The English Record* (Summer 1982), 17-20.

¹⁸ William L. Stull, *Combining and Creating: Sentence Combining and Generative Rhetoric* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), p. 2.

how quickly your writing begins to stand up to theirs.¹⁹

How combining sentences and comparing versions with those of professionals really puts students on an "equal footing with the masters" is not clear, nor is it clear how students will know that their writing "stands up" to professionals. Without much more specific and detailed explanations than they usually get of how methods work, either from their teachers or textbook authors, adult learners who come to writing with specific goals—for example learning to do things "correctly" or learning the "rules" to good writing—may not have the knowledge to understand, evaluate, and/or modify those goals.

The attitude of teachers toward materials like sentence combining exercises can contribute to the problem. Barbara Fassler Walvoord, for example, explains to college teachers of different academic disciplines that sentence combining has students, "like toddlers with blocks, both build towers and break them down":

In the hands of a skilled teacher, these exercises can also produce a toddler-like glee. In a professional demonstration of sentence-combining method, I once watched a pretty, lively woman delight her sixth graders by dancing up and down the aisles of the classroom while blowing soap bubbles.... In the high school or college classroom, the English teacher or the skills center tutor may not blow bubbles, but the sentence-combining exercises will be much the same.²⁰

If teachers expect sentence-combining exercises to stimulate "toddler-like glee" in students of all ages, they may not recognize the need to explain the benefits and drawbacks of such exercises, the rationale behind the practice, and the ways in which students can recognize and measure success while using the method.

In addition to being self-directed learners, adults also tend to be pragmatic learners. Malcolm Knowles points out that adults look for immediate application and often come to education because of some inability to cope with life problems.²¹ Cross reports that adults who voluntarily undertake learning projects "do so more in the hope of solving a problem than with the intention of learning a subject."²² Another way to view this pragmatism is in terms of biological/psychological time. Bernice Neugarten, for instance, suggests that, as people grow older, they gradually shift from viewing time as time-since-birth to viewing time as time-left-to-live.²³ Adults with little time to accomplish as much as they want to accomplish

¹⁹ Stull, p. 2.

²⁰ Barbara E. Fassler Walvoord, *Helping Students Write Well: A Guide For Teachers in All Disciplines* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1982), pp. 161-162.

²¹ Knowles, p. 38.

²² Cross, p. 189.

²³ John Flavell, "Cognitive Changes in Adulthood," in *Life-Span Developmental Psychology: Research and Theory*, ed. L.R. Goulet and Paul B. Baltes (New York: Academic Press, 1970), p. 252.

are less apt to be interested in making long-term commitments.

Another source of this pragmatic orientation is work experience. Students who work to pay for their education or come to school as part-time learners or returning students tend to be influenced by practicality. In the world of work, ideas and projects have consequences. Tasks lead to accountability, often measured in terms of visible products or observable outcomes. When workers enter school, they often expect their education to have consequences: better jobs, money, respect, promotion, etc.

Those who are concerned with making the most out of the time they have left may be uninterested in postponed success or mediated success, and, indeed, writing tasks are often built around the assumption that people are willing to work for future results, even if the results are somewhat nebulous. David Bartholomae, for instance, tells students that there are many fringe benefits to learning to write:

As a result of the writing you'll do in this course, you will experience an increase in self-awareness. In addition, you'll be more aware of the complexity and beauty in the world around you. And, if all goes well, you will be more confident, not only of your ability to communicate in writing, but more confident in general. And you'll be a more interesting person. I think these are important benefits. I hope you experience even more.²⁴

Such goals are certainly worthy ones: self-awareness, awareness of the "world," self-confidence, increase in interest-quotient. Youngsters, perhaps, can be encouraged by such promises, but not all adults. Even when adults accept such goals as worthy ones, few will see them as practical ones—as central to their immediate problems and purposes or as realistically achievable in ten to sixteen weeks.

One approach to teaching writing is to see the process as a gradual and incremental one in which students begin with words, move on to sentences, progress to paragraphs, then to five-paragraph themes, and finally to mature themes. Adult students will bridle at this regimen. Katie Davis explains the organization of her book on sentences and paragraphs as follows:

Of course, the very first step in the writing process is the construction of good sentences. Because this is true, the first twelve lessons of this book are designed to make you more aware of the various elements that make up a sentence, the ways these elements can be put together to form a good sentence, and the ways you can achieve sentence variety by using various combinations of these elements.... When you have completed the first twelve lessons, you will no doubt have mastered the technique of good sentence writing and will be better prepared to master the technique of good paragraph construction.²⁵

²⁴ David Bartholomae, *Sometimes You Just Have to Stand Naked: A Guide to Interesting Writing* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. 7.

²⁵ Katie Davis, *Sentence Combining and Paragraph Construction* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), p. ix.

Davis' twelve chapters on the sentence include drills on sentence elements, compound subjects, compound predicate objects, compound direct objects, compound predicate nominatives, compound adjectival modifiers, compound adverbial modifiers, participial phrases, gerunds, gerund phrases, and more. Such a plan appears logical, and some students may enjoy such practice—particularly students who are content with passive, teacher-directed learning. But many adult learners will find such drill work to be impractical and time-consuming—too time-consuming, in fact, considering the limited amount of time they believe they have to reach paragraphs and real themes.

