

# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

**FALL 1989**

Volume 8, Number 2

"Am I really that bad?"  
Writing Apprehension and Basic Writers  
**Mary Louise Buley-Meissner**

Explaining Grammatical Concepts  
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Toward a Phenomenology of Freewriting  
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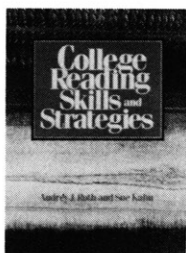
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# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

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## CALL FOR ARTICLES

We welcome manuscripts of 10–20 pages on topics related to basic writing, broadly interpreted.

Manuscripts will be refereed anonymously. We require four copies of a manuscript. To assure impartial review, give author information and a biographical note for publication on the cover page only. One copy of each manuscript not accepted for publication will be returned to the author, if we receive sufficient stamps (no meter strips) clipped to a self-addressed envelope. We require the new MLA style (*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 1984). For further guidance, send a stamped letter-size, self-addressed envelope for our one-page style sheet.

*All manuscripts must focus clearly on basic writing and must add substantively to the existing literature.* We seek manuscripts that are original, stimulating, well-grounded in theory, and clearly related to practice. Work that reiterates what is known or work previously published will not be considered.

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

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

We particularly encourage a *variety* of manuscripts: speculative discussions which venture fresh interpretations; essays which draw heavily on student writing as supportive evidence for new observations; research reports, written in nontechnical language, which offer observations previously unknown or unsubstantiated; collaborative writings which provocatively debate more than one side of a central controversy; and teaching logs which trace the development of original insights.

Starting with the 1986 issue, a “Mina P. Shaughnessy Writing Award” will be given to the author of the best *JBW* article every four issues (two years). The prize is \$500.00, courtesy of an anonymous donor. The winner, to be selected by a jury of three scholars/teachers not on our editorial board, will be announced in our pages and elsewhere.

## EDITORS' COLUMN

As the contents of this issue amply demonstrate, *JBW* continues to attract a rich and extremely varied flow of manuscripts. This is due in large part to the efforts of the Editorial Board in both encouraging colleagues to submit articles for publication and in supplying the kind of feedback that aids authors in their revision process. Thus, increasingly, we are publishing articles that have been extensively revised (sometimes expanded, sometimes reduced in length) as a result of dialogue between editors and authors. This strikes us as a very good thing. No less than students in our basic writing classes, we professionals also need to rely on peer support and feedback to bring our work to a finished state. However, without the dedication of *JBW* board members spending countless hours reading manuscripts and writing responses (and who, due to our blind review process, will never receive a word of thanks from the authors they assist) this extremely valuable exchange could not take place.

We are also pleased to report that we have recently received several orders from libraries for complete runs of the *Journal*. This perhaps reflects a new sense among academics of the importance of basic writing as a focus of research and scholarship. In any event, we continue to expand our list of subscribers and advertisers. While in Japan this summer to conduct workshops in the teaching of writing for the Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT), our copies of *JBW* and our considerable supplies of *JBW* brochures were quickly exhausted, suggesting that interest in basic writing is truly international in scope.

Before turning to the articles in this issue, we must apologize to Sarah Benesch for inadvertently leaving her name off the masthead of the Spring '89 issue. She joined the Editorial Board with the Fall '88 issue. This is also the time to welcome Linda Shohet of Dawson College in Montreal, the first member of the Editorial Board from outside the United States. As was apparent at the National Testing



Network Conference in Montreal this past April, Canadians are extremely active in basic writing teaching and research and we hope to take greater account of their work in future issues of *JBW*.

We would like to comment briefly about the articles in this Fall '89 issue. In the first article, Mary Louise Buley-Meissner discusses the value of having native and nonnative basic writers complete and discuss the Daly-Miller measure of writing apprehension, both at the beginning of the term as a way to identify their strengths and weaknesses as writers, and at the end of the term to evaluate their progress in becoming more fluent, organized, and self-confident.

Drawing on concept learning research, Muriel Harris and Katherine Rowan argue in the second article for a large variety of interlocking and reinforcing strategies as the most effective means for students to learn grammatical concepts they need to edit their writing.

In a long article, Peter Elbow delineates a "phenomenology of freewriting," that is, what it feels like to write a moment-by-moment account of the texture of writing. Recognizing that freewriting is not just a tool, but central to what he does as a teacher and writer, Elbow explores the evolution of his complex and long-standing involvement and surveys some of its future possibilities.

Following Peter Elbow, Patricia McAlexander and Noel Gregg investigate the difficulties of identifying learning disabled students who turn up in basic writing classes and the ways in which English teachers and LD centers can work together to diagnose these students. This is the first article on a relatively new aspect of the profession and we welcome it to the pages of *JBW*.

In the fifth article, Marilyn Sternglass explains the need for ESL and basic writing students to begin as early as possible to practice appropriately complex, cognitive activities in thinking and writing about the larger implications and issues growing out of their own experiences.

Finally, Joseph and Nancy Martinez, no strangers to the pages of *JBW*, underscore the dramatic differences between students' and teachers' goals, expectations, attitudes, and values. They go on to suggest the need for both to see each other's perspectives more clearly and for teachers to make some reasonable accommodations.

***Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller***

Mary Louise Buley-Meissner

## “AM I REALLY THAT BAD?”: WRITING APPREHENSION AND BASIC WRITERS

The term writing apprehension was coined by Daly and Miller . . . to describe an individual difference characterized by a general avoidance of writing and situations perceived by the individual to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing. The individual who is highly apprehensive finds the experience of writing more punishing than rewarding and, as a consequence, avoids it . . . (Daly 37)

It seems likely that many, if not most, basic writers share characteristics ascribed to highly apprehensive writers. In college, they avoid composition classes whenever possible. When they are required to submit essays for other classes, they often receive failing grades. In their experience, writing is an obstacle to academic success. As one of my basic writing students, Isaac, commented, “If I never had to write, I’d do fine in school.” Forced into composition classes by program requirements, basic writers often are troubled by deeply rooted anxieties and fears about their teachers’ demands as well as their own abilities. Again to quote Isaac, “I never wrote one [essay as] good as it was supposed to be. Now I’m supposed to write something every week. I don’t know if I can do it. But I have to pass.”

In this report, I would like to suggest the usefulness of having students complete the Daly-Miller measure of writing apprehension (MWA) at the beginning and end of the term. (See Appendix A for a

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*Mary Louise Buley-Meissner is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. With Chris Anderson and Virginia Chappell, she is coediting Balancing Acts: Essays on the Teaching of Writing (forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press).*

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copy and a scoring key.) At the beginning of the term, the students' responses can help the teacher identify problems—such as fear of evaluation—that may need to be discussed with individual students or the class as a whole. Equally important, completing the measure and discussing the results can be one way for students to start evaluating their own strengths and weaknesses as writers. At the end of the term, the students' responses can help the teacher evaluate their progress in becoming more confident and more capable writers. Overall, the measure itself is less important than what it uncovers, namely, the complex relationship between how students write and how they feel about writing.

Table 1 summarizes students' initial and final MWA scores, as well as overall changes in the scores, for one of my own basic writing classes. Diverse as these students are, I believe their difficulties in learning to write are shared by many others.

As the table shows, the average MWA score for the class was 81 at the beginning of the quarter and 63 at the end. According to Daly and Miller, scores above 90 indicate "high apprehensives"; scores below 54, "low apprehensives." In that case, at the beginning of the quarter, only two students (Isaac and Syngman) could be classified as highly apprehensive writers. Furthermore, at the end of the quarter, not even one student could be classified as highly apprehensive while three students (Sergio, Ming, and Sidney) could be typed as distinctly unapprehensive. According to Bloom ("Composing Processes"), however, an average score of 71 may be more common for "anxious writers"; an average score of 51 more typical for "non-anxious writers." By that standard, all but two students (Ming and Sidney) could be called anxious writers at the beginning of the quarter. At the end of the quarter, four students (Isaac, Syngman, Paik, and Dan) still could be called anxious; three (Sergio, Ming, and Sidney), nonanxious.

Appendix B provides a detailed summary of the students' responses to the measure. Overall, five major conclusions can be drawn from the patterns of agreement, disagreement, and change from the beginning to the end of the quarter.

First, although current research suggests that basic writers are conditioned to dislike writing, a majority of students in my class, native and nonnative, indicated at the beginning of the quarter that they liked writing as a way to see their own thoughts on paper (#19 on the MWA). By the end of the quarter, after extensive composition instruction and directed practice, this feeling was reinforced. In fact, positive changes in the students' responses to the MWA were most strongly linked to the increased personal satisfaction which they seemed to derive from writing.



TABLE 1

**STUDENTS' INITIAL AND FINAL SCORES ON THE DALY-MILLER  
MEASURE OF WRITING APPREHENSION (MWA)**

Student	Initial MWA Score	Final MWA Score	Difference Between Scores
Isaac (N)	112**	79*	-33
Syngman (NN)	101**	78*	-23
Paik (NN)	87*	71*	-16
Giao (NN)	86*	68	-18
Cliff (N)	86*	68	-18
Hsiu (NN)	79*	55	-24
Dan (N)	77*	77*	0
Sergio (N)	74*	49L	-25
Judy (NN)	73*	66	-7
Teresa (NN)	72*	58	-14
Ming (NN)	70	45L	-25
Sidney (N)	54	44L	-10
Average	81*	63	-18

\*A single asterisk indicates a score typical of an "anxious writer" according to Bloom ("Composing Processes").

\*\*A double asterisk indicates a score typical of an "anxious writer" according to Bloom and a "high apprehensive" according to Daly and Miller.

L-Capital "L" indicates a score typical of a "non-anxious writer" according to Bloom and a "low apprehensive" according to Daly and Miller.

Note: "N" indicates a native student; "NN," a non-native.

Second, these students tended to be apprehensive about writing when they knew their work would be evaluated—especially if they believed it would be evaluated in comparison to the work of other, better writers. As the research of Bartholomae and Perl has shown, basic writers tend to be apprehensive not only because of standards imposed by their teachers, but also because of self-imposed standards which they find extremely difficult to meet. Surprisingly, however, these students as a group—and the nonnative students in particular—did not seem to dislike evaluation itself. They worried about it; they felt uncomfortable about it; but they also seemed to accept it as a necessary part of learning to write.

Third, getting started, organizing ideas, and judging the effectiveness of writing—what Sommers calls “strategies for handling the whole essay”—were particularly troublesome concerns for these basic writers. Often rooted in years of misinstruction, such problems can seriously impede the development of students’ fluency and skill.

Organizing ideas seemed to be most difficult for the students, both at the start and end of the quarter. Possibly this is because basic writers rarely have a clear sense of intention or direction when they compose. Instead they tend to connect their ideas sentence by sentence, finding their way and correcting their words as they haltingly move toward the end of their essays. Yet as Williams observes, “Successful expository writing depends [not only] on a control of syntactic structures, [but also] on seeking out an informing intention . . .” (183).

Fourth, in comparison to the responses of the native students, the responses of the nonnative students were definitely more consistent with each other. As a group, the nonnative students seemed to have much more in common with each other, at least as far as their major strengths and weaknesses in trying to handle the demands of college writing. They had less confidence than the native students in many ways, yet they also underwent more changes in learning to overcome their anxieties about writing.

Two possibilities seem reasonable here: On the one hand, the nonnative students may have been more susceptible to the encouraging effects of composition instruction and practice. As Shaughnessy points out, nonnative students are more likely than other students to rely on their teachers for individual help in deciding how to improve their work. On the other hand, at the beginning of the quarter, the nonnative students’ personal approaches to composing may not have been as stabilized, or as deeply embedded, as the native students’ approaches.

Fifth, judging by their responses to the Daly-Miller measure,

students with high apprehension were students with low self-expectations, influenced more by fear of what they could not do than by awareness of what they might learn to do. In Elbow's terms, they tended to see writing as "dangerous," exposing their flaws. Their initially negative expectations, however, were not matched by correspondingly negative self-evaluations at the end of the quarter. For native and nonnative students alike, writing apprehension was a problem, but a problem with workable solutions.

Bloom reports that writing apprehension is essentially a behavioral problem, and should be treated accordingly. In her view, anxious writers too often are convinced that "their inability to write at all, or with comfort or enjoyment, is inherent either in themselves or in the tasks of writing" and that "there is little or nothing they can do" to improve the situation ("Fear of Writing" 27). To change students' convictions, she suggests changing their behavior by helping students to identify, confront, and gradually restructure their own inefficient composing strategies. As she reminds participants in Writing Anxiety Workshops, "the writing—or non-writing—habits of a lifetime can be changed" (28).

Isaac, the student with the highest MWA score at both the start and end of the quarter, exemplifies the kind of anxious writer who enters a basic writing class with the self-defeating belief that no matter how hard he tries, he cannot write well. Here is the student's own explanation of his main problem, given in a self-evaluation at the start of the quarter:

I hate writing because of the long waiting in Knowing what to write and I know what I want to say But I just don't know how to phrase or put it into good English, so you could understand what I'm trying to say and while I'm waiting I feel under pressure and all tied down to complete the paper. It's very hard for me to express myself to let out what I'm trying to say.

For Isaac, having to write essentially meant having to wait—for inspiration, for the right idea, for the necessary phrase. The longer he waited, the more pressure he felt to produce something, anything that would fill the blank pages of his composition notebook. Yet the more he was pressured, the less he was able to write. In his case, time spent procrastinating had to be changed into time spent imagining, pursuing, and shaping concrete possibilities for his class essays. He had to learn how to look for ideas, and in that endeavor he was at least partly successful. As he commented in another self-evaluation at the end of the quarter, "My strongest points as a writer are, I'm able to let my imagination go freely and

come up with Ideas and collect them and put them in your paper." Over the quarter, his MWA score dropped from 112 to 79, a dramatic reduction suggesting that the changes Isaac experienced were behavioral as well as attitudinal. Although he still could be classified as an anxious writer after ten weeks of composition instruction, he finally did seem to have reconceptualized and gradually restructured some important aspects of his personal approach to composing.

Syngman, the student with the second-highest MWA scores at the start and end of the quarter, exemplifies the kind of anxious writer who is paralyzed by the intimidating realization of everything that could go wrong whenever he tries to write. Syngman typically delayed writing as long as possible, because it almost always proved to be extremely painful for him. "I can hardly think about other things when I have to write," he commented at the start of the quarter, "but results which I have done is very poor usually." Nothing seemed to come easily to him. "People don't understand what I'm saying," he wrote, and furthermore, "Sometimes I look at my writing and I think 'What *did* I say?'" Deciding how to organize his essays, building coherent paragraphs, providing enough evidence to make his main ideas convincing, constructing sentences according to standard patterns of academic English—all these were difficult for him. Added to the rest of his troubles, Syngman had to admit, were "the little things, articles and pronouns" which were "killing" him.

Contrary to this student's convictions at the start of the quarter, his problems were solvable—one at a time. To overcome his anxieties about writing, he had to stop trying so hard to make his compositions perfect. He also had to practice writing his compositions in stages, allowing himself, for example, to delay sentence-level correction of his work until he felt generally satisfied with its content and shape. This required more time than Syngman had been accustomed to spending on his writing, yet over the quarter, his MWA score dropped from 101 to 78, and he seemed to be pleased with the results of his efforts:

I write many notes, rough drafts, essays, and revisions. I become very conscious in writing to save time to correct . . . It's sure a big burden, but it is also true that gives me an improvement.

Hsiu's MWA scores also fell dramatically, from 79 to 55, suggesting that writing apprehension was a major problem for her at the start of the quarter, but only a minor one at the end. Like Syngman, she initially suffered from what Rose calls "nearly

immobilizing writer's block," an attitude and approach to composing which holds students back from demonstrating their real abilities when they have to complete writing projects for school. In his own case studies of ten college writers, five who could write with comparative ease and five who could write only with difficulty, Rose found that for the latter group "blocking usually resulted in rushed, often late papers and resultant grades that did not truly reflect these students' writing ability. And then, of course, there were other less measurable but probably more serious results: a growing distrust of their abilities and an aversion toward the composing process itself" ("Rigid Rules" 389).

None of the students included in Rose's research are identified as basic writers. Rose is careful to point out, however, that writer's block can be a problem for students at any ability level. As he explains:

What separated the five students who blocked from those who didn't? . . . There was one answer that surfaced readily . . . The five students who experienced blocking were all operating either with writing rules or with planning strategies that impeded rather than enhanced the composing process. The five students who were not hampered by writer's block also utilized rules, but they were less rigid ones, and thus more appropriate to a complex process like writing. Also, the plans these non-blockers brought to the writing process were more functional, more flexible, more open to information from the outside. (390)

Hsiu's personal writing rules were obviously self-limiting and sometimes contradictory: Leave out your own feelings; leave out your own opinions; don't make your compositions easy to understand; don't put in ideas you are not sure about; don't try writing in ways that might lead to mistakes. Impersonal, complex, error-free writing was the kind of writing this student thought she had to produce for school. Consequently, her planning strategies were restricted to three concerns: Find out what the teacher wants; separate yourself from the subject; weigh every word; and write out every sentence as carefully as possible.

At the start of the quarter, Hsiu said she knew that her approach to composing was "really all wrong." As she explained, "How can it be good for me when it makes me hate writing so much?" But the student also felt that if she wanted to produce acceptable college essays, she had to follow the rules and strategies which seemed to govern all academic writing. "I'm trapped and I hate it," she

exclaimed in conference, "but what can I do about it? I want to do better, I want my writing to be better, but how?"

Hsiu soon discovered that she could "do better" in many ways. Discussing the concept of personal "voice" in writing, for example, opened her mind to new and exciting possibilities for narrative essays. Being asked to make her ideas convincing, instead of merely complex, also encouraged Hsiu to break out of her old patterns in school writing. Most importantly, perhaps, she had the opportunity to view her writing as her own. Did she want to improve her work? How did she want to improve her work? In the past she had not seriously considered such questions, since her teachers had answered them for her. But during the quarter, she came to believe that improvement of her work finally depended less on rules than on choices, personal choices reflecting her own purposes in writing.

As Hsiu commented in a self-evaluation at the end of the quarter, "I used to think that 'hard to understand writing' is the best kind of writing, even though I wasn't able to do it. But I can see now that if I am able to do it the way I want to do it, clearly and simply, that is enough." Equally important, she added, "I expect to do more so I have to work harder."

Flower and Hayes assert that "people only solve the problem they give themselves to solve" ("Cognition of Discovery" 22). For basic writers, "the problem" of how to compose acceptable school essays seems immense and formidable. Too many things, in their view, have to be done at once: not only keeping the flow of ideas going, but also stopping to check for correct punctuation and spelling; not only staying with the main point of an essay, but also bringing in details; using sentences that are not too short or too long; choosing words that are not too plain or too obscure; making the essay original without making it overly personal. Experienced writers, who have internalized many effective composing routines, may be able to deal with a number of these concerns simultaneously. But as Hirsch points out:

Learners have a very limited channel capacity at any moment of time. Their circuits can get very easily overloaded if they are asked to perform several unfamiliar routines at the same time. When the mind does get overloaded in this way, an interesting phenomenon occurs: one's performance in every subroutine, even a familiar one, is degraded. . . . (159)

Hirsch adds that composition students can avoid "overloading their circuits" by learning to concentrate on different aspects of essay improvement during different stages of revising and editing. Not all students, however, find it easy to stop asking too much of

themselves when they compose. Teresa, for example, said at the beginning of the quarter that she usually made herself try to get "everything right all the time" because she felt "ashamed" if her essays were returned with very many red marks and critical comments. Ironically, though, she also was afraid that in some cases her efforts were self-defeating:

Most of the time when I work hard, I don't feel like I get anyplace. I make mistakes, teachers correct the mistakes, I make more mistakes, sometimes different ones, but sometimes the same ones! It makes me feel bad every time.

Teresa needed at least two kinds of help to overcome her apprehension about writing. First of all, she had to be given new and explicit guidelines for the step-by-step completion of her essay assignments. As she said, "If I'm not supposed to do it all at once, you have to tell me what to do instead." Equally important, she had to be given the chance to discuss the errors and find out why they were errors. Over the quarter, her MWA score dropped from 72 to 58, not a dramatic change, but nevertheless an important one. At the end of the quarter, she declared, "I don't feel so ashamed of my writing anymore, even when I make mistakes. Because if I study my mistakes, and try hard, then maybe I can do better next time."

Sergio was another student who felt personally humiliated when his essays were returned with all of his mistakes circled and underlined. Unlike Teresa, however, he long ago had become almost completely resigned to accepting failure. The more mistakes he made on one paper, the less writing he did for the next paper. As Robinson observes, "Excesses of red often warn insecure students away not from the errors circled but from the act of writing itself" (443). Sergio seemed especially insecure about his abilities because he had been told that his problems, ranging from poor spelling to disorganization to vagueness, were so numerous and diverse that he probably could not ever be "really any good at all" at writing. Yet at the start of the quarter, after submitting his first essay, he asked, "Am I really that bad?"

Beneath his resignation, Sergio still had the hope that he could write. But changing his sense of failure to a sense of new possibilities went hand in hand with changing his approach to composing. Flower and Hayes point out that skillful writers use both "content goals" and "process goals" in tackling the demands of various writing tasks ("Cognitive Process"). That is, they typically set up two kinds of operational guidelines for themselves: the first generally concerned with what kind of text should be produced; the second more specifically related to how it should be produced. The



work of basic writers, however, seldom is productively goal-directed. In his first class essay, for example, Sergio was understandably confused when he tried to pursue an abstract content goal ("make it interesting") and a mechanical process goal ("check the spelling and punctuation in every sentence") at the same time. Not until he was encouraged to take his readers into account—in this case, his teacher and classmates—did he begin to see how his goals might be reformulated. Then he was able to set up goals like this:

I want to make my essay like part of a book about my family. I want people to be interested in my great great grandfather, so I have to tell them what he said and did and why I admire him. I can start with what he used to always say to his kids . . .

Over the quarter, Sergio's MWA scores dropped from 74 to 49, indicating that while he was highly apprehensive about his work at the start of the quarter, he could be classified as a nonanxious writer at the end. In his final evaluation, he wrote, "My writing has improved because you have given me the motivation I need!" Perhaps at the start of the quarter Sergio did need personal encouragement more than anything else. But after that, his motivation definitely seemed to be reinforced by the discovery that writing could connect him with readers. As he said at the end of the quarter:

I know what I'm trying to say, but my readers don't. I have to tell them! I'm still working on this. It's hard, but it's worth it.

The student with the lowest MWA scores, both at the beginning and end of the quarter, was Sidney. In an early conference, he commented, "It's not hard for me to write. When I have a paper to do, I forget about all the rules and just write." According to Rose (*Writer's Block*), such remarks are typical of "non-blockers," students who are not usually troubled by any of the problems commonly ascribed to highly apprehensive writers. Unlike Isaac, he seemed to have no trouble generating ideas for his essays: "I just write down what I want to say." Unlike Syngman, he did not worry about making too many mistakes: "I can put sentences together pretty easy." Neither was he overly concerned about meeting the standards of serious academic writing or being able to improve his writing, as Hsiu and Teresa were: "I know what good writing is. Maybe my writing's not all that good, but I think it's good enough, most ways." and he certainly did not worry, as Sergio did, about



whether or not he would ever become a skillful writer: "I know what I have to do to get by, to get things done, and I do it."

Sidney operated according to set routines which were highly efficient for him, routines based primarily on a deliberate simplification of the composing situation itself. At the beginning of the quarter, for example, he admitted that he did not concern himself with clarifying ideas for his readers: "If it makes sense to me, it should make sense to other people." He liked to write his ideas once, from the beginning to the end of each essay, stopping only to change a few words, check the punctuation of each sentence, and divide some sections into paragraphs. His main strategy for completing assignments seemed to be: "I add as I go along."

By the end of the quarter, Sidney had learned to be more purposeful in adding details to his essays. He was careful, for example, to cite specific passages from a novel to support his analysis of the main characters' actions. But for the most part, his attitudes and approaches to composing did not change. His MWA scores of 54 and 44 reflected that stability, suggesting that he had internalized writing rules and strategies which were consistent with his own standards for producing acceptable college essays.

Dan was the only student whose MWA scores did not change at all. Yet "conflict and struggle" (Lu 445) typified his work. At the beginning of the quarter, his score of 77 placed him close to the class average of 81. At the end of the quarter, however, the same score placed him well above the class average of 63. Isaac and Syngman had higher final scores of 79 and 78, but theirs were remarkably low in comparison to initial scores of 112 and 101. Why, then, was it so difficult for Dan in particular to overcome his anxieties about writing? Troyka's observations are helpful here:

Non-traditional students come to academe with resources not usually used or even recognized in college. They come with legacies derived from situations and from language that can enlarge the teaching repertoire that teachers of writing can use. These legacies determine not so much *what* we teach but *how* we can reach and teach, often with dramatic results. . . .  
(256)

Unfortunately, Dan's past educational experiences had convinced him that the legacies of his Indian heritage were viewed by most of his teachers as liabilities. None of his teachers had reached out to him in the way Troyka suggests. But Dan, like the other students considered in this report, needed more than encouragement to start making progress in his attempts to become a skillful writer. As he wrote in an early self-evaluation:

I want to improve my knowledge of writing by knowing exactly how to write what I want to say. Basic English may be very simple but sometimes simple things are difficult. Writing the correct way is very important and I hope to accomplish this someday. Perhaps it is too late to master the basic English technique by the end of this quarter but I realize I do need to spend a lot of time on that road.

Uncertain about how to produce effective college writing, this student wanted to learn the methods, rules, and patterns—"the basic English technique"—which would enable him to make appropriate choices at all levels of composing. That in itself seems a reasonable goal. But in working towards this goal, he may have taken a counterproductive approach by trying to move from rules to language to meaning to self-engagement. In his view, knowing the rules of standard English was prerequisite to using language correctly, which in turn was prerequisite to expressing meaning clearly. Last of all came self-engagement, being able to change or develop meaning according to his own intentions.

In his final conference, Dan said, "I'm just beginning to think I can write. I wish I could have felt this way before." Certainly his attitudes and approaches toward composing both changed to some extent during the quarter. He was encouraged to start thinking and acting as a writer capable of making more progress than he ever had made before. Yet he may have been a student unable to overcome what Troyka calls "learning anxiety," a problem "deeper and more pervasive than what has come to be known as writing anxiety" (260). Whether his Indian heritage was to be treated as a valuable resource or as a handicap in learning, Dan knew that when he entered a college writing classroom, he was taking deliberate steps away from his past. In that situation, rules may have represented the only sure means of finding direction and control.

But can rules provide basic writers with the kind of control they most need? As this report suggests, inexperienced writers tend to be highly apprehensive because they rely on rules and struggle for control at levels of composing which are not, finally, governed by rules so much as by informed choices. Bloom explains that students are able to overcome their anxieties about writing when they are able "to gain control over their attitudes towards writing, and an understanding of the varied—and workable—writing processes of themselves and others" ("Fear of Writing" 29). Furthermore, she observes:

Control implies a continual willingness to act to overcome writing problems, rather than to be devastated by them.

Ultimately, control implies skill and productivity as a writer, based on knowledge of what to do and how to do it . . . (29)

But control cannot be acquired from teachers or textbooks. Control must be developed through the meaningful connection of self, reader, text, and intention. Furthermore, basic writers can learn to make that connection, as many of my students have proved. "Am I really that bad?" is a question that can be countered with another: "How would you like to be better?" As we work out possible answers with our students, their writing apprehension may diminish and their writing confidence may grow.

# APPENDIX A

## DALY-MILLER MEASURE OF WRITING APPREHENSION (MWA) AND SCORING KEY

Directions: Below are a series of statements about writing. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) are uncertain, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree with the statement. While some of these statements may seem repetitious, take your time and try to be as honest as possible. Thank you for your cooperation in this matter.

		1	2	3	4	5
(+)	1. I avoid writing.					
(-)	2. I have no fear of my writing being evaluated.					
(-)	3. I look forward to writing down my my ideas.					
(+)	4. I am afraid of writing essays when I know they will be evaluated.					
(+)	5. Taking a composition course is a very frightening experience.					
(-)	6. Handing in a composition makes me feel good.					
(+)	7. My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on a composition.					
(+)	8. Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time.					
(-)	9. I would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines for evaluation and publication.					
(-)	10. I like to write my ideas down.					
(-)	11. I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing.					
(-)	12. I like to have my friends read what I have written.					
(+)	13. I'm nervous about writing.					
(-)	14. People seem to enjoy what I write.					
(-)	15. I enjoy writing.					
(+)	16. I never seem to be able to clearly write down my ideas.					
(-)	17. Writing is a lot of fun.					

# APPENDIX A (continued)

		1	2	3	4	5
(+)	18. I expect to do poorly in composition classes even before I enter them.					
(-)	19. I like seeing my thoughts on paper.					
(-)	20. Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience.					
(+)	21. I have a terrible time organizing my ideas in a composition course.					
(+)	22. When I hand in a composition I know I'm going to do poorly.					
(-)	23. It's easy for me to create good compositions.					
(+)	24. I don't think I write as well as most other people.					
(+)	25. I don't like my composition to be evaluated.					
(+)	26. I'm no good at writing.					

SOURCE: 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): 246.

SCORING KEY: The base score is assumed to be 78. Points then are added to or subtracted from that base, as explained below, resulting in a total score which may range from 26 to 130. Items marked on the left\* with a plus sign (+) are scored as follows: two points are added for a checkmark in the first column; one point is added for a checkmark in the second column; none are added for the third column; one point is subtracted for a checkmark in the fourth column; and two points are subtracted for a checkmark in the fifth column. Items marked with a negative sign (-) are scored in exactly the opposite way: two points are subtracted for a checkmark in the second column; one point is subtracted for a checkmark in the second column; none are subtracted for the third column; one point is added for a checkmark in the fourth column; and two points are added for a checkmark in the fifth column.