The circumstances under which practice writing sentences should precede writing paragraphs and longer papers are, I think, few. It may be, in fact, an inappropriate sequence for most adult learners. As a director of a writing center, I have for years counseled almost all students to work on larger units first—organization and cohesion in their own full-length manuscripts—because of the amount of immediate, practical success they can get especially in courses in other disciplines besides English. Students who work on organization and cohesion in larger pieces of discourse can, in fact, improve their grades often by more than a full point; students who spend their time honing isolated sentences do not improve in their ability to solve the global discourse problems that impede communication of subtle perceptions. And only the young and disoriented will work away on sentence and paragraph drills with no other reward than praise from their English teachers.

Certain tasks can be defended, but not on grounds of immediate, practical applicability. Free writing, for instance, may help students to loosen up, postpone closure, gain confidence, and discover meaning. But unless presented so that students can recognize and appreciate such outcomes, free writing may be perceived as useless and wasteful. Likewise, sentence combining takes time—over twenty hours, says John Mellon²⁶—and adult learners may not be willing to commit their energies or attention to such tasks unless they can see the value of "syntactic maturity." And one of the major problems teachers face in introducing spelling to many adult learners is that spelling takes time—so much time for some that they may not be able to recognize progress toward their goals. Adult learners who see themselves with only a limited amount of time may not wish to watch their bodies grow old while they continue manipulating letters in words, learning rules, and watching out for exceptions. Furthermore, with the introduction of spelling programs for word processing, the value of learning to spell may well decrease even further in the minds of many students in the next few years.

²⁶ John Mellon, "Issues in the Theory and Practice of Sentence Combining: A Twenty-Year Perspective," in *Sentence Combining and the Teaching of Writing*, ed. Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg (Conway, AK: L&S Books, 1979), p. 26.

Not only are adult learners goal-oriented and pragmatic learners, but they are also experienced learners. Composition teachers, of course, are well aware that students bring with them considerable stores of experience. In answer to the question "Who are our students?" Marie Ponsot writes:

...student writers come to us with 18 years of experience and with 18 years of experience with language. They come with 12 years of school experience so varied that while we see all freshmen know something, we can assume little about the facts, attitudes, and skills transmitted to them, not even that schools have been transmitters.²⁷

While eighteen-year-olds have had experience, older students have had even more. They have had the opportunity to interact socially as equals with other adults. Outside of school, their ideas are often taken seriously by their peers, and they often have roles that carry responsibility. Many have been married, sometimes divorced; many have children, sometimes the same age as traditional freshmen; many have had military experience, welfare experience, experience with governmental agencies; many have lived long enough to have seen relatives and loved ones die and experience the anticipation of their own deaths.

Teachers often attempt to tap this experience as subject matter for their composition courses. Recognizing the importance of such experience, they often emphasize personal narratives and descriptions, one-to-one conferences, class discussions, and laboratory approaches that allow students to work on individualized projects and assignments. Lou Kelly emphasizes that "student talk is full of special knowledge, vivid experience, and honest feelings."²⁸ William E. Coles, Jr. writes to students:

In order to deal with [these assignments] you will be supplying your own information and materials. After all, you have held various jobs and played games. You live in a variety of communities. And for a number of years now you have had your own thoughts and feelings about things. This is your experience, and from this seemingly shapeless and yet entirely individual source you will derive whatever it is you have to say.²⁹

Viewed positively, the experience students bring to the classroom gives them something to write about and can be a source of inspiration and motivation. On the other hand, such experience can also have a negative effect on classroom instruction, especially for older students. Established attitudes and values determine how students react to certain methods and materials. For example, introducing the technique of free writing and journal keeping, Peder Jones and Jay Farness emphasize the game-like quality

²⁷ Marie Ponsot, "Total Immersion," *Journal of Basic Writing* 1 (Fall/Winter 1976), 32.

²⁸ Lou Kelly, *From Dialogue to Discourse: An Open Approach to Competence and Creativity* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1972), p. 20.

²⁹ William E. Coles, Jr., *Teaching Composing: A Guide to Teaching Writing as a Self-Creating Process* (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book Company, 1974), p. 10.

of free writing, pointing out that "to get moving, we must trick, tease, or cajole stored information out of our minds."³⁰ And they suggest a number of ideas for making journal entries:

- imaginary dialogue
- outrageous comparison
- fake love letters
- if I could make myself invisible...
- New Year's resolutions
- the world's greatest party
- the world's worst party
- your thrilling moments in sports or theater or dance
- the Insult Hall of Fame

They ask: "Don't the names of the journal-writing games listed...tickle your fancy just a little bit?"³¹

Such suggestions may "tickle the fancy" of some adults—and for those students, such journal entries might be effective—but many will remain untickled, especially those who bring to composition class a strong belief in the value of rules and of handbook instruction and drillwork in learning how to write "correctly" or those with a strong belief that writing and learning is serious business. Indeed, Jones and Farness tell their students that "if you have never kept a journal, now may be a good time to try one; the joys, surprises, crises, and occasional absurdities of college life make for great journal entries," yet such encouragement may mean nothing to a thirty-five-year-old welder who has come to school to retool after a job disability.