\* The plus signs (+) and negative signs (-) do not appear on the forms given to students.

# APPENDIX B

## SUMMARY OF STUDENTS' INITIAL AND FINAL RESPONSES TO DALY-MILLER MEASURE OF WRITING APPREHENSION (MWA)

	MWA Items (paraphrased)	Student's Responses at Beginning of Quarter			Student's Responses at End of Quarter		
		N	NN	Total	N	NN	Total
		A D X	A D X	A D X	A D X	A D X	A D X
(+)	1. I avoid writing.	4 1 0	5 2 0	9 3 0	1 4 0	2 5 0	3 9 0
(-)	2. I don't fear evaluation.	2 3 0	4 3 0	6 6 0	2 3 0	2 5 0	4 8 0
(-)	3. I look forward to writing.	3 2 0	0 4 3	3 6 3	2 1 2	5 2 0	7 3 2
(+)	4. I fear writing essays for evaluation.	1 2 2	2 3 2	3 5 4	0 4 1	1 4 2	1 8 3
(+)	5. Taking a writing class is scary.	2 2 1	3 3 1	5 5 2	0 4 1	3 4 0	3 8 1
(-)	6. Handing in work is enjoyable.	2 2 1	3 3 1	5 5 2	4 0 1	2 2 3	6 2 4
(+)	7. My mind goes blank.	2 3 0	7 0 0	9 3 0	2 3 0	2 5 0	4 8 0
(+)	8. Writing can be a waste of time.	2 2 1	0 7 0	2 9 1	0 5 0	2 5 0	2 10 0
(-)	9. Publication would be enjoyable.	1 4 0	2 2 3	3 6 3	2 3 0	5 1 1	7 4 1
(-)	10. I like to write my ideas down.	1 1 3	5 1 1	6 2 4	4 1 0	7 0 0	11 1 0
(-)	11. I am confident about expressing my ideas clearly.	1 4 0	1 4 2	2 8 2	1 2 2	3 3 1	4 5 3
(-)	12. I enjoy sharing my writing with friends.	3 1 1	1 4 2	4 5 3	1 2 2	6 1 0	7 3 2
(+)	13. I am nervous.	2 3 0	1 6 0	3 9 0	2 3 0	2 5 0	4 8 0
(-)	14. Others enjoy my writing.	1 1 3	2 1 4	3 2 7	2 0 3	4 0 3	6 0 6
(-)	15. I enjoy writing.	1 1 3	3 3 1	4 4 4	5 0 0	3 1 3	8 1 3

# APPENDIX B (continued)

## SUMMARY OF STUDENTS' INITIAL AND FINAL RESPONSES TO DALY-MILLER MEASURE OF WRITING APPREHENSION (MWA)

	MWA Items (paraphrased)	Student's Responses at Beginning of Quarter			Student's Responses at End of Quarter		
		N A D X	NN A D X	Total A D X	N A D X	NN A D X	Total A D X
(+)	16. I can't write ideas clearly.	3 2 0	2 5 0	5 7 0	2 3 0	1 6 0	3 9 0
(-)	17. Writing is fun.	2 1 2	1 4 2	3 5 4	3 1 1	1 2 4	4 3 5
(+)	18. I expect to do poorly in class.	2 2 1	2 4 1	4 6 2	0 4 1	1 4 2	1 8 3
(-)	19. I like seeing my thoughts on paper.	3 0 2	5 0 2	8 0 4	5 0 0	7 0 0	12 0 0
(-)	20. Discussing my writing is enjoyable.	2 1 2	4 1 2	6 2 4	3 0 2	4 1 2	7 1 4
(+)	21. I can't organize ideas.	4 1 0	5 2 0	9 3 0	3 2 0	3 4 0	6 6 0
(+)	22. I expect low grades.	2 2 1	2 2 3	4 4 4	0 4 1	1 5 1	1 9 2
(-)	23. It's easy to write good essays.	2 3 0	7 0 0	9 3 0	1 4 0	4 3 0	5 7 0
(+)	24. I don't write as well as others.	3 2 0	7 0 0	10 2 0	2 3 0	4 3 0	6 6 0
(+)	25. I dislike evaluation.	3 2 0	1 6 0	4 8 0	0 5 0	1 6 0	1 1 0
(+)	26. I am no good at writing.	1 3 1	4 1 2	5 4 3	0 4 1	1 4 2	1 8 3

NOTE: "N" marks a native student; "NN," a non-native. "A" indicates agreement; "D," disagreement; and "X," neither agreement nor disagreement.

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Muriel Harris  
Katherine E. Rowan

## EXPLAINING GRAMMATICAL CONCEPTS

Although editing for grammatical correctness rightly begins when composing is basically complete, editing is—at least for unpracticed writers—almost as demanding as composing. Editing for grammatical errors is not a one-step process, but a complete series of steps which involve detecting a problem (finding a mistake), diagnosing the error (figuring out what's wrong), and rewriting (composing a more acceptable version). Skilled writers don't always consciously need to move through all of these steps, but most students do. As writing lab instructors, we are acutely aware of situations when students are able to detect sentence-level problems but have few clues for resolving them. "That sentence isn't right—should I take it out?" a student will mumble as we sit with them. "This needs something, but I don't know what," another will say. Or, "I know I should be checking for commas, so maybe I should put some in this sentence." Anxiety, frustration, and even

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*Muriel Harris, associate professor of English, Purdue University, and director of the Writing Lab, edits the Writing Lab Newsletter, has authored two textbooks, and is currently completing a brief grammar handbook (to be published by Prentice-Hall). Her interest in individualized instruction, the theory and practice of writing centers, and the tutorial teaching of writing is reflected in her numerous journal articles (e.g., College English, College Composition and Communication, Journal of Basic Writing, Written Communication, English Journal, Writing Center Journal, and Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference (NCTE)).*

*Katherine E. Rowan, assistant professor of communication, Purdue University, teaches journalistic writing. She conducts research on the development of written communication skills, particularly the skills associated with explaining difficult ideas. Her work has appeared in Written Communication, Journalism Educator, and the Journal of Technical Writing and Communication.*

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anger surface as they flail around knowing that something should be done—if they only knew what.

Certainly no one needs prescriptive grammar to generate grammatically complete oral sentences: everyone masters this mysterious skill before the age of four. And as those opposed to the teaching of grammar are quick to point out, many people can rely on their competence as native speakers to “sense” a fragment or agreement error and correct it without resorting to conscious knowledge of grammar. But this detection skill does little or nothing to help many students edit their papers. Admittedly, these students don’t need to be able to spout grammatical *terminology* (e.g., “That’s a participial phrase”). But they do need to understand fundamental grammatical *concepts* so that they can successfully edit their writing. And grammatical concepts, effectively taught, can be learned. However, despite the hype of textbook salesmen, the glossy packages of supplements, and the stacks of free review copies of books that inundate our mailboxes, it is not particularly obvious *how* grammatical concepts can best be learned. As Patrick Hartwell notes, many tried-and-true explanations of grammar are COIK—clear only if known (119).

Hartwell has identified a core issue: too much of what passes for explanation of grammar may be perfectly clear to the teacher or textbook writer but leaves the student groping for help. To address this problem, we draw on concept learning research, a field which identifies the reasons why students generally have difficulties learning concepts and which offers tested strategies for overcoming these problems. Support for this approach comes from recent reviews of research on the teaching of grammar (Hillocks 140) and in the field of concept learning. What concept learning research offers is not some heretofore unknown approach or miracle cure but an affirmation of the need to combine a variety of interlocking strategies for success. Any standard textbook will illustrate some of these strategies or partial use of some approaches, but concept learning research emphasizes the need for thoroughness in our presentations. As we shall point out, using a few misleading examples to support a flawed explanation can cause confusion or misperceptions that may thwart a student’s attempts to edit for years to come.

The term “concept,” as used here and in concept learning research, refers to those mental abstractions that represent a class (or set) of entities which share certain essential characteristics. The names of these concepts (for example, the terminology traditionally used in grammar instruction) are merely conveniences for communicating about the concept. Although terminology can facilitate

talking about grammatical concepts, a focus on learning terminology may cause problems because learners can mistakenly think that knowing the name means knowing all the critical features of the concept. Being able to identify ten (or two hundred) restrictive clauses in no way ensures that the student knows all the critical features of the concept. The broad definition of concepts helps us to see that concept learning principles are meant for all disciplines. While some of the research in concept learning is conducted with lessons in other fields, many projects include instruction in grammatical and poetic concepts, which researchers have successfully taught to students in junior high through college. These studies are not often cited in composition research, perhaps because the work appears in journals that composition teachers don't normally think of as being in their domain, e.g., *Educational Technology and Communication Journal*, *The Journal of Educational Psychology*, and *Review of Educational Research*.<sup>1</sup> Our purpose in this essay is to show how insights and strategies from concept learning literature can make the teaching of grammatical concepts efficient and effective. Throughout, we use instruction in the grammatically complete sentence as an example of how the principles of concept learning can facilitate understanding of grammatical concepts.<sup>2</sup> We've chosen sentence completeness because it is one of the writer's basic tools for clear, correct writing. In addition, a shaky concept of the sentence can inhibit writers from composing sentences they might otherwise construct. In a study of sentence errors, Dona Kagan describes the fragment as "among the most prevalent and irremediable errors" found in student writing (127).

Research in concept learning shows that a basic criterion for good explanations of difficult ideas is that they address students' most frequent misunderstandings. Hence, to identify our students' notions of the complete sentence, we first examined and categorized fragments that they wrote. We then altered a student essay slightly so that each of these characteristic fragments was represented (see Appendix A). To see what information students call upon while editing for fragments, we asked 179 students to identify each of thirty items in the essay as either a sentence or a fragment and to explain, in writing, why they made each choice. The students were enrolled in nine classes at our university, classes ranging from freshman composition to advanced writing, business writing, technical writing, and journalism. This gave us a sample of students about half of whom were juniors or seniors who had completed one or more college writing courses and another half of whom were completing their first semester of freshman composition. The

tabulations of the students' responses (Table 1) show that while no item was correctly identified by all the respondents, some were more confusing to them than others.<sup>3</sup>

More important for our purposes than the matter of correct identifications are the reasons the students offered for their decisions. These responses open a window into student conceptions—and misconceptions—of the sentence. We use examples of these student responses to illustrate what concept learning researchers have identified as problems in learning concepts in nearly any field. After describing each problem, we offer strategies from concept learning research which overcome the particular difficulty. These strategies, as we illustrate, are found to some degree in contemporary grammar textbooks and programmed learning guides. However, concept learning research has shown that no one of these strategies can be truly effective if used alone. Instead, concept learning strategies are interlocking and reinforcing and achieve their purpose only in combination. In short, partial explanations, examples, and practice too often produce, at best, partial learning.

## **Learning Concepts: Key Difficulties and Effective Strategies in Overcoming Them**

### **1. Recalling Background Knowledge**

#### *Evidence of the Difficulty:*

The work of learning theorists like Robert Gagne shows that learning a new concept usually involves building on other, more basic, concepts. If these other concepts are not familiar to a student, any explanation of the new concept can be a classic case of COIK, clear only if known. This is obvious to a teacher trying to explain the sentence to students who lack knowledge of subjects and predicates. To understand the concept of subjects, students have to know not only what nouns and pronouns are but, ultimately, phrases and clauses too, since all can exist as subjects. They may have some partial knowledge of these concepts, but it is necessary that at some point they have access to complete knowledge of all forms that can act as subjects. Otherwise, as we saw among the students we studied, the inability to consistently recognize subjects and predicates causes frequent errors in distinguishing sentences from fragments. For example, some of the students who identified the complete sentences #22, 23, and 27 in the test essay (Appendix A) as fragments did so because they said that there was no subject, an indication that the pronouns in these sentences weren't

recognized as subjects. Even more confusion appears to exist for the student who identified a fragment (#16) as a sentence because it contains a verb, "perfect," and a noun, "his." Other students labeled item #19 as a fragment, saying "it has no subject or verb." (It has both, though in dependent clauses.)

Students also revealed their difficulties in distinguishing dependent from independent clauses. As a typical example, one student incorrectly identified item #4 as a fragment "because each clause cannot stand by itself," and another student incorrectly labeled item #13 as a fragment "because it is a prepositional phrase." This small, but representative sampling of the students' comments could be extended, but it is clear that these students' background knowledge is inadequate and that there is no point in expecting them to understand a definition of a fragment which assumes an understanding of the subject, verb, phrase, and clause.

#### *Strategy for Overcoming the Difficulty:*

Meeting this difficulty by providing background knowledge may seem to lead to an endless regression, but this is not the case. In their studies of concept learning, Tennyson and his associates have demonstrated the effectiveness of presenting background information at the point that the student seems to need help (Tennyson and Cocchiarella 62-63). For example, this technique is used to teach the sentence in the opening pages or "frames" of Joseph Blumenthal's *English 2200, 2600, and 3200*, a venerable and widely used—but not unflawed—series of self-instructional texts.<sup>4</sup> Included in Blumenthal's definition of a complete sentence are the concepts of subject and predicate which are defined as the "naming" and "telling" parts of the sentence. Practice is then offered for identifying the "naming" and "telling" parts of several sentences. In Lynn Quitman Troyka's *Simon and Schuster Handbook for Writers*, the sentence fragment is also defined and illustrated. Then, as the definition is extended, the concept of "verb" is introduced, explained, and illustrated, and the subject is explained next. Then, with this background information provided, the handbook explains dependent and independent clauses, beginning with an explanation of subordinating conjunctions (260-263). Thus at each step, background information is provided as needed.

## **2. Controlling All the Critical Features of a Concept**

#### *Evidence of the Difficulty:*

Another problem faced by students learning new concepts is that of internalizing all the concept's critical (or essential) attributes,

that is, of building a mental representation which includes every one of these necessary attributes. In the classic view of concept learning, recognizing a list of critical features was viewed as sufficient. But research on applied problems of concept learning has shown that people learn concepts by forming a mental prototype, that is, a clear case or best example (Reitman and Bower; Tennyson, Chao, and Youngers; Tennyson, Youngers, and Suebsonthi). In learning a specific concept, the more of its critical features our prototype includes, the fuller and more complete our grasp of this concept is. Nevertheless, what we store in memory is not a list of a concept's critical features but a prototype, an abstraction derived from *examples* of the concept that we've encountered.

The chief difficulty in forming a prototype is that of identifying the particular cluster of attributes which are truly critical and of distinguishing this cluster from the variable attributes, those that can and do occasionally or frequently appear, but aren't necessary. We can thus mistakenly include in the cluster of critical features attributes that are really only variables or omit a critical feature because we wrongly think it is a variable. For example, we can understand the source of confusion experienced by the child who, watching a kilted Scottish bagpiper in full regalia, says, "Why does that lady have a beard?" Skirts may be most frequently associated with women, but it is not a critical attribute of skirts that they be worn only by women. Assuming a variable to be a critical attribute is also a common source of humor, particularly with stereotypes: "Why did Adam remain happy when he left the Garden of Eden?" "Because he *still* had no mother-in-law." Unpleasantness, despite the vast repertoire of jokes on the subject, is a variable, not a critical attribute of mothers-in-law.