Other motivational devices may be ineffective with adult learners. One author tells students:

- You are the doctor.
- Your compositions are the patients.
- Your instructor is the Director of the Clinic.³²

Yet not all adults may be willing to accept such role playing—especially those who have been patients all their lives. Another analogy suggests that grammar is like football:

The grammar game and the game of football have a lot in common. Both games have teams with a certain number of positions on them, and both have tactics, rules, and goals. In football, there are eleven positions on the team; in grammar there are five positions on the team of words we call a sentence. The players on both teams are selected on the basis of the skills required for the positions.³³

³⁰ Peder Jones and Jay Farness, *College Writing Skills: A Text with Exercises* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 4.

³¹ Jones and Farness, p. 6.

³² Loewe, p. xiii.

³³ Myrtle Bates and Renee Freedman Stern, *The Grammar Game* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1983), p. 2.

The authors point out that the analogy is useful because it "helps to clarify a difficult subject"—but not only is the analogy cute and oversimplified, but it will not interest students who lack knowledge of and interest in the game, and will offend others for whom comparison of grammar with a game suggests a lack of seriousness.

Experience not only establishes the biases and attitudes that affect the responses of adult learners to instructional materials and programs but may, in fact, shape the ways adult learners perceive problems, search for solutions, and accept advice. Many adults, for instance, firmly believe that "grammar" and knowledge of grammatical terminology will help them to write better. Many believe that there is something scientific about judging "good" writing and that teachers have that scientific knowledge. Many believe that if they do enough drills and practice hard enough on the "basics" (whatever those are) they will automatically "cure" their poor writing habits.

Helping adults to understand the limitations of their own perceptions of their problems—helping them to change their perception that grammatical knowledge will automatically help them to write better, to accept the limitations teachers have in judging "good" writing, to believe that learning to write involves more than building correct habits by drill—may be extremely difficult. Much more difficult, in fact, for older students than for younger students. Jane C. Zahn, for example, suggests that "the most difficult task for an adult is to learn to do a familiar task in an unfamiliar way or to view a deeply valued concept in a new light."³⁴ Donald H. Brundage and Dorothy MacKeracher suggest that effecting change in established patterns requires a "greater input of energy" than the subject matter might suggest.³⁵

Adults who have had long experience coping with problems in their own ways or who have commitments to particular beliefs may find changing their approaches or beliefs very difficult. Alan Knox suggests, for instance, that past experiences can negatively affect the creativity of many adults, causing them to search through their repertoires of past solutions instead of generating novel solutions.³⁶ Such unreceptiveness to new approaches or beliefs may cause adults to reject or ignore advice calculated to help them improve their methods of "discovery" or "invention." Peter Elbow, for instance, suggests that students learn to "lie":

Write down quickly all the odd or crazy things you can come up with. For example: "The French Revolution wasn't started by the Wobblies in Seattle, or by Lenin, or by Marx, or by the Marx brothers. It wasn't part of the women's movement. It didn't last forty days and nights, it isn't in the Bible, they didn't just get the

³⁴ Jane C. Zahn, "Differences Between Adults and Youth Affecting Learning," *Adult Education*, 2 (Winter 1967), 75.

³⁵ Donald H. Brundage and Dorothy MacKeracher, *Adult Learning Principles and Their Application to Program Planning* (ERIC ED 181 292), p. 33.

³⁶ Knox, p. 445.

enemy drunk and slide them into the sea." If you let the nonsense roll effortlessly for ten or fifteen minutes—spelling out some of the individual fantasies at more length, too—you can discover some ideas that will help your thinking even if they are not true. (And they may be true. Could the French Revolution have been part of the women's movement?)³⁷

Elbow's advice gains support from theorists in creativity who emphasize that people can learn to brainstorm, withhold closure, and generate unconventional solutions to problems.³⁸ Yet such a solution may appear to be impractical, immature, or simply wrong-headed to many adults—especially if they have a commitment to answers, rules, and facts.

Similarly, adults may learn to use heuristic techniques that ask them to "change perspectives" or to consider problems in different contexts. However, they will strongly resist using such techniques on subjects about which they have firmly held beliefs or for which they have strong commitments. To do so might require more than simply changing "perspectives"—indeed, might require a significant reassessment and structural reorganization of fundamental perceptions.³⁹

I have touched on some of the implications of considering the needs and characteristics of adult learners. And it might be worthwhile here to summarize these and suggest a few more:

1. Teachers of adult learners cannot talk to them the same way they would talk to adolescents. They may not, in fact, be able to use the same textbooks or motivational devices with both adolescents and adults.
2. Teachers of adult learners must choose methods that allow their students to set goals, assess their own progress, and understand the rationale behind instructional programs.
3. When using materials that do not offer immediate and obvious rewards—materials such as exercises in free writing, controlled composition, sentence combining, grammar, or spelling—teachers will need to help their adult students to understand why such programs are essential in achieving their goals and when and how to recognize success, change, or progress. They cannot expect their instructional materials alone to stimulate adult learners to work harder, enjoy writing, or discover adventure. And explanations will require more than simple exhortations: changing any adult's perceptions will require effort, hard facts, and individualized attention.
4. Teachers who design programs to help students to "think" better, to become "aware," to become more "involved" or "concerned" with social issues or other controversial issues may need to pay extra attention to the

³⁷ Peter Elbow, *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 72.