In our study we noticed numerous problems in students' prototypes of sentences which resulted from their confusion or misperceptions about critical and variable features. For example, in our pilot work, Teresa told us that the sentence, "John went to the store," was not a complete thought because it did not say what John bought at the store. For Teresa, the semantic feature "fully informative" was a critical attribute of all sentences rather than a variable attribute. (Sentences in context in paragraphs are not always fully informative.) Thus, we found students labeling as fragments complete sentences such as items #26, 27, and 30 because these items contained references to previous sentences by means of pronouns such as "he" and "that" and were therefore somehow "incomplete." Transition words (at the beginning of items #7, 13, and 15) and the phrase "on the other hand" in item #9 also provoked this sense of incompleteness. Among the students who

said that the transitional phrase "to sum up" (item #25) marked a sentence as a fragment, one explained that it was incomplete by noting "To sum up what?" To prove the point that "first" (items #7 and 15) causes incompleteness, one student wrote, "What's second?" Another student wrote, "If there's a first, there needs to be a second thought to complete the sentence." These misperceptions raise the question of whether some students avoid the connectives we encourage for coherence because they see these as making a word group not "able to stand alone" (another commonly used definition of the sentence that students were unable to operationalize successfully). The conjunctions "and" and "but" are also definitely forbidden as sentence openers in the minds of many students. They noted that "and" as the first word of item #18 and "but" as the first word of item #26 identified these sentences as fragments. Said one student, "After putting in a subject and verb I allow a sentence to do almost anything it wants except begin with a conjunction." This misconception is most probably due to advice that students mistakenly store as a fixed rule.

The problem of viewing variable attributes of sentences as critical caused other difficulties as well. For example, sentence length, a variable attribute, exists as a critical attribute in the minds of those students who incorrectly labeled items #5 and 21 as fragments with explanations such as "it's too short" and a lengthy fragment (#28) as a sentence with explanations such as "it has enough words." The criterion of word length was given for other items as well. (Kagan's study documents the same misconception, that complete sentences need to exceed a certain number of words.) This raises the question of whether some students don't vary the word length of their sentences because they fear violating some rule they think applies to complete sentences. We found internal punctuation within the sentence included in many students' concepts of the sentence as well. For example, students incorrectly said that items #2 and 9 were fragments because of internal punctuation problems. Item #1 was incorrectly identified as a fragment because of "missing punctuation before the quote," item #12 was incorrectly marked as a fragment because "it needs punctuation after 'patience,'" and item #26 was also incorrectly identified as a fragment because "it needs commas." For other students, usage errors caused a word group to be a fragment. Thus, for item #22, a reason given by several students for incorrectly identifying it as a fragment was their discomfort with the phrase "fast and easy." Another student noted that item #27 (a sentence) was a fragment because "something is wrong with 'both very much.'"



In all this confusion we can see either ignorance of what constitutes the critical features of a sentence or elaborate but dysfunctional representations of the sentence. As Shaughnessy has argued, the problem is not that students are novices with a "lack" of knowledge but rather that from their bits of knowledge, they have constructed some elaborate, convoluted, and misleading conceptions. Kagan reaches a similar conclusion when she notes that "poor writers may simply have misperceived examples of written language and thus have abstracted incorrect rules regarding the structure of complete sentences" (127). Behind many of the students' comments in the responses we read, we heard echoes of familiar, overly brief, incomplete definitions such as "a sentence is a group of words with a subject and a verb," "a sentence tells who and what," "a sentence expresses a complete thought." Such inadequate definitions, accompanied by a few examples carefully chosen to support the definitions, leave students thinking they understand what a sentence is. However, such definitions also leave students without any way to think about sentences where the "who" or "what" is less than obvious (as in the sentence, "What she did to him is wrong") or about sentences which make sense only in context of other sentences (e.g., "They did it again"). The problem here is that students mistakenly apply the notion of "completeness" to the semantic meaning of the sentence and think that sentences must be fully informative. However, in reality, many grammatically complete sentences are not fully informative or "complete thoughts" outside the context of other surrounding sentences. In many of the mistaken student responses in our study, we observed a great deal of confusion when the students used semantic completeness as a test for a sentence rather than grammatical completeness. The weakness of the "tells who or what" definition is particularly evident in the frequency with which it turned up in student responses as justification for incorrectly identifying dependent clauses as complete sentences.

### *Strategy for Overcoming the Difficulty:*

In the discussion of student perceptions—and misperceptions—of the sentence, we noted that definitions help students mentally represent the critical attributes of a concept. Evidence for the usefulness of definitions comes from C. S. Dunn's study of six methods of teaching science concepts. She found that the least effective was a "discovery" approach in which students were not given definitions. Instead, they were asked to discern the critical attributes of a concept from a set of diverse examples. Since the



purpose of a definition is to highlight the critical attributes of a concept, the definition should contain a list of these critical features with each feature graphically highlighted.

Along with definitions, clear, typical, and varied examples also help students to master a concept's critical attributes. Grammar handbooks, intended primarily to be used as references rather than as programs of instruction, do not generally have space to include all the typical examples that are needed, but they often have quite adequate definitions. For example, the definition in Troyka's handbook is helpful in that it includes, among several definitions from various perspectives, a grammatical one: "Grammatically, a sentence contains an independent clause, a group of words that can stand alone as an independent unit" (154). Troyka then goes on to discuss the structure of a sentence and also presents a range of clear, typical examples. Initially, there are also five examples of fragments. The first three are phrasal fragments (no verb, no subject, no verb or subject) which, as we and Kagan found in our studies, students are most likely to recognize. The last two are clausal fragments (dependent clause and a subject with a dependent clause), the ones which students have more trouble recognizing and are more likely to produce (Harris). The discussion in Troyka's book then builds up to more complex examples of typical fragments. Other widely used handbooks such as the *Harbrace College Handbook* or the *Random House Handbook* tend to have a more limited number and range of examples, and the difficulty of attempting a brief, easily grasped (but incomplete) definition can be seen in the popular workbook, *Grassroots*. Here students are told: "For a sentence to be complete, it must contain a *who* or *what* word." Further down the page in *Grassroots*, the subject is defined as the "*who* or *what* word" (4), thus failing to distinguish subjects from objects. Such a definition can create further confusion in that it does not allow for subjects which consist of more than one word. In sum, then, good definitions list *all* of the critical features of a concept and are accompanied by a range of clear, typical examples.

### **3. Recognizing New Instances of a Concept**

#### *Evidence of the Difficulty:*

Another problem in learning a concept, as suggested in the examples cited above, is that of recognizing newly encountered instances of the concept. In fact, researchers such as Homa, Sterling, and Trepel; and Tennyson, Chao, and Youngers say that this is one of the most frequent problems learners have. Certainly it is familiar to teachers: students can recite a definition of a sentence, but they

have difficulty identifying new examples of sentences or fragments, or examples in unfamiliar contexts. People struggle to recognize concepts in context because, first, some of the guises or forms in which a concept appears are easier to spot than others and, second, to identify a new instance of a concept one must recognize *all* of its critical attributes. For example, some of the students who incorrectly labeled items #18 and 26 as fragments did so because they noted that these items “lacked verbs.” What they did not recognize were verbs which are manifested in contractions (“he’s” and “that’s”). However, other examples of fragments were easy for students in our study to recognize. For example, most students recognized short, phrasal fragments such as those in items #6, 11, 16, and 29. But a dependent clause (in item #19) was harder to recognize. Kagan also found that students had difficulty recognizing as fragments verbs followed by various structures, particularly objects modified by prepositional phrases. From the perspective of concept learning research, then, some students either may not understand all of the forms in which subjects and predicates can appear, or they may not understand that fragments can be either phrases or dependent clauses.

### *Strategy for Overcoming the Difficulty:*

To help students recognize new instances of a concept, it is particularly important to use examples, more examples, and even more examples if possible, though they have to be carefully constructed and ordered. As already noted, we need to start with clear, typical cases that accompany definitions so that students can form and encode a prototype in memory. After that, students need an extended presentation of various kinds of examples, displayed in matched sets and discussed in easy-to-difficult order. The sets of examples should illustrate a wide range of critical and variable attributes. Highlighting for visual emphasis, particularly in explaining the examples, is very helpful.

- **Matched Sets.** Examples should be in matched sets of examples and nonexamples to help students discriminate between critical and variable features. Examples and nonexamples are matched when all the irrelevant or variable attributes of the set are as similar as possible. For example, because students may have trouble realizing that some contractions may include verbs, matched sets of examples and nonexamples could be used to illustrate this fact:

*Concept:* verb in a contraction

*Matched sets:*

Example: She **is** lovely.

Example: She's lovely.

Nonexample: She lovely.

Example: When cotton shirts are old, they **are** more comfortable.

Example: When cotton shirts are old, they're more comfortable.

Nonexample: When cotton shirts are old, they more comfortable.

*Explanation:* Some verb forms can be present in contractions. In the matched sets above, the word groups that can stand alone as sentences (examples) contain complete verbs. The nonexamples lack verbs.

The use of nonexamples may seem to contradict a currently popular approach, offering instruction which is described as "nonerror based." The assumption in nonerror based instruction is that students should avoid seeing examples of errors. However, a number of studies indicate the power of the nonexample in effective concept formation (Markle and Tiemann; Tennyson 1973; Tennyson and Park; Tennyson, Woolley, and Merrill).

For example, since some students think that a pronoun cannot be the subject of a sentence (perhaps because a pronoun as the subject would cause the sentence to be less than fully informative), an effective sequence of instruction would present a sentence with a pronoun as a subject and an accompanying fragment with the same pronoun as a subject. An explanation of the pair would point out that both the sentence and the fragment have a pronoun as a subject. (Putting the sentence in the context of other sentences would help the student see that sentences refer to each other.) This kind of matching is helpful because the purpose of the nonexample is to have students see that a variable feature is indeed irrelevant.

Because the irrelevant or variable features to present are those likely to cause confusion, we can look at our students' writing to determine which variable attributes to illustrate. For example, since 20% of the students we studied labeled sentence #8 (a fragment containing a subject with a lengthy dependent clause modifying it) as a complete sentence, the following example/nonexample pair might be presented and discussed:

**Six** of the players who had poor grades on their mid-semester exams **are sitting** on the bench.

(This is an example of a sentence because it has a subject, "six," with a lengthy word group describing it and then the verb "are sitting" which tells what the six are doing.)

**Six** of the players who had poor grades on their mid-semester exams.

(This is not a sentence because it has a subject, "six," with a word group describing it but no verb. The word group after the subject describes only the subject.)

Given the confusions about sentence length that we found, another matched pair should contain only a few words while a third should be lengthy to emphasize that length is not a critical feature of the sentence.

The *English 2200, 2600, 3200* books make considerable use of this kind of matching. When these texts offer examples of new concepts, the examples are usually paired with matched nonexamples. For instance, in *3200*, Blumenthal offers the following advice and matched sets:

Remember, too, that the length of a word group has nothing to do with its being a sentence or not. Two words may form a sentence provided that they are a subject and verb and make sense by themselves.

a. [The] ***Neighbors objected.***      b. The ***neighbors.***

Which is a complete sentence?—

(33, frame 1367)

To further show that length is a variable and irrelevant feature of sentences, Blumenthal offers another matched set:

[a.] The ***neighbors***, who were annoyed by Joanne's practicing her trombone at all hours of the day and night, (37, frame 1369)

[versus]

[b.] The ***neighbors***, who were annoyed by Joanne's practicing her trombone at all hours of the day and night, ***complained.*** (41, frame 1371)

By using these and many more matched sets, Blumenthal illustrates the irrelevance of length as a feature of sentences and highlights the critical importance of subjects and verbs.

- **Easy-to-difficult order.** Researchers have also found that students benefit when matched pairs are discussed in "easy-to-difficult" order. Easy examples have variable attributes that students make

fewer mistakes with, and the progression should be to variable attributes that are more and more likely to cause students difficulties. To determine whether examples and nonexamples are easy or difficult, instructors can examine students' own writing or give diagnostic tests. In their work, Tennyson, Woolley, and Merrill found that when students are exposed only to easy items, they either fail to recognize *all* of the critical attributes of a concept, or they fail to recognize the full range of guises in which these attributes may appear. (Of course, this range will vary as students mature and become more proficient writers.)

- **Divergence between sets.** There should also be divergence between sets of examples. This helps students in discriminating a variety of apparent from real instances of a concept when they encounter new examples. Thus, for instance, when teaching sentences, we would include some matched sets of sentences/fragments beginning with the conjunctions, transitional words, and phrases that too many students think indicate fragments and other sets without such beginnings. Students would see, for example, both a sentence and a fragment starting with "but" and another matched set lacking this initial term. Other variable attributes would also be drawn from the lists of problems and confusions students have.
- **Highlighting.** Another characteristic that increases the effectiveness of presentations, particularly in discussing examples, is the use of "attribute isolation," that is, the use of typographical or graphic highlighting such as underlining, italics, and/or white space to call attention to the critical features of a concept (Tennyson "Pictorial Support"). A text that uses attribute isolation particularly effectively is Troyka's handbook which, in the discussion of fragments, uses boldface lettering, shaded boxes, contrasting colors of print (red and black), and generous use of white space to highlight important points. In the classroom, with homegrown materials, we are not likely to have at our disposal such elegant type features, but we can make use of underlining, circling, arrows, and white space.

Accompanying the examples should be explanations, to call attention to the various critical features that we want students to notice. For the sentence, we might present examples and nonexamples and note: "This is an example of a sentence because it has both a subject and a predicate, which constitute an independent clause," or "This is not an example of a sentence because it has only a dependent clause." These examples and accompanying explana-

tions ("expository presentations") perform a necessary and important function in concept learning, for it is here that students see what Tennyson and Cocchiarella call the "dimensionality or richness of the conceptual knowledge" (61). Presenting only simple sentences with clear subjects and predicates sidesteps all the elaborations and variety of real sentences (and fragments) that occur when students actually write.

For examples of good expository presentations in current texts, see the discussion of fragments in the *Harbrace College Handbook*—which uses matched sets, divergence across sets, and some highlighting—or Troyka's extended expository presentation on fragments (260–64) which makes good use of nonexamples in matched sets, divergence across sets, easy-to-difficult order, and highlighting. Although *Grassroots* has very short expository presentations or discussions of concepts, it does illustrate the use of practice exercises in easy-to-difficult order and uses some highlighting to emphasize key words. An example of a presentation which omits nonexamples, matched sets, divergence across sets, and easy-to-difficult ordering can be seen in the *Random House Handbook*.

#### **4. Discriminating Apparent from Real Instances of a Concept**

##### *Evidence of the Difficulty:*

A fourth aspect of learning difficult concepts is that of discriminating apparent from real instances of the concept's application. Students develop this discriminatory ability only with time, practice, and feedback (Dunn). In our study, we did not explore the history of our subjects' attempts to master the sentence-fragment distinction; however, the study does show that even as juniors and seniors, many students had fuzzy notions of the sentence which did little to help them master this distinction. Those who reported using the "complete thought" definition often seemed to use this in some vague semantic sense. Those who used the "who or what does the action" criterion failed to understand that their notion of the sentence did not include predication. For example, one student incorrectly identified item #24 as a sentence because it "gives who or what." Perhaps such students have inaccurate notions because they never practiced the sentence-fragment distinction in a context where they received continual feedback which explained why their answers were correct or incorrect.

##### *Strategy for Overcoming the Difficulty:*

To distinguish between apparent and real instances of a concept, students continually need reminders about the features that are

truly critical to it. Tennyson and his associates found that students are more likely to classify concepts correctly and recall them better when they not only have a chance to read expository presentations of examples but also have the chance to work through "inquisitory practice sessions" (Dunn; Tennyson, Chao, and Youngers). These are exercises in which students are presented with new examples and nonexamples and are asked to identify them by working through a list of questions. After they give both correct and incorrect answers, students receive feedback which reminds them of the basis on which they should have made their identification (i.e., whether or not a given item had or didn't have all critical attributes of the concept). By working through these questions (which ask students to think about a concept's critical attributes) and by receiving feedback (which discusses the presence or absence of a given critical attribute in a particular item), students gradually learn to look for these critical attributes on their own. For an example of inquisitory practice, see Figure 1.

Similar strategies can be seen elsewhere in Troyka's handbook where, for example, at the beginning of the first exercise on fragments, students are told: "Check each word group according to the Test for Sentence Completeness on p. 261" (264). Students have to flip back and forth between the test and the exercises, but they are reminded of how they should proceed in determining whether or not a word group is a sentence or a fragment. *Grassroots* does not phrase the critical attributes of fragments as questions, but it does remind students of at least some of these critical attributes by beginning an exercise with the following instructions: "All of the following are *fragments*; they lack either a subject or a verb or both. Add either a subject or verb or both in order to make the fragments into sentences" (17). Unfortunately, this fails to help students whose fragments are primarily dependent clauses, but it is more helpful than the instructions in the *Harbrace College Handbook*, which tells students: "Eliminate each fragment below by including it in the adjacent sentence or by making it into a sentence" (29).

Tennyson, Chao, and Youngers have demonstrated the importance of providing students with both expository presentations and inquisitory practice in a study which contrasted three learning situations. In the first, students were given only an expository presentation with examples. In the second, they were given only the inquisitory practice, while in the third, they were given both. The students in all three situations were able to recall the concept's critical attributes and some examples. However, the students who worked through both the expository presentation and the inquisitory practice had significantly higher scores than the other two

Figure 1. "Applying the Test" exercises are examples of inquisitory practice. The first exercise (#1) should be easier than the second (#2) because it requires students to make fewer decisions. The second exercise is more difficult but more realistic, requiring students to detect, diagnose, and edit.

### **Inquisitory Practice**

**Concept:** Fragment

**Definition:** A fragment is one word or a group of words that cannot pass Troyka's Test for Sentence Completeness

#### **[Troyka's] Test for Sentence Completeness**

1. **Is there a verb?** If no, there is a sentence fragment.
2. **Is there a subject?** If no, there is a sentence fragment.
3. **Do the subject and verb start with a subordinating word—and lack an independent clause to complete the thought?** If yes, there is a sentence fragment. (Troyka 261)

### **Applying the Test—1**

**Directions:** Identify all the sentence fragments incorrectly punctuated as sentences in the passage below. To do so, examine each numbered item by asking the three questions in Troyka's test.

#### **The Change in Our Family**

(1) When I was sixteen. (2) My father died. (3) Our family, my mom, me, and my two sisters, struggled to make ends meet. (4) We decided to move to an apartment because we couldn't afford our house any more. (5) The apartment, a big adjustment for us all. (6) For we had always seen ourselves as middle class. (7) The move made us wonder if we still were. (8) We have adjusted over the years and learned to be more realistic, I think. (9) It's not been easy. (10) But maybe we're a more honest family now.

### **Applying the Test—2**

**Directions:** Using Troyka's Test to guide your decisions, punctuate the following passage.

**Passage:** To celebrate the opening of his theater the owner decided to give a television set to the person holding the lucky ticket when the number was called seventy-two people flocked to the box office each having the lucky number the printer had made a slight mistake. (Blumenthal 71, frame 1386)



groups in identifying new examples of the concept in context and in discriminating between instances of the concept and entities that appeared to be instances. In Dunn's replication of this study, once again it was the combination of explanations of matched examples and nonexamples and inquisitory practice that increased performance in every aspect of concept attainment.

## Conclusion

In all of the information that concept learning research has to offer, one point stands out: students do not learn difficult concepts when presented with any single technique. What works is a *combination* of techniques:

- Providing background information when and where it is needed
- Offering definitions that list critical attributes and that are not overly simple or misleading
- Using a wide array of examples and nonexamples, chosen to reflect students' actual difficulties, and discussing the examples
- Including practice sessions, with feedback, that help students turn a concept's critical attributes into questions they ask themselves.

As we have seen, some of these principles are at work in our textbooks, but not as consistently or thoroughly as concept learning research would urge. But we can keep these guidelines in mind when choosing workbooks and textbooks and when offering instruction—both in classrooms and in tutoring sessions. And we can supplement, where necessary, adequate but not entirely complete textbook assignments and computer-assisted instruction. (However, spending time on uprooting misconceptions caused by inept textbooks is, like swatting mosquitoes, a frustrating, unending task.) The use of concept learning strategies is not the only way into better explanation of grammatical concepts, but it is *a* way, one based on sound principles and extensive research. It may appear to involve a great deal of effort, but if our students have convoluted, erroneous concepts that have to be untangled or corrected, we can't give short shrift and expect good results. They come to our classes with the capacity to detect some editing problems. They should leave with their detection, diagnosis, and revision skills enhanced.

## Appendix A

(Included here is the essay that students in our study were given. They were asked to identify each sentence as either a sentence or a fragment and to explain their responses.)

### My Brothers

(1) The phrase I heard only too often when I was younger was "You're too little to play." (2) Whatever my older brothers did I wanted to do, wherever they went I wanted to go. (3) Pat being two years older than myself and allowed to hang out with Randy, being four years older. (4) Since there was such a difference in age, I developed different and unique relationships with each.

(5) My brothers have clashing identities. (6) Total opposites of each other. (7) First, Pat is the kind of brother you see on television. (8) The kind that would help you with your homework and your problems. (9) Randy, on the other hand, isn't the smartest brother in the world but, he's been around and knows a lot. (10) The best summary of Randy is that he's the Mr. Hyde of Pat. (11) Not exactly bad, though a lot different. (12) He has no patience especially when he gets angry. (13) Then he goes on apologizing for days.

(14) There are traits in both of my brothers that I dislike. (15) First, Pat is too perfect. (16) Much too perfect for his own good. (17) The biggest annoyance is that he gets great grades. (18) And he's always so nice to people that bother him. (19) Because he thinks it's important to be polite. (20) Not to mention his mannerisms are good at all times. (21) Randy likes to move around a lot. (22) He gets bored with a job fast and easy. (23) He just can't stay in the office very much. (24) Which makes him a very good salesman.

(25) To sum up, we have our differences. (26) But that's just like any other family. (27) I still like them both very much. (28) Any differences that I may have because of age or size which wasn't resolved or will be through time. (29) For a final note to this assignment. (30) I would never say any of this to their faces, just on paper.

Item #	No. (and %) identifying it as a sentence	No. (and %) identifying it as a fragment
1 (sentence)	161 (90%)	17 (9%)
2 (sentence)	144 (89%)	31 (17%)
3 (fragment)	3 (2%)	175 (98%)
4 (sentence)	161 (90%)	17 (9%)
5 (sentence)	165 (92%)	13 (7%)
6 (fragment)	4 (2%)	175 (98%)
7 (sentence)	153 (85%)	24 (13%)
8 (fragment)	36 (20%)	140 (78%)
9 (sentence)	168 (94%)	10 (6%)
10 (sentence)	175 (98%)	3 (2%)
11 (fragment)	4 (2%)	172 (96%)
12 (sentence)	162 (91%)	15 (8%)
13 (sentence)	98 (55%)	79 (44%)
14 (sentence)	174 (97%)	4 (2%)
15 (sentence)	160 (89%)	18 (10%)
16 (fragment)	9 (5%)	168 (94%)
17 (sentence)	164 (92%)	12 (7%)
18 (sentence)	60 (34%)	114 (64%)
19 (fragment)	23 (13%)	152 (85%)
20 (fragment)	75 (42%)	97 (54%)
21 (sentence)	167 (93%)	5 (3%)
22 (sentence)	148 (83%)	25 (14%)
23 (sentence)	156 (87%)	17 (9%)
24 (fragment)	14 (8%)	157 (88%)
25 (sentence)	144 (80%)	28 (16%)
26 (sentence)	54 (30%)	114 (64%)
27 (sentence)	154 (86%)	15 (8%)
28 (fragment)	21 (12%)	150 (84%)
29 (fragment)	3 (2%)	167 (93%)
30 (sentence)	154 (86%)	14 (8%)

*Table 1.* Tabulation of student responses to the test essay. (Number of students = 179. Because of some omitted responses, totals are not always 100%.)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In such journals one can find the work of Robert Tennyson and his associates, e.g., Johansen and Tennyson; Merrill and Tennyson; Tennyson, Welsh, Christensen, and Hajovy; and Tennyson, Woolley, and Merrill. An accessible summary for teachers of this work is M. David Merrill and Robert Tennyson's *Teaching Concepts: An Instructional Design Guide*. Reviews of more recent research in concept learning can be found in an article by Tennyson and Park and another by Tennyson and Cocchiarella.

<sup>2</sup> We should note that the "grammar" being referred to here is that set of school grammar conventions labeled "grammar 4" by Patrick Hartwell, to distinguish it from other grammars, such as the descriptive grammar of linguists, stylistic grammar, or the internal grammar which guides all of our language use.

<sup>3</sup> While it was not our purpose to look for developmental gains as students progress through writing courses, we should note here that the students in the upper level writing courses did not perform appreciably better than the freshmen in distinguishing complete sentences from fragments.

<sup>4</sup> The books we use as examples in this paper are among those frequently used to teach grammar at the college level, according to sales information from major publishers.

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Peter Elbow

## TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGY OF FREEWRITING

A scene. I am leading a workshop for teachers. I introduce freewriting as merely a first thing: easiest, lowest level, not very complicated—good for getting started. I don't allocate much time: ten minutes for writing, ten for brief reactions. This is all just warming up and going on to other more complicated activities in teaching writing—activities that will take more time to try out and discuss. But as we talk about it we tangle. Some love freewriting. A few even get what I would call too enthusiastic, going overboard—developing a reactive revulsion at all the planning and care they'd always associated with writing: breaking out, spontaneity is all, "free at last." But others are deeply distrustful, disturbed, critical. Freewriting touches some nerve. We fight. Finally I get tired of the fighting and defending—or suddenly realize how much time has gone by. "Let's move on, this is not the main thing, it's just one of many kinds of writing—options, spectrum, no big deal."

After this happened a number of times I began to sense the pattern and finally realized it wasn't just *they* who were getting caught up in it. "No big deal," I say, so I can extricate myself from the tangle—but finally I realize that it is a big deal for *me*. I must admit to myself and to others that freewriting may be what I care

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*Peter Elbow is currently Professor of English, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and a member of the MLA Executive Council. A former director of the Writing Program at SUNY Stony Brook, he is the author of Writing Without Teachers (1973), Writing with Power (1981), and Embracing Contraries (1987), all published by Oxford UP. A new textbook (with Pat Belanoff), A Community of Writers (McGraw 1989) came out earlier this year. The paper above is from a collection of essays titled, Nothing Begins with N: New Investigations of Freewriting, that he edited with Pat Belanoff and Sheryl Fontaine, to be published in 1990 by Southern Illinois UP.*

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about most in writing and teaching writing. I learn the most from it. I get my best ideas and writing from it. I get my best group- and community-work done that way. I feel most myself when I freewrite. I think freewriting helps my students more than anything else I show them, and they usually agree with me over the years in formal and informal evaluations (and often the same response from teachers I work with). I'm bemused that I work so hard teaching complicated ideas and procedures, yet at the end they say they learned most from what I taught them in the first half hour of the first class (though I use it extensively throughout the term).

But when I do workshops for teachers I sometimes forget about the depth of my personal connection to freewriting, how much I've cathected it, because I want so badly to be pragmatic and show how it's "just a tool": useful to one and all, no ideology attached.

In this chapter, then, let me try to tell why freewriting is not just a handy-dandy tool but something at the center of what I do as a writer and a teacher. I started out writing a considerably different chapter—more impersonal and analytic. It got soggy and I gradually sensed I should focus on how I use and experience freewriting. But I'll also try to draw conclusions.

### **Freewriting Without Knowing It: Desperation Journal Writing**

What may have gotten me most personally involved with freewriting was, perhaps fittingly, my use of something like freewriting for my own personal life. There was a long period of struggle in my life, almost a decade, when intermittently I felt at the end of my tether. When I experienced myself as really stuck, nothing I did seemed to help me or diminish the pain. But I'd kept a kind of diary for a while, and so at really stuck times I took to simply sitting down at the typewriter and trying to *say* or *blurt* everything and anything I could. I remember sometimes sitting on the floor—I'm not sure why, but probably as a kind of bodily acting out of my sense of desperation. I could type fast and I learned that I could just let myself flow into words with a kind of intensity. When I felt myself shouting I used all caps. This process seemed to help more than anything else, and in this way I drifted into what I now take as the experiential germ of freewriting—the "freewriting muscle": don't plan, don't stop, trust that something will come—all in the interest of getting oneself "rolling" or "steaming along" into a more intense state of perception and language production. I don't think this was a conscious methodology—just a vague awareness that it helped.<sup>1</sup>

This was very private writing. I've never shared it and won't

share more than a few short passages here. But the fact that I can do so after twenty-five years—you will not have failed to notice—shows that I saved it. It felt precious to me.

There were all kinds of writing jumbled up in these hundreds of single-spaced typed pages. Anyone who has kept a diary in hard times can imagine what's there. For me the characteristic move was to start from feelings and seek relief in trying to figure things out:

I'm being driven out of my mind by — — —. What power can I gain over it by this process. Maybe the fact that it is exceedingly hard to get myself to sit down and deal with it on typewriter is clue that it will be effective—ie, that the demons inside don't want me to do this.

But there was more naked blurting too. I began one long entry like this:

Please let me be able to face up to what it is that is bugging me and face it and get through it and come out on the other side.

In this passage I seem to be tacitly using the genre of prayer or supplication—I'm not sure to whom. Prayer was a usable if leftover genre for me since it had been an important part of my life, and I hadn't been above asking for personal favors.