³⁸ See, for instance, James L. Adams, *Conceptual Blockbusting: A Guide to Better Ideas* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1974).

³⁹ See, for instance, Jack Mezirow, "Perspective Transformation," *Adult Education*, 28 (1978), 101.

difficulties they will have achieving success with older students whose attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives are more firmly set than younger students. 5. Teachers who teach adults skills—for example, punctuation, sentence analysis, or stylistic analysis—may find that skills that appear simple to them are much more difficult for their adult learners to master than they expect. In order to learn new ways to perceive and to solve old problems, adults often must unlearn old ideas and strategies.

Some of these guidelines and cautions suggest reassessing the way teachers approach teaching younger students as well as adults. Certainly treating younger adults as adults can often help them to mature. And by treating young students as adults, teachers also take into consideration individual differences in such areas as goals that affect the ways younger learners approach learning. Yet I would emphasize that adults are sufficiently different in the ways they approach learning, set goals, and perceive their problems that teachers cannot teach all students like adults. Different methods and materials as well as different expectations are appropriate for different student populations. We need more materials designed specifically for adult learners. And we need specific strategies for teaching adults to recognize both the value and limitation of their own perceptions and experiences.

PERSPECTIVES ON ANXIETY AND THE BASIC WRITER: RESEARCH, EVALUATION, INSTRUCTION

Professional writers, amateur writers, and unskilled or basic writers all share what Donald M. Murray refers to as the "terror of the blank page."¹ The kind of writing anxiety that professional writers struggle with—a reluctance or inability to compose which is usually overcome by various rituals—can stimulate very good writing just by the pressure of its presence. The counterproductive, debilitating writing anxiety most often felt by basic writers, on the other hand, can prevent the flow of any writing.

Various causes have been cited for this crippling anxiety that interferes with the performance of basic writers. Mina Shaughnessy believed that basic writers allow their fear of committing errors to overwhelm them:

For the basic writer, academic writing is a trap.... By the time he reaches college, the basic writer both resents and resists his vulnerability as a writer.... Some writers, inhibited by their fear of error, produce but a few lines an hour or keep trying to begin, crossing out one try after another until the sentence is hopelessly tangled.²

Sondra Perl corroborates Shaughnessy's assessment in her study of the composing processes of five basic writers, for whom editing often plays an intrusive role that "breaks down the rhythms generated by thinking and writing."³ Murray suggests that basic writers are highly anxious because of their unfamiliarity with the craft of writing. He feels that students will become less terrified of writing once they are encouraged to think of it as a process, as a series of stages, draft upon uncorrected draft, through which they eventually discover their subject.⁴ And Richard Todd believes that the blank page intimidates students because they "lack a voice adequate" to express the complexity of their social experiences.⁵

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¹ Donald M. Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), p. 70.

² Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 7.

³ Sondra Perl, "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 13 (1979), 333.

⁴ Murray, p. 72.

⁵ Richard Todd, "Back-to-School Reading: Why Yalies Can't Write," *Atlantic Monthly*, (September, 1976), 96-97.

Fear of errors, unfamiliarity with the composing process, and a lack of voice all may explain why the highly anxious basic writer fails when attempting to communicate via the written word. Basic writing teachers might be better equipped to turn failure into competence by applying current knowledge about writing anxiety to their teaching practices and evaluative measures. My purpose in this paper is to share some findings about writing apprehension and to describe some related work done in the basic writing program at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo.

There is a growing body of research on writing anxiety. Most of the studies propose measures of writing anxiety, demonstrate its relationship to writing performance, or relate it to the teaching of composition. Since there seems to be no qualitative way to define a psychological construct such as anxiety, it is usually assessed in terms of self-reports, physiological signs, or general behavior. The most common measurement of general anxiety is the self-report.⁶ In response to the anxiety that they observed to be prevalent among college basic writers, John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller developed a standardized self-report instrument to isolate apprehensive basic writers from those who are not.⁷ Their Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) was constructed with the assumptions that basic writers: (1) fear evaluation of their writing; (2) avoid writing; (3) expect to fail in their few writing attempts; (4) consistently fail to submit compositions in class; (5) do not attend class when writing is required; and (6) seldom enroll voluntarily in courses requiring writing. The twenty-six statements which comprise the WAT elicit responses in these six areas in a sliding scale format, with five possible responses per item, "strongly agree" through "strongly disagree."

Despite the existence of other measures of writing apprehension,⁸ most studies of the relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance have compared results on writing tests to WAT scores. These studies have found that highly apprehensive students write differently and with lower quality than low apprehensives, that highly apprehensive writers fail to demonstrate as strong a working knowledge of writing skills as low

⁶ For descriptions of various general anxiety questionnaires such as the Manifest Anxiety Scale and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, see Eric Gaudry and Charles D. Spielberger, *Anxiety and Educational Achievement* (Sydney: John Wiley and Sons, 1971), pp. 7-42.

⁷ John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 9 (1975), 242-249.

⁸ See, for example, Barbara King, "Measuring Attitudes Toward Writing: The King Construct Scale," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Minneapolis, April 1979; Barry M. Kroll, "Assessing Students' Attitudes Toward Writing," *The English Record*, 20 (Winter 1979), 6-9; Merle O'Rourke Thompson, "Classroom Techniques for Reducing Writing Anxiety: A Study of Several Cases," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Washington, DC, March 1980.

apprehensives, that highly apprehensive writers use more words to say less, and that low apprehensives reveal syntactical features of mature writers more consistently than do high apprehensives.⁹

Two studies done by University of Texas at Austin researchers examined the link between apprehension and writing performance in terms of the writer's composing processes and essay writing skills. Cynthia L. Selfe compared the composing habits of two groups of writers—those who scored on the WAT as high apprehensives and as low apprehensives. Selfe found that at the planning or prewriting stage, high apprehensives had less awareness of audience or organization, used fewer essay planning strategies, and did less written note-taking than did low apprehensives. During the writing stage, high apprehensives spent less time on individual sentences than did low apprehensives. And in the postdraft stage, high apprehensives again spent less time proofreading, editing, and revising than did low apprehensives.¹⁰ Lester Faigley, John A. Daly, and Stephen P. Witte focused their attention on the finished product and found that high apprehensives wrote significantly shorter essays that were also less syntactically mature (e.g., final nonrestrictive modifiers appear less frequently in the prose of high apprehensives). Faigley, et al. also found that for personal narrative/descriptive essays, high apprehensives wrote communication units with significantly fewer words than low apprehensives, whereas there was no such significant difference in apprehension for argumentative essay types.¹¹ In other words, high apprehensives are, in general, less skillful than their low apprehensive counterparts both in handling the process and in achieving successful products. They react to their perceived lack of skill with a lack of confidence. Argumentative essays produce heightened apprehension and shorter communication units in all students.

Several other studies have administered the WAT as a pre/post questionnaire and have compared the writer's increase or decrease in apprehension to measures of writing growth in order to determine how writing anxiety relates to change (decline or improvement) in writing skills over a period of time. R.H. Weiss and S.A. Walters at West Chester State College in Pennsylvania discovered that decreases in apprehension toward writing

⁹ See these studies: John A. Daly, "Writing Apprehension and Writing Competency," paper presented at the Convention of the Southeast Educational Research Association, Austin, 1978; Virginia Bock, "Some Effects of Apprehension on Writing Performance," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Business Communication Association, San Diego, December 1976; Robert J. Garcia, "An Investigation of Relationships: Writing Apprehension, Syntactic Performance, and Writing Quality," diss., Arizona State University 1977.

¹⁰ Cynthia Leigh Selfe, "The Composing Processes of Four High and Four Low Writing Apprehensives: A Modified Case Study," diss., University of Texas at Austin 1981.

¹¹ Lester Faigley, John A. Daly, and Stephen P. Witte, "The Role of Writing Apprehension in Writing Performance and Competence," *Journal of Educational Research*, 75 (1981), 16-21.

were directly related to having students complete intensive writing tasks in content courses across the curriculum: history, biology, psychology.¹² Two other studies examined WAT pre/post scores, student writing performance, and teaching methods. William Powers, John A. Cook, and Russell Meyer found that compulsory writing (i.e., required essays on assigned topics accompanied by rigid due dates) increases the anxiety of basic writers. These researchers at a large midwestern university suggested that since forcing basic writers to write increases their anxiety, alternative teaching methods that rely less on negativism must be developed.¹³ In a study at the University of Missouri which compared traditional teacher-centered classes and student-centered composition classes, and which matched writing by both groups to their WAT pre/post scores, Roy F. Fox reported that the sequential, student-centered exercises, often in a peer workshop context, reduced writing anxiety at a significantly faster rate than did conventional, lecture-type instruction.¹⁴

Most strategies for lessening writing anxiety have a common aim: to build the writer's confidence. These strategies range from "writing anxiety workshops" for WAT-diagnosed students¹⁵ to small group work involving low-risk, affirmative experience.¹⁶ A program developed by Teresa Ferster Glazier attempts to improve student self-image and reduce anxiety in these ways: (1) to help students work out a thesis statement for each paper; (2) to get students to write immediately; (3) to provide supportive statements; and (4) to let students taste success.¹⁷ Merle O'Rourke Thompson also outlines a "language study approach" designed to reduce writing apprehension, in which students read about language, talk in small groups about language, write about language, and then respond to each other's writing. Thompson's instructional scheme includes units on the writing process, the professional writer, and the language situation, while allowing time for teacher-student conferences. Using his own thirty-item attitude survey which emphasizes statements describing the writer's feelings about the writing process and its consequences, Thompson reports significant

¹² R.H. Weiss and S.A. Walters, "Writing Apprehension: Implications for Teaching, Writing, and Concept Clarity," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Washington, DC, March 1980.

¹³ William Powers, John A. Cook, and Russell Meyer, "The Effect of Compulsory Writing on Writing Apprehension," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 13 (1979), 225-230.

¹⁴ Roy F. Fox, "Treatment of Writing Apprehension and Its Effects on Composition," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 14 (1980), 39-49.

¹⁵ Lynn Z. Bloom, "Identifying and Reducing Writing Anxiety: Part II, Writing Anxiety Workshops," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Denver, March 1978.

¹⁶ Mary E. Denman, "The Measure of Success in Writing, CCC, 29 (February, 1978), 42-46.