Sometimes in desperation I ranted and raved. Toward the end of a very long entry—in effect, working myself up over three or four pages into a frenzy—I wrote:

AND LESS THAN THAT I WILL REFUSE! LESS THAN THAT IS UNSATISFACTORY! LESS THAN THAT IS WORTHY OF HATE! LESS THAN THAT I WILL REFUSE. AND I WILL BE ANGRY. AND I WILL ACCEPT NOTHING FROM THIS UNIVERSE: I WILL ACCEPT NOTHING. I WILL ACCEPT NO WARMTH, NO COMFORT, NO FOOD, NO GIFT, NO ANYTHING UNTIL. . . . [going on and on and ending with] I HATE EVERYBODY.

Two things strike me (besides the purple theatricality—which I didn't experience that way at the time). First, I was using this private writing to allow myself kinds of discourse or register I couldn't otherwise allow myself (my public language being rather controlled). The basic impulse was to find words for what I was experiencing; somehow it helped to blurt rather than to try to be careful. Second, even in this ranting I see a kind of drive toward analysis that the reader might not notice: by letting myself rave, I helped myself catch a glimpse I hadn't had before of the crucial



pattern in my inner life—helped myself admit to myself, “I *insist* on cutting off my nose to spite my face! And I refuse to do otherwise.”

In the next excerpt I explore the writing-thinking-discovery process itself (in a passage coming on the fourth single-spaced page of a very long entry):

—There is a moral in what I’ve done tonight and also last Sunday most of the day. On both occasions I was bothered by feelings, but didn’t know what they were. I felt helpless both times. Tended to vacillate and wander around and do nothing. Same thing had happened an infinite number of times in the past and resulted in hours or days of compulsive wandering and brooding and being in irons and getting nowhere—ending only when fortuitous circumstances jolted me out of it. BUT these two times I somehow had the determination to sit down with the typewriter. And the fact seems to be that once I do that, and once I begin simply to line up the data—my feelings and actions—I start to see and sense functionalities and see relationships. And that produces both insights and even new feelings. BUT THINKING AND BROODING NEVER WORKED: IT SEEMS TO REQUIRE THE WRITING OF THEM OUT. Like writing papers—once one can get writing, things—and *big* things—begin to come. REMEMBER ALSO THAT IT TENDS TO BE DEAD END TO TRY TO WRITE OUT INSIGHTS. WHAT IS TRULY PRODUCTIVE IS ATTEMPT SIMPLY TO LINE UP THE DATA AND SEE THEN SEE WHAT EMERGES. WRITING STARTING OUT WRITING INSIGHTS SIMPLY TRAPS ME IN OLD FAILURE PATHES OF THINKING + NO NEW INSIGHTS THAT WAY.

—Thus, it may be that the new element in my life is the determination to apply the seat of the pants to the typewriter. Not determination, really, but somehow I did it, WHEN IN THE PAST I DID NOT DO IT. WHY? WHY? SOMEHOW A SENSE THAT I COULD GET RESULTS.

I could be (read “am”) embarrassed by the endless pages of self-absorption in these journals. And I’d happily trade in much of it now, ten cents on the dollar, for some concrete descriptions: where was I, what was I doing, who was I with, who said what—in short for “good writing.” Nevertheless I hold fast to a charitable view and remember how important this continual churning process was for my survival—and *also*, it now strikes me, for making writing a deep part of me.

What also strikes me is how analytic it is—however driven by feelings and full of descriptions of feelings in loose and often emotional language. Indeed the hunger to figure things out led to so *much* analysis as finally to show me the limits of analysis—to show me that “expression” or “blurting” was often more useful than insight.

Finally, I see a drive toward honesty here. I felt stuck in my life. I was willing to write things I couldn’t tell others and, indeed, didn’t want to tell myself—in hopes that it would make things more bearable. I still feel this at the root of freewriting: that it invites a *personal* honesty even in academic writing, and thus helps me pursue feelings or misgivings about my thinking that are not possible when I’m writing a draft for the eyes of others.

### **Freewriting as Incoherent**

As I let myself careen around in my inner life I let my journal writing be careless and digressive and unformed. But I never let it be actually incoherent. I was, after all, a graduate student or a teacher for all these years. My motivation was to “figure things out.” It wasn’t till I had actually worked out a theory of freewriting (thanks to Ken Macrorie and to my experience as a returning graduate student who was now stuck in his writing, not just his living) that I consciously adopted the principle that I should sometimes keep on writing even if it led to nonsense.

Freewriting as nonsense happens to me most characteristically when I am feeling some responsibility about being in charge of a class or workshop. I often find it easier to freewrite productively when I’m alone or in someone else’s class or workshop and can concentrate on my own work and not worry about people I’m responsible for. When I’m feeling nervous about being in charge, I sometimes cannot enter into my words or even very much into my mind. Here is an example of the nervous static I produced just the other day at the start of my 8 a.m. freshman writing class:

Freewriting. where does my pen take me. Heck Keep the pen going. And keep your pen moving. Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening. I don’t know whats happening. I feel sleepy and down. I get more cheerful in their presence. I feel more cheerful when they’re here. [Seeing the students be sleepy and grumpy made me overcome my similar feelings.] I feel more sleepy—no happy—when they’re here. Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening.

Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening.  
Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening.  
Whats happening.

Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening.  
Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening.

I don't know whats happening to me. I don't want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. [Written by hand]

Is this a *use* of freewriting? Or an abuse or a nonuse? Am I using it to avoid what's bothering me? With all my talk about honesty, why can't I explore what's on my mind in the safety of this private writing? Was I nervous? I don't know. It would have been easier if I hadn't been sitting there facing the class. This whole question still perplexes me.

But this kind of freewriting helps me identify with a certain proportion of the *student* freewriting I've seen (private freewriting that I've been allowed to see later): sometimes nervousness (or something else) prevents students too from entering in or giving their full attention to their writing. A touching irony here: I'm nervous because I'm in charge and wondering if I'm doing the right thing; they're nervous because they're in this required class with some guy making them write without stopping. In addition students sometimes produce this "static," freewriting for the opposite reason: it feels to them too boring and inconsequential to write words on paper that the teacher won't grade and *no* one will read. The moral of the story is that even though freewriting usually helps us concentrate better and enter more fully into our words (not pausing to reconsider our words or worry about reader reactions), it cannot *ensure* safety and involvement even for an experienced writer like myself.

In the end, however, my deep sense of *safety* with freewriting depends crucially on my being allowed to "abuse" it this way. It feels crucial to be able to say that I've freewritten *perfectly* as long as I didn't stop my pencil. If I had to be honest or meaningful or coherent all the time ("did I do a good job this time?"), it would create a burden that would undermine what I experience as central to freewriting.

### **Freewriting for Unfocused Exploring**

Unfocused exploring is probably my main use of freewriting: I

have a thought, perhaps out of the blue or perhaps in the midst of writing something else, and I give myself permission to pursue it on paper in an uncontrolled way wherever it wants to go—even if it digresses (which it usually does). This kind of freewriting is precious to me because my mind seems to work best—at the level of ideas as well as of syntax—when I allow it to be uncontrolled and disorganized. I cannot find as many ideas or perceptions if I try to stay on one track or be organized. And the not-stopping seems to build mental momentum—helps me get wound up or get rolling so that more ideas come.

Here is a long example: a single piece of freewriting that provided important germs for two different published essays (on voice and on audience). I'd been reading one evening and found two passages I wanted to save. The next morning I was merely copying them into a file when more thoughts came and I followed the train of associations:

Perfect example of “constructed” syntax from Ronald S. Crane, famous sentence from “Critical Monism,” quoted by Bialostosky, 1/3rd through his “Dialogics of the Lyric”:

“a poet does not write poetry but individual poems. And these are inevitably, as finished wholes, instances of one or another poetic kind, differentiated not by any necessities of the linguistic instrument of poetry but primarily by the nature of the poet's conception, as finally embodied in his poem, of a particular form to be achieved through the representation, in speech used dramatically or otherwise, of some distinctive state of feeling, of moral choice, or action, complete in itself and productive of a certain emotion or complex of emotions in the reader.” (p. 96)

One can feel him building. Perhaps this extreme version is characteristic of a classicist, someone who is immersed in reading Aristotle, Aquinas. (Does he read a lot in original classical languages? Certainly when we are asked to write in Latin or Greek (or some non native language in school) we are always CONSTRUCTING. Latin, in particular, seems to lend itself to that—with its free choice word order—invitation to fiddle with placement of words as in a puzzle—there doesn't seem to be a driving force to UTTER words in a particular order. Can it be that the peculiarities of the language's syntax relation to meaning INVITE one, more than in other languages, to, as it were, “formulate a meaning in ones mind first” and then find words for it? Can it be that some languages invite that more than others? Can it be that

languages like English—and even more Chinese—where word order is obligatory and carries much of the meaning—invite UTTERANCE more—for the force of making meaning gives rise to a sequence of words that drives itself forward from the head to the world—the process of FINDING MEANING in itself implies a word order; whereas in more of a language of free-choice syntax, there is an invitation to allow a bigger gap between finding meaning and making words?

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The above will make an important footnote in anything I write about voice/freewriting/utterance &c &c.

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Try to find the notes I made about UTTERING and CONSTRUCTING language while I was teaching 101. The struggle for students in moving from one to the other. Are they in my “germs” folder? Could there be something in my 101 folders? It was spring 83 that I was noticing it.

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Bakhtin evidently says that lyric poetry implies an audience of COMPLETE trust. Yes? Perhaps. But I suspect its more accurate to say that lyric taps the impulse to speak TO ONESELF. And is related to the fact that poets, perhaps more than any other group, are always sticking up for no-audience writing. To write lyric is to get at TRUSTED, INNER stuff. We do that best when we have safety and privacy. I suspect lyric poets are often people who learn to make privacy for selves, write to self, AND THEN LET OTHERS HEAR.

(Thus, it's an instance of my interest in DOUBLE AUDIENCE SITUATIONS. Good lyric poets are people who learn to write to self, but also to others. Perhaps that's the secret of all writers. Learning to deal with double audience.

DOUBLE AUDIENCE PHENOMENON: THIS IS IMPORTANT POINT. MAY BE CLOSE TO THE CENTER OF THE PHENOMENON OF GOOD WRITERS. PEOPLE WHO LEARN TO CREATE PRIVACY FOR THEMSELVES: WHO LEARN TO BE PRIVATE AND SOLITARY AND TUNE OUT OTHERS, WRITE only FOR SELVES—HAVE NO INTEREST IN THE NEEDS AND INTERESTS AND PRESSURES OF AUDIENCE.

YET, THEY ARE ALSO PEOPLE WHO LEARN TO TURN THAT TO AUDIENCE INTEREST. MORE THAN USUALLY INTERESTED IN AUDIENCE—HAM, POSEUR, ACTOR, SHOWOFF.

SO HERE AGAIN, WE HAVE AN ANALYSIS OF COMPLEX DIFFICULT BEHAVIOR, PERFORMANCE, SKILL: WHAT MAKES IT DIFFICULT AND COMPLEX AND SUBJECT TO ARGUMENT IS THAT IT CONSISTS OF ESSENTIAL PARADOX. A GOOD WRITER IS SOMEONE WHO IS MORE THAN USUALLY PRIVATE AND WRITING ONLY TO SELF YET AT THE SAME TIME MORE THAN USUALLY SHOWOFFY AND PUBLIC AND GRANDSTANDING AND SELFPANDERING. THEY SOUND OPPOSITE, YET THATS just WHAT WE SEE WITH SO MANY GOOD WRITERS.

LYRIC POETS; PAUL GOODMAN. who else to name?

I'd thought of "double-audience" phenomenon as an interesting anomaly in writing. (It was during one of my writing-to-myself sessions during one of my bard summers. What occasioned it? I must still have the note I wrote then.) BUT REALLY WHAT LOOKS LIKE AN ANOMALY IS REALLY CHARACTERISTIC THE MAIN THING—RIGHT AT THE CENTER OF WRITING. OR AT LEAST GOOD WRITING.

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WONDERFUL:

THUS, THIS BUSINESS ABOUT DOUBLE AUDIENCE IS REALLY THE CONCLUSION TO MY PUBLIC/PRIVATE CHAPTER/SECTION OF MY BOOK. MAKES IT A PERFECT MATCH FOR THE END OF MY SPEECH/WRITING CHAPTER/SECTION

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So what's the practical moral of it all? We must teach ourselves and our students to have more than usual privacy in writing; and more than usual publicness. Conventional teaching is just about as bad as it can be on both counts. Almost no privacy: everything a student writes is read by the teacher (usually in a judgmental light); it's so bad that students have come to feel bad if you DONT collect what they write: to ask students to write and not collect it, you have to fight their resentment. YET ON THE OTHER HAND, its always just that ONE teacher—who often doesn't read "like a

person"—"like an audience"—but rather judgmentally to grade and note strengths and weaknesses. It's IN A WAY private writing: doesn't feel like it goes to any "real person." Students don't feel like they are writing to real people. I've discovered resentment from students when I want to share what they write with other students: it feels like private thing between just them and teacher—even if it is about the causes of the french revolution or irony in ["to his coy mistress.["]

Similarly, students are willing to turn in garbage to teachers that they are embarrassed to share with peers. Mistakes. Expect teachers to accept it. "It doesn't matter." Like children with mother: talk in a way or leave a kind of mess they wouldn't do with others. (Oh well, they're use to that garbage.") It reminds me of the passage in Richard Wright's autobiography where he discovers that the prostitutes don't bother to cover themselves, though naked, when he brings in the coffee they asked him to go out and get—because they don't really think he's quite real. Not a real man/person—no need to hide. That's how students often feel teacher as reader: not real person.

So the school setting/context for writing is often the LEAST PRIVATE and the LEAST PUBLIC—when what it needs to be is the MOST PRIVATE and the MOST PUBLIC.

I'd never have been able to work out these ideas if I'd been trying to stay "on track" or know where I was going.

### **Freewriting as Sociable**

Freewriting is always private—by definition, for the sake of safety. But I have come to feel an intriguing link between freewriting and sociability because I so often do this private writing *in the company of others*—with a class or a workshop. Thus true freewriting "by the book," never pausing, has come in certain ways to feel like a companionable activity: one sits there writing for oneself but hears other people's pens and pencils moving across the paper—people moving in their chairs, sometimes a grunt or sigh or giggle. The effect of using these conditions for freewriting (however private) is to contradict the association of writing with isolation. An even more important effect is the palpable sense of, "Look at all these people putting words down on paper without agony. If they can do it, well so can I!" This contradicts a feeling hidden in many of us (not just raw freshmen) that really there's something



impossible about putting words down on paper, and when we succeed in doing so it's some kind of accident or aberration, but next time the impossibility will return.

My experience with Ira Progoff's journal approach has also underlined the social dimension of freewriting. His workshops consist of nothing but private journal writing (though he gives powerful prompts for ways to explore one's life), yet after a long writing session he often asks, "Does anyone need to read out loud what they've written?" He stresses that it's not important for others to understand or even listen carefully, and there's *never* any response; he simply suggests that someone might feel that the writing is not really "finished" till he's had a chance to read it out loud in the hearing of others. I occasionally use Progoff-like journal writing exercises in my teaching, and though I never invite people to read out loud, there is nevertheless this important experience of doing private work *together*.