¹⁷ Teresa Ferster Glazier, "Improving the Poor Self Image of the Remedial Student," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Denver, 1978.

declines in student anxiety (via decreases in posttest survey scores) and improvement in writing (by comparing pre- and posttest writing samples) at semester's end.¹⁸

Colleges and universities which must deal with increasing numbers of inexperienced, unskilled writers should incorporate these findings about and approaches to anxious writers in their basic writing programs. The basic writing program at SUNY at Buffalo diagnoses highly apprehensive writers, maps out individual instructional plans, measures changes in apprehension, and monitors the impact of the composition program on student apprehension. The SUNY at Buffalo Learning Center, a skills division separate from the English Department, offers a two-semester sequence of credit-bearing writing courses. Although the program was established more than ten years ago to help Educational Opportunity Program students overcome academic deficiencies, increasing numbers of regularly admitted students—many of them upperclassmen who have already taken English Department composition courses—have also enrolled in these writing courses in recent years. The first course in the sequence, College Writing, concentrates on work at the sentence and expository essay levels. The second course, Advanced College Writing, seeks to expand the command of discourse by having students write extensively in a wide variety of modes, with an emphasis on persuasive writing. Under the directorship of Charles R. Cooper, the Center first began using the WAT as one of several measures to evaluate student growth in various aspects of writing. In recent years, the Center has broadened its concern for writing apprehension to include diagnosis, instruction, and program development.

During the first week of classes each semester, the WAT is administered to all sections of College Writing and Advanced College Writing. It takes fifteen to twenty minutes of class time for students to enter their responses to the WAT onto an answer sheet designed for quick hand-scoring by the instructor.¹⁹ After computing and recording their own class set of WAT scores, instructors submit the results to the evaluation coordinator who establishes cutoff points for high and low apprehensive writers. Scores one standard deviation below the group mean indicate high apprehension; scores one standard deviation above the group mean indicate low apprehension. Instructors are informed of these cutoff points so that they can identify particularly apprehensive writers at the outset of the semester. The WAT scores derived as cutoff points (the Fall 1979 cutoffs are typical: for high apprehensives, scores below 73; for low apprehensives, scores above 101) help instructors to isolate highly apprehensive writers and to make individualized instructional plans for them.²⁰

¹⁸ Thompson, "Classroom Techniques for Reducing Writing Anxiety: A Study of Several Cases," 2-4.

¹⁹ A reproduction of the WAT answer sheet devised by the SUNY/Buffalo staff can be found in Appendix B of Elizabeth Metzger's, "A Scheme for Measuring Growth in College Writing," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 1 (Spring/Summer, 1978), 71-81.

²⁰ I am indebted to my SUNY/Buffalo writing component colleagues Roger Cherry, John Staley, and Michael Williamson, for their help in collecting and analyzing WAT data from 1977 to 1980.

Basic writing instructors at SUNY at Buffalo have five strategies for helping highly apprehensive writers. They arrange immediate individual student-teacher conferences, encourage students to analyze their own composing processes, avoid formal evaluation of student work early in the semester, refer selected students to additional resources such as the campus tutorial center, and channel writers into appropriate beginning levels of sentence-combining exercises.

Their first step, once the highly apprehensive basic writers in their classes have been identified, is immediately to schedule one-to-one tutorial sessions with those students. Generally, the first conferences focus conversation on the writer's history (previous high school and college writing, writing done in nonacademic settings, etc.) and on ideas for essay topics. Since students must generate their own subjects for the eight to ten required essays in Learning Center courses, it helps anxious writers to compile a long list of possible topics from which they can draw throughout the semester. Subsequent regularly scheduled conferences are centered on works-in-progress. By posing questions about purpose, audience, and organization, instructors help students see trouble spots and solutions, and develop confidence in their ability to solve problems and make decisions. Also at an early point in each semester, whether in conference or in a class meeting, instructors ask students to describe their own composing habits, rituals, and processes by writing a short piece titled, "How I Write." By reflecting upon their own composing process, apprehensive writers often pinpoint their failings and see how to remedy them. For example, a frequent self-appraisal is "putting off an assigned task until the last minute," which writers can overcome by disciplining themselves to plan, rehearse, draft, and share rough versions of a piece with instructors or other readers ahead of time.

Two other tactics help highly apprehensive writers. We avoid the formal evaluations of early essays. Instead, instructors respond, orally and in writing, to the first few writing tasks but refrain from attaching a grade to essays until well into the semester. One common practice is to allow students at midterm to select the best two of their first four or five essays to be graded. Another is for instructors to identify two or three major problems that recur in the first few essays and to agree to base the final course grade largely on improvement in these key areas. In addition, we refer students to the campus tutorial center, the Writing Place, for further help in overcoming these problems. Although this writing center is available to all students and staff, its tutors work closely with the Learning Center and are especially sensitive to the needs of basic writers. On the average, twenty percent of the student visits are by students enrolled in our Learning Center courses. The Writing Place tutors are prepared to respond to drafts, to suggest exercises in workbooks and programmed texts, and to hammer out alternative sentence patterns with students. However, most of the work at the sentence level is accomplished through interaction between the instructor and writer.