But the sociable flavor of freewriting is strongest for me because of the times when, instead of regular freewriting, I've used *public* or *shared* freewriting in a supportive community: "Let's freewrite and then read it to each other." In the first draft of this essay I said I didn't do this very often, but over the course of revising I've realized that's wrong. There are many occasions when I do *some* form of public freewriting. This slowness in my memory is revealing: I'm a bit ambivalent about shared or public freewriting. On the one hand I tend to avoid it in favor of private writing. For I find most people's writing has suffered because they have been led to think of writing as something they must always share with a reader; thus we need more private writing. On the other hand I love the sharing of freewriting—for the community of it and for the learning it produces. It's so reassuring to discover that unplanned, unstudied writing is worth sharing. It teaches the pleasure of getting more voice in writing. (And we learn so much by reading out loud—by mouth and by ear.) As a result I try to find occasions for public freewriting and I find students are often more willing to read something out loud if they've just freewritten it quickly than if they've worked hard revising it at home.

Let me list, then, the diverse situations where I use public freewriting. (I make it clear that someone can "pass" even if she really doesn't want to share.)

- I often start a course or workshop with two short pieces of freewriting, one private and one public, in order to give people a vivid sense of the differences: how seldom they really write privately and what a useful luxury it is to do so. Because of this agenda I sometimes start with the public writing and make the task



slightly daunting: "Introduce yourself in writing to the strangers here." This freewriting is thus *both* public and focused: two constraints have been reimposed, namely that the writing be shown to an audience and that it stay on one topic.

- **Process writing.** After the opening exercise I just described, I often ask the students or teachers to write about what they noticed during the private and public freewriting—to write as much as they can about simply what happened as they were writing. Here is another case of freewriting that is both focused and public. (Often of course I invite process writing to be private; and sometimes I say, "This is private, but I hope we'll be able to hear a couple of these afterwards—or at least talk about what people wrote.") Process writing is interesting for being both very personal and also very task oriented and cognitive. People are often eager to share what happened to them and hear what happened to others. I make this kind of process writing a staple of my classes throughout the semester—usually asking for a piece of it to accompany each major assignment.

- In my teaching I sometimes ask us all to freewrite on a topic or issue we are working on, and then hear many of them. Sometimes this is part of a disciplined inquiry (see Hammond); sometimes it is more celebratory—just writing and sharing on an interesting or enjoyable topic for the pleasure of it.

- My work with the Bard Center for Writing and Thinking has provided me a particularly important experience of freewriting as sociable. In the summer of 1981 I was given the opportunity to bring together a group of about twenty teachers to teach a three-week intensive writing program for Bard freshmen. It was an exciting but scary adventure into the unknown for all of us, and I needed to ask from the start that we work together as a community of allies. At our first meeting I had us begin by freewriting with the expectation of sharing. This group of teachers has continued this tradition, meeting at least a couple of times a year. (Paul Connolly has been director since 1982 and the group does workshops and conferences, not just teach Bard freshmen in the summer.) The freewriting and sharing in this group has been very important for me: a paradigm experience of people working together out of enormous trust—trust in our writing and in each other. The question I used in one of our early meetings is one that is often still used: "What needs to be written?" This question sums up a kind of trust in the group dimension of the muse. I have very few other groups where I feel I can ask for this kind of open public freewriting with no topic. But the experience remains a touchstone for one way writing can be—and illustrates a crucial principle: though privacy might seem like the safest possible

condition for writing (since no one will read what you write), the safety is greater when you can share what is private with a full ally—someone who will support you and not condemn you whatever you write. That is, when we write privately we can seldom get away from the condemning judge most of us carry around in our heads, but a really supportive trusting audience can give some relief from that judge. This relates to Britton's (1975) emphasis upon the importance of a "trusted adult" as reader for children. I have occasionally met with a feedback group where as a prelude to giving feedback to each other on writing we brought in, we all did a piece of public freewriting and shared it—here too as a way to try to establish openness and trust. I know some feedback groups that do this regularly.

### The Difference between Private and Public Freewriting

Here is an example of each audience mode in freewriting—one written right after the other—that illustrates the difference I've come to notice fairly frequently between my private and public freewriting. The scene was a workshop for English teachers from primary grades through university. The public freewriting came first and the topic was "What do we have in common?":

What do we have in common? Seems to me we're all involved in helping people have *power* over language. And power over themselves. ~~To-wh~~ Whether it's kindergarten or graduate school, it's the same struggle—and potentially the same triumph—figuring out what we have to say, what's on our minds, and figuring out how to *say* it to readers.

~~Then-the~~ "Dare to say it," I find myself muttering to myself. Because what so often gets in my way when I'm trying to find my thoughts and find how to say them is a matter of *courage* and *confidence*. Even more for my students. When ~~we~~ I feel brave and trust myself, I am full of good stuff. When I'm scared and doubting myself I am continually tongue-tied and stuck.

And what's interesting ~~is~~ to me is that I have to keep learning that over and over again. I get brave—I ~~was~~ felt brave in getting out WWT [*Writing Without Teachers*]. Yet then over and over again I feel scared or doubt myself. And so I think I see it in my students too. From kindergarten to grad school, we keep having to *re-learn* ~~how~~ this lesson.

Why should that be? Perhaps because life continually buffets

us. Perhaps because as we learn or get brave ~~we continually~~—  
as we get more slack in the rope—we take on harder scarier  
tasks.

The topic for the private writing was “What divides us?”—but I immediately fell into talking about what I noticed about the difference between public and private:

What divides? I was kind of pollyanna as I wrote that. I was on a soap box. It kind of helped with my syntax: a kind of belly full of air keeping pressure on my diaphragm so that there was more resonance in that writing. I was “projecting” more in my public writing. Making my words kind of push themselves forward ~~over a~~ out and over to readers. Somehow—once I got going—it made it easier to keep writing. In an odd way it *helped* me find words. It was as though I was standing in front of a small group of people listening and I had to keep talking. I couldn’t just fall dumb and perplexed. The *pressure* of the audience situation forced ~~me to f~~ words upon me. However they felt a little bit just that—“forced”—a little bit as though I don’t trust them.

Odd fact. As I get ~~myself~~ in to this piece of writing—in the middle of the last paragraph—I find myself thinking, “this is interesting.” And I’m looking for little bits of process writing ~~for~~ to use in a textbook. I say, “maybe I could use this.” And before I know it, I’m feeling the presence of audience and slightly “fixing” or “helping” my words.

You *might* say that shows there’s no such thing as really private writing. It’s *always* for an audience. And I know there are strong arguments there.

But I still disagree. And even this piece is evidence for me. For I could feel the *difference*. It felt different as I gradually drifted into making my words ready for readers.

I’m not saying I know the words-as-product were different. But *to me*—the process of finding and putting them down was different ~~to~~ depending on whether I wanted them for just me or for others. [Written by hand]

I hope my public freewriting doesn’t always succumb to the slightly “public,” tinny quality here, straining for something “meaningful” to say, but this example does illustrate a potentiality of the effect of audience. (Obviously it is nicer to start a workshop with private writing, often leading people comfortably to a strong

honest voice in their public writing. But I sometimes move from public to private writing, perversely as it were, in order to illustrate more obviously to people the frequently strained effects of the fact that they *usually* start with public writing.)

### Using Freewriting to Write Responses or Feedback

When I write responses to papers by colleagues and students, I don't freewrite strictly (never pausing), but I sort-of-freewrite. As a writing teacher, I have so much responding to do that I've gradually given myself permission to write quickly. In doing so I've discovered a "door" that "opens" when I get steaming along: my perceptions get heightened, my feelings somewhat more aroused, and my language feels more fluid and "at the fingertips"—as though no "translation" is required. I can almost "think onto the paper" with no awareness of language. For me, this condition of "getting rolling" seems a good state for responding. For some reason, my special condition of writing—both more open and more intense—seems to lead to a better condition of reading: a heightened awareness of how the words were affecting my consciousness and more hunches about what was going on for the writer as he or she was writing. Yes, I often write too much and the writing is not judicious, but I do it on a computer so I can delete my worst gaffes. In addition, this somewhat more intense condition makes me write more *to* the writer—makes me talk turkey, not hold back, not tiptoe around. An example—to a freshman:

Dear Lisa,

This is long and interesting. It has problems as a piece of writing because there is so much in it, but all the things in it are rich.

Here's what I notice:

—I love the way you start out for much of the opening in a mood of *questioning*. Terrific. I say, "Here's an essay/paper that says, I'm baffled, I'm troubled, I want to try to figure something out." And that's a terrific thing to do. Perplexity absorbs the reader. (And of course it's a deep and interesting issue.) And I say to myself, "I hope she doesn't somehow tie it up into some neat tidy package of "wisdom" with a ribbon around it—neater than life.

—But then you drift into a long story of you and Stacey. What's interesting to me here is the change from last time. Last version the mood was primarily "pissed"! Here it's kind

of held-back-pissed. It somehow doesn't work for me for much of it. I say, "why doesn't she just admit how mad she is?"

—But then at the end of the story you really do some hard thinking about her and you seem primarily analytic and probing and NOT angry; you are really trying to take hold of it and figure out how to build some stability. And your thinking and probing are convincing and interesting to me.

—So then I finally conclude that the main problem with the long story of you and Stacy is just the length and the lost focus: it makes me forget what the paper is really about—or at least I lose track.

So in the end, I feel these things:

—The paper is *trying* very much to be an extended meditation on the question of where do we get stability from—and why instability. And I love that. And I like your thinking about Stacy. But somehow that doesn't solve your larger problem: not everyone has had such a hard life as she has had. (However maybe your generalization would still hold true for the rest of us: I think it really is hard to trust people; and your conclusion is strong. But don't sound so smug and tidy with it. It's only a hypothesis and it may not fit everyone. But if you present it that way, I'd call it interesting and useful.

Talk to me about some week toward the end of the term perhaps using a week to try another *major* revision of this. There's so much here and you are really trying to deal with something important and hard. I'd like to see you get this bucking bronco under control. Let it rest a few weeks.

best,

Peter [On word processor]

There is an important connection between my love of freewriting and my love of giving feedback in the form of "movies of my mind"—a narrative of the mind reacting. That is, freewriting *can* lead to objective description or to analysis (as it sometimes does for me), yet freewriting naturally *invites* an account of the mind reacting. For if you have to keep writing, the only inexhaustible source of material *is* a story of what's happening in your mind at the moment. You can't run out (indeed, like Tristram Shandy, you often fall behind).

### **Freewriting about Freewriting**

I freewrote the following piece in a class I was teaching in 1987,

using the occasion to reflect on having recently filled out a questionnaire from Sheryl Fontaine about my use of freewriting. As I filled out her questionnaire I was perplexed to notice that though I use freewriting a lot in my teaching and in workshops, I don't so often do *pure* freewriting on my own, by choice.

Freewriting. Sheryl. You're making me think more self-consciously about freewriting. Freewriting. Am I fooling myself about it somehow?

Do I not *use* freewriting? Am I guilty of not practicing what I preach?

Actually an old story with me. I used to feel that way a lot after *WWT* [*Writing Without Teachers*] came out. And in truth I couldn't [double underline] do, then, what I'd figured out in thinking through that book was a good thing to do. It ie, to relinquish control. It took a year or two. But ~~th~~ it's not so unusual: we the human (mind) often works that way: we figure out in *theory* what we cannot do in *practice*—we learn to “act” with neural impulses acts we cannot yet get our ~~min~~ bodies to do. (Except when it goes the other way round: really clever people learn from their *behavior* and then get the wisdom in their minds. Sometimes

But And I even felt it many times after *WWP* [*Writing With Power*]. Am I a fraud?—is the archetypal question. Will people look beneath my surface to my reality and find out I'm no good—wrong—dishonest?

~~But~~ actually, I think I do practice what I preach. (Though I wouldn't be surprised to discover that I ~~preach~~ forget to preach some important things that I practice.)

This is like a letter to you—but calling it “fw” gives me permission to be sloppy about it.

I forgot to remember that *letters* are another place where I use freewriting. [By hand]

So do I or don't I use freewriting in my own writing? I guess the answer is that I don't use it so often “by the book” or “by the clock” when I'm writing substantive pieces on my own. And I don't do daily freewrites or regular warm-up exercises. But I make journal entries when something is confusing me in my life and I rely heavily on what I like to think of as my “freewriting muscle” in all the ways I describe in this chapter. This “muscle” seems to me in essence to consist of the ability to write in fairly fast and long bursts at early stages of any project—later stages too—when I get an idea or hunch (or fruitful doubt): to blurt as much of my thinking on paper

as I can. In general, when I am not revising I have learned to lessen control and accept thoughts and words as they come.

### Process Writing When I'm Stuck: Articulating Resistance

As I noted at the start, I drifted into something like freewriting when I felt stuck in my life. One of my most frequent and consistent uses of freewriting is when I feel stuck in my writing. *Writing without Teachers* grew from little germs of stuck-writing. Here is one of the many stuck-writings I did while working on this essay. I found myself going back and forth in my head about where to put a projected section about control and noncontrol (and even moving my note about it back and forth in my file)—*instead of starting to write it*. I freewrite in capital letters here not because I am shouting but because I want to be able to distinguish this metawriting from the rest of my text.

HERE I'M WORRYING ABOUT WHERE TO PUT THIS SECTION ON CONTROL/NONCONTROL—AND THE UNCERTAINTY IS REALLY GETTING IN MY WAY, AND CAUSING A KNOT IN MY STOMACH AND MAKING ME FEEL BAD BECAUSE I KNOW I'M LOSING TIME AND I'M BEHIND SCHEDULE HERE. WHEN I HAVEN'T EVEN WRITTEN A DRAFT OF THIS SECTION YET. IN THE BACK OF MY MIND I KNOW THAT IF I'D JUST STOP WORRYING ABOUT THE OVERALL RHETORICAL STRATEGY AND JUST PUT MY HEAD DOWN AND START TO WRITE WHAT I WANT TO WRITE, I WOULD NOT JUST FEEL BETTER ABOUT GETTING SOMETHING WORKED OUT—ALMOST CERTAINLY THE PROCESS OF DOING IT WOULD SOLVE THE STRATEGIC QUESTION OF WHERE IT SHOULD GO OR HOW TO CONSIDER IT. (AM I THINKING OF IT AS PARADOX OR AS MY MAIN COMMITMENT?)

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO JUST DO THIS IF I KNOW IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO. I CAN FEEL THE ANSWER. THOUGH IT'S MORE EFFICIENT AND SMARTER TO PLUNGE IN, THERE'S SOMETHING THAT HOLDS ME BACK AND THE METAPHOR OF "PLUNGING IN" IS JUST RIGHT FOR "EXPLAINING" WHY: THERE'S SOME KIND OF JUMPING IN TO A DEEP AND SLIGHTLY SCARY ELEMENT THAT'S INVOLVED HERE. [on word processor]

Where there had been intense strain in trying to control my thinking and language all afternoon—unsuccessful planning and inept



steering (leading to awful writing)—here was a rush of letting go and just allowing words to take over without much steering. It is a mere blurting, but the effect was to help me see more clearly what was happening and to gain some power over my writing process.