Sentence-combining drill is an integral part of the Buffalo basic writing program, and particularly valuable to the most anxious writers. Much of

the first level course and some of the second course are devoted to intensive sentence-combining practice. In an effort to use material best suited to anxious writers who fear failure, instructors have on hand three sentence-combining texts and usually have highly apprehensive writers work, initially, through exercises from Frank O'Hare's *Sentencecraft*.²¹ A quick readability check by a member of the Learning Center's reading staff found that *Sentencecraft* has an estimated eleventh grade readability, whereas *Sentence Combining*, by William Strong, has an estimated readability level of twelfth grade, and *The Writer's Options*, by Donald A. Daiker, et al., has a readability level between twelfth grade and college.²² Given the relatively lower readability level of *Sentencecraft*, the lack of reading proficiency by most Learning Center students, and the fact that O'Hare's sentence-combining exercises are signaled (i.e., specific instructions for the combining operations are given to the writer), instructors frequently start highly apprehensive writers with exercises from that text before moving on to the others. This instructional plan not only helps bolster students' confidence in their ability to manipulate sentences, but also moves them toward handling more difficult college-level tasks.

After the fifteen weeks of instruction, instructors again administer the WAT to each student. A cumulative "change score" (or mean difference) for all students in the program is then computed. Although the WAT pre-score is used primarily for diagnosing individual students, and the WAT pre/post scores are added to other test data (holistic rating, error and t-unit counts of pre- and post- essays) to form profiles of each student's performance, some overall conclusions can be drawn about changes in student attitude by looking at whole group change scores. The results over a three-year period indicate that most students are significantly less anxious about writing by the end of the semester. The results for 1978-1979, for example (see Table 1), demonstrate that most students in College Writing decreased significantly in apprehension while many Advanced College Writing students decreased slightly by the end of the semester.²³ The most likely explanations for less dramatic overall decreases in anxiety shown by advanced writers are that their WAT pre- scores were rather high to begin with (that is, at the outset of the semester, they were not all that anxious) and that the course demand for a higher level of abstract and argumentative thinking tends to increase anxiety in some writers.

²¹ Frank O'Hare, *Sentencecraft* (Lexington, MA: Ginn & Company, 1975).

²² William Strong, *Sentence Combining* (New York: Random House, 1973); Donald A. Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg, *The Writer's Options* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

²³ "The University Learning Center Evaluation for the Spring 1978, Fall 1978, and Spring 1979 Semesters" (SUNY at Buffalo: unpublished report, 1979).

TABLE 1

WRITING APPREHENSION TEST
DISTRIBUTION OF PRE AND POST PERCENTILE SCORES* FOR
FALL 1978, SPRING 1979

College Writing

	Fall 1978		Spring 1979	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
90%ile	87	81	89	77
75%ile	78	71	78	69
50%ile	69	64	72	60
25%ile	57	56	62	53
range =	PRE 31-101		34-92	
	POST 35-106		34-101	
classes =	6		3	
students =	109		57	

Advanced College Writing

	Fall 1978		Spring 1979	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
90%ile	83	82	77	80
75%ile	75	74	72	72
50%ile	63	62	66	64
25%ile	54	52	58	54
range =	PRE 30-104		34-101	
	POST 38-96		38-92	
classes =	3		4	
students =	58		74	

*Due to scoring method, high scores represent high apprehension and low scores represent low apprehension.

In addition to incorporating writing apprehension measurement in program evaluation, the Learning Center attempts continually to monitor the impact of the writing program on apprehension. For example, when evaluating course attrition rates, the evaluation coordinator discovered that there is a greater proportion of highly apprehensive writers among those who drop writing courses than among those students who complete the courses.²⁴ During the 1977-1978 academic year, the Center conducted a

²⁴ John Staley, "Role of Writing Anxiety in the Evaluation of a Basic Skills Writing Program," paper presented at the Developmental/Remedial Education Symposium, Rochester, April 1979.

study to determine whether or not there is a significant relationship between a student's decrease in writing apprehension by the end of a semester and his or her success in course performance. The study was based on data collected during the Fall 1977 semester. One hundred and fifty undergraduates—mostly freshmen—in the two levels of writing courses completed the WAT at the beginning and end of the semester. In order to study the correlation between WAT and writing performance changes, we established the WAT pre/post score as the dependent variable. Two sets of independent variables were set up: one containing final grade, attendance (number of times present and number of times absent), class section, and sex; the other consisting of error count differences (spelling, pronoun case and reference, verb tense and agreement, fragments, run-ons, and comma splices) and holistic ratings for pre/post writing samples.

TABLE 2
STEPWISE REGRESSIONS FOR TWO PREDICTOR SETS
(INSTRUCTIONAL VARIABLES)

SET 1	INCREMENT OF R ²
Sex	.4070
Class section	7.2651
Final grade	1.7031
Number times absent	36.6732
Number times present	.7218
R = .6791	
R ² = .4611	
SET 2	INCREMENT OF R ²
Error counts	.3742
Holistic evaluation of essays	.0287
R = .0635	
R ² = .0040	

Next, a multivariate multiple regression of the WAT pre/post change score was done with the instructional variables. The results showed that the most significant correlations with change in writing anxiety were the number of times absent from class and the particular class section a student enrolled in. Even though Daly and Miller found that males were significantly more anxious about writing than females, the Learning Center study yielded no significant correlation between sex and change in anxiety. Furthermore, when a stepwise regression was conducted (see Table 2)²⁵ in

²⁵ Tom Reigstad and Gay Church, "The Relationship Between Writing Anxiety and Performance in College Basic Writing Courses," SUNY at Buffalo, unpublished manuscript, 1978.

order to analyze the contribution of each individual instructional variable to the WAT change score, it was found that set one (number of absences, number of times present, class section, final grade, and student's sex) accounted for 46% of the variance in WAT change, and that set two (holistic rating and error counts of essay samples) were not significant predictors of change in WAT score.

The SUNY at Buffalo study demonstrates that for the 150 cases examined, decreases in writing anxiety could not be predicted by improvement in writing (by decreasing errors or by writing a better posttest essay), but rather by a low rate of absenteeism and by the section the student enrolled in. The most significant predictors of a decrease in writing apprehension were absences and class section. In other words, an increase in writing apprehension is related to a high number of absences and to the class a student is in.

At least two implications for the classroom are implicit in these findings: (1) writing instructors need to look closely at the WAT pre-scores early in the semester, to isolate the highly apprehensive writers and, via personalized attention, to encourage these writers to attend class meetings; (2) since decreases and increases in writing apprehension are so highly correlated with specific class sections, basic writing instructors must be sensitive to the causes of apprehension such as fear of failure and reluctance to take risks and adjust their teaching style and grading procedures for these individual writers until their confidence is built.

Writing programs can reflect current literature on writing apprehension by tailoring instruction and evaluation to help reduce the high apprehension which some basic writers experience. John Mellon's taxonomy of compositional competencies suggests that writing instructors need to teach, among other things, "the ability to prevent, control, or overcome writing apprehension, and to forestall or master 'blank page' aphasia."²⁶ It seems particularly crucial to identify highly anxious writers early, to provide them with differential treatment, and to experiment with individualized teaching techniques that reduce student apprehensions. Writing programs need to develop instructional approaches to apprehension and to test their effectiveness. They need to discover relationships between the WAT and actual samples of writing, rather than objective skills tests and to examine the effect of teaching style, programmed writing textbooks, and workbooks on high apprehension. Whatever specific "cures" that research might reveal, though, the basic writing instructor's duty will certainly be to encourage the student to forget about past failures, to take risks in writing, and to adapt to the rules which govern academic writing.

²⁶ John C. Mellon, "A Taxonomy of Compositional Competencies," *Perspectives on Literacy*, ed. Richard Beach and P. David Pearson (Minneapolis: College of Education, University of Minnesota, 1978), pp. 247-272.

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Writing Instructor is a quarterly publication committed to the field of writing/composition instruction in secondary and higher education. The Editorial Board invites articles of 8-10 double-spaced pages which blend theory and pedagogy to the practical ends of classroom experience. Exercises, brief notes on resources, and announcements are also welcomed. Subscription to the journal is \$12.00 annually for individuals and \$16.00 annually for institutions. We do not bill. Please send material and subscription requests to: *The Writing Instructor*, c/o Freshman Writing Program, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0062

The *Writing Lab Newsletter* is intended as an informal means of exchanging information among those who work in writing labs and language skills centers. Brief articles (4-6 typed pages) describing labs, their instructional methods and materials, goals, program, budgets, staffing, services, etc. are invited. For those who wish to join the newsletter group, a donation of \$5 to help defray duplicating and mailing costs (with checks made payable to Purdue University, but sent to me) would be appreciated. Please send material for the newsletter and requests to join to: Professor Muriel Harris, Editor, *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Department of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907

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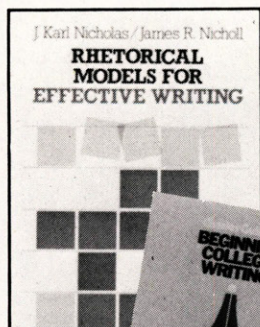
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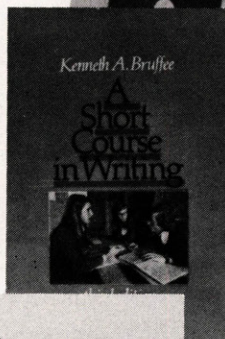
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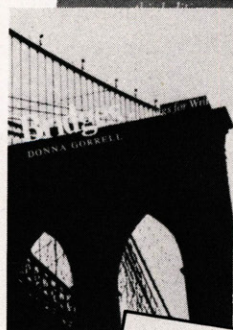
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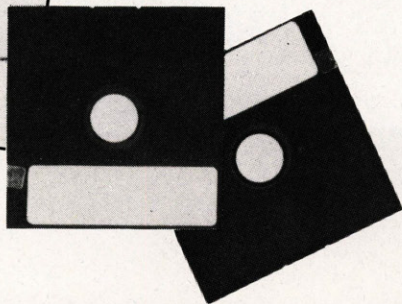
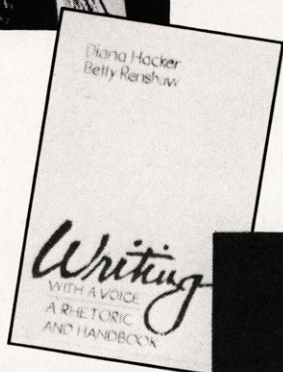
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