## Heightened Intensity

What I value in freewriting is how it can lead to a certain *experience* of writing or *kind* of writing process. The best descriptors of that experience are perhaps the metaphors that have sprinkled this essay so far: “getting rolling,” “getting steaming along,” “a door opening,” “getting warmed up,” “juices flowing” or “sailing.” These all point to states of increased intensity or arousal or excitement. In these states it feels as though more things come to mind, bubble up—and that somehow they fall more directly into language (though not necessarily better, clearer, nor more organized language). And sometimes, along with this, comes a vivid sense of knowing exactly to *whom* I need to say these things.

I know this is dangerous territory I’m wandering into. So many students have talked about how wonderful it *felt* while they were writing something—leaving us the job of telling them how bad the writing was that grew out of that feeling. Excitement doesn’t make writing good. But freewriting doesn’t pretend to be good. So if we have to write badly—as of course we do—I find it more rewarding to be excited while doing it. This intensity can lead to bad writing, but it usually leads to better material and more pleasure.

In short, though it is dangerous to defend excitement or heightened intensity or “getting carried away” as conditions we should strive for in writing—and readers will no doubt fear renewed talk about that dangerous concept “inspiration”—I find myself deciding it is time to take the risk. I know I produce a lot of garbage and disorganization when I get wound up in freewriting or freewriting-like extended blurts, but at these times it feels as though I can see more clearly what I’m thinking *about* and also experience more clearly my mind *engaged in* the thinking. They are the times that make it rewarding to write and make me want to return to the struggle of it. I doubt whether many people continue to write by choice except for the periodic reward of some kind of intensity of this sort. For example, Louise Wetherbee Phelps writes:

Throughout my daybooks I have tried repeatedly to capture the feeling of the generative moment. It is not a cool, cerebral experience but a joyous state of physical excitement and pure power felt in the stomach and rising up in the chest as a flood



of energy that pours out in rapid explosive bursts of language. It is a pleasantly nervous state, like the feeling of the gymnast ready to mount the apparatus who is tuned tautly and confidently to the powers and capabilities of her own body. Ideas compel expression: I write in my daybook of their force shooting and sparking through my fingers onto the paper. ("Rhythm and Pattern" 247)

Phelps says she is engaged in phenomenology. She is trying,

to approach the level and quality of phenomenological description, which involves not only intuiting, analyzing, and describing particulars of composing in their full concreteness, but also attempting to attain insight into the essence of the experience. (243)

The nascent interest in phenomenology in the profession is a good sign: a respect for the facts of what actually happens in writers. We've had a decade of protocol analysis and TV cameras trained on writers—all fueled by a devotion to the facts about the writing process. But feelings are facts, and until this research shows us the powerful effects of feelings on a writer's thoughts and choices, I will have a hard time trusting it. My own investigations show me that feelings play an enormous role. When we get more careful phenomenological research, I suspect that one result will be to give us more respect for this suspect business of being excited, aroused, carried away, "rolling." (For a few leads into the use of phenomenology and study of feelings in writing, see Brand, Flisser, Gleason, McLeod, Perl and Egendorf, Phelps, Whatley.)

### **A KIND of Goodness in Writing**

Because freewriting produces so much careless, self-indulgent, bad writing, I am nervous about defending it as good—and, as I've just said, it's not the product that I most value it for. Nevertheless freewriting has come to serve, I now see, as a model of what seems to me an important *kind* of goodness in writing. That is, even if I spend much less time freewriting than I spend trying to control and revise, freewriting has come to establish for me a directness of tone, sound, style, and diction that I realize I often try to emulate in my careful writing.

For example, freewriting sometimes helps me as it were to break free from what feels like the heavy mud and clinging seaweed that are clogging my ability to *say directly* what I already feel I know. As

I was working on the preceding section of this essay I found myself having written the following sentence:

But it strikes me if we only stop and think about it for a moment, I think we'll have to agree that we better take the risk of sounding sophomoric or ridiculous in other ways—that is of talking turkey about what it actually felt like during the important moments of writing—because that is exactly what we haven't gotten much of in fifteen years of people saying they are investigating the composing process.

When I looked back and notice what a *soggy* thing I'd just struggled hard to produce, I was dismayed. In frustration I stopped and forced myself to freewrite my way through to more direct language:

WE BETTER RISK TAKING OUR CLOTHES OFF AND DESCRIBING WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS WHEN WE WRITE—WHAT IT FEELS LIKE—THE TEXTURE FROM MOMENT TO MOMENT. BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN LACKING FROM ALL THESE YEARS OF PROTOCOL ANALYSIS OF WRITERS. THEY'VE SUPPOSEDLY GIVEN US PICTURE OF THE WRITERS MIND, BUT IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE MY MIND. IT'S TOO SANITIZED. IT LEAVES OUT FEELINGS.

I GUESS IT'S NO ACCIDENT THAT WE LEAVE THEM OUT. THE FEELINGS ARE SO SOPHOMORIC OR ODD OR STUPID OR CHILDISH. WRITING BRINGS OUT FEELINGS THAT MAKE US FEEL LIKE WE'RE NOT GROWN UP, NOT SOPHISTICATED. PERHAPS WHAT MAKES SOPHOMORES SOPHOMORES IS THAT THEY ACTUALLY ADMIT WHAT THEY ARE FEELING.

WHAT I WANT IS MORE PHENOMENOLOGY OF WRITING. PHENOMENOLOGY IS PERHAPS JUST A FANCY WORD TO MAKE US ALL FEEL A LITTLE SAFER ABOUT BEING NAKED—AND Fancier word for going naked. BUT IF THAT HELPS, SO BE IT. BESIDES, IT'S MORE THAN THAT. THERE IS THAT ENORMOUS AND COMPLEX DISCIPLINE THAT PHENOMENOLOGISTS TALK ABOUT—IN THEIR GERMAN JARGON—ABOUT TRYING TO GET PAST THE OVERLAY OF WHAT IS CULTURALLY OR LINGUISTICALLY DETERMINED AND HABITUAL. A MESS. BUT WORTH THE EFFORT. LET ME GIVE A FOOTNOTE THAT MENTIONS THE PEOPLE I KNOW WHO ARE TALKING ABOUT FEELINGS AND PHENOMENOLOGY.

I confess I *like* these short bursts of freewriting. They are too careless, too casual, too whatever—I can’t “hand them in” that way. (This essay is an excuse to hand in a few pieces for credit.) But I want to get as much of that quality as I can in my acceptable writing: the energy, the talkiness, the sense of a voice, and the sense of the words or the writer reaching *toward* a reader.

For some reason freewriting also seems to elicit crass analogies and physical metaphors, and I find these help my thinking. I’ve come to call this kind of discourse “talking turkey.” My freewriting tends to be more like a speech act and less like the formulation of impersonal truths. Thus even though I can seldom use my freewriting as it is, I think my history with it has put a kind of *sound* in my ear and a *feel* in my mouth—a sound and a feel that guide me in my revising.

### **Relinquishing Control—Not Striving for Mastery**

There is another experience that is central to my involvement with freewriting and that is the sense of *letting go*. I don’t know whether this is the cause or the effect of the heightened intensity I’ve just been talking about—or perhaps the two conditions simply go along with each other. At any rate, when I am writing carefully or revising I usually experience myself as trying to plan or control: to figure out what I want to say, or (knowing that) to *say*, what I want to say, or (having done that) to get my words clear or coherent or organized. It feels like trying to steer, to hold things together, to juggle balls. I usually experience this as struggle and strain. When I freewrite I let go, stop steering, drop the balls and allow things to come to me—just babble onto paper. It’s the difference between Linda Flower’s emphasis on always making a plan and trying to follow it vs. plunging along with no plan; between trying to steer vs. letting go of the steering wheel and just letting words come.

Not that it’s always relaxed. Freewriting often makes for an increased tension of sorts. It’s as though writing were a matter of my head containing a pile of sand that has to pour down through a tiny hole onto the paper—as though my head were an hourglass. When I freewrite it feels as though someone has dumped an extra fifty pounds of sand in the top chamber of my head—so the sand is pressing down and coming through that tiny hole in my mind with more pressure (though faster too). But despite the pressure, there is a kind of relief or comfort at the very no-stopping rule that *causes* the pressure—to see if I can really bring all that sand down through the small opening.

I sometimes think of it as a matter of *translation*. That is, it feels

to me as though the “contents of my mind” or “what I am trying to say” won’t run naturally onto paper—as though what’s “in mind” is unformed, incoherent, indeed much of it not even verbal, consisting rather of images, feelings, kinesthetic sensations, and pieces of what Gendlin calls “felt sense” (see Perl). Thus it often feels as though writing requires some act of translation to get what’s *in mind*—into *writing*. (Some social constructionists like to say that all knowledge is verbal or linguistic. It’s hard for me to believe they really believe that, but if it were true we would find it much easier to articulate ourselves.)

Let me put it yet another way. It feels as though my mind is messy and confused and unformed, but that writing is supposed to be clear and organized. Therefore writing really asks for *two* things: to get my meanings into words *and* to get those words clear and organized. What’s really hard here is trying to do the two things in one operation. Freewriting shows me I can do them one at a time: just *get my mind into words*—but leave those words messy and incoherent.

What a relief. For it’s not so hard to neaten up those messy words—once they are on paper where they stay still. For—and this is another central experience for me when I try to write normally or carefully—the words and ideas and feelings in my head won’t stay still: they are always sliding around and changing and driving me crazy. Interestingly enough, I find that it’s easier to clean up a mess I produced by galloping freewriting than to clean up a mess I produced by careful composing. The freewriting is crudely jointed so that all the sections and elements are obvious, whereas the careful mess is delicately held together by elaborate structures of baling wire, and once I fiddle with it, everything seems to fall apart into unusable or unlinkable elements. (And sometimes, of course, the freewriting is *not* such a mess.)

In fact I often experience an additional relief in this very messiness and incoherence. That is, sometimes it feels as though there is a primal gulf between my experience and what can be communicated to others: as though I am trapped inside a cavern of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts that no one can ever share—as if I am in a Fellini movie where I shout ineffectually across a windy gulf and no one hears—or in a Faulkner novel where I talk and move my mouth and no sound comes out. I find great relief in coming up with words that embody or express the very *incoherence* or *unformed* quality of my inner existence. (What I appreciate about reading novels by people like Woolf, Faulkner, and May Sarton is the relief of finding someone who articulates the texture of experience and feeling that sometimes seems trapping.) In short,

where everything about the process of normal writing tells us, "Plan! Control! Steer!" freewriting invites me to stop planning, controlling, steering.

I acknowledge that of course we cannot, strictly speaking, get the "contents of mind" onto paper as they are. And of course there is probably no such thing as truly unplanned speech or uncontrolled behavior. The human organism seems incapable of randomness. To relinquish conscious control, or plans, or goals is to allow for unconscious plans, "unplanned" goals, tacit shapes and rhythms in our thinking—and for more control and inscription by the culture. Nevertheless there is an enormous difference between the experience of planning one's words and thoughts beforehand (whether carefully planning large chunks on paper in an outline, or just rehearsing phrases and sentences in one's mind before writing them down), and the experience of letting words go down on paper unrehearsed and unforeseen. Obviously freewriting does not always produce this latter experience, but it does tend in this direction with some reliability: to that undeniable experience of the hand leading the mind, of the emerging words somehow choosing other words, of seeing what comes when one manages to invite the momentum of language or one's larger mind or whatever to take over. Freewriting is an invitation to stop writing and instead to "be written."

Of course there is a sense in which whenever we write "we are written." But when people are too glib or doctrinaire about this, they obscure the crucial empirical difference between those moments when we have plans, meanings, or intentions in mind and keep to them, and those other moments when we proceed without conscious plans, meanings, or intentions. The difference between these two conditions is something we need to investigate rather than paper over. The most graphic example is surprise. That is, even if there is no such thing as uncontrolled or unplanned writing, there is a huge difference between knowing what one is writing and being startled by it. I'd guess that this kind of surprise is another of those rewards that make people who write by choice continue to do so. One way to sum up freewriting is that it increases the frequency of surprise.

In our culture, *mastery* and *control* are deeply built into our model of writing. From freewriting I learn how writing can, in contrast, involve *passivity*—an experience of nonstriving, unclenching, letting go, or opening myself up. In other cultures people do more justice to this dimension of writing—talking in ways we call superstitious or magical, for example about taking dictation from the muse. My hunch is that many good writers engage in lots of "wise passivity."

Some writers acknowledge this and talk about consciously trying

to relax some control and engage in a process of waiting and listening. (Donald Murray sounds this note eloquently.) For example, distinguished writers often talk about creating characters and then consciously waiting to see what they do. But what's even more touching is the testimony of writers who *try* to stay in control but fail—giving thereby a kind of backhanded testimony to the importance of relinquishing control. Barbara Tomlinson has collected fascinating examples of what she calls the theme of “characters as co-authors” in the phenomenology of writers writing.

[C]haracters “demand” things (William Faulkner . . . , Reynolds Price, Barbara Wersba), reject things (William Inge, Joyce Carol Oates . . . , Sylvia Wilkinson), insist on speaking (Robertson Davies, Joyce Carol Oates . . . , Harold Pinter), refuse to speak (Paul Gallico, Cynthia MacDonald), ignore authors’ suggestions (Katherine Anne Porter), “resent” what has been written about them (Saul Bellow . . . ), confront their authors (Timothy Findley . . . , Margaret MacPherson) and so forth. (Tomlinson 8)

John Cheever is troubled by this kind of talk and insists that “[t]he legend that characters run away from their authors—taking up drugs, having sex operations, and becoming president—implies that the writer is a fool with no knowledge or mastery of his craft (Tomlinson 29).” Surely Cheever is wrong here. Surely a writer *lacks* knowledge and mastery of his craft unless he has the ability to allow himself to develop—even subversively, as it were—the gift for relinquishing control, for example by unconsciously empowering a character to take over and contradict his conscious plan.

Does it sound as though I am against planning and control in writing? I am not. What is probably the *majority* of my writing time is taken up trying to establish and maintain control, to steer, to try and get the damn thing to go where I want it to go. But my struggle for control rests on a foundation of shorter stretches of time when I manage to relinquish control. And I’m not just saying that my freewriting produces more material or fodder for my planning or control. No, when my writing goes well, it is usually because the plan itself—my sense of where I’m trying to get my material to go—*came* to me in a piece of noncontrolled writing. In short, freewriting doesn’t just give “content,” it also gives “form.”

## Dwelling in and Popping Out

Because freewriting is an invitation to become less self-conscious about writing, to stop attending consciously to the

choosing and forming of words, it helps me enter more easily and fully *into* my writing and thinking. To use Polanyi's terms, it helps me make writing more a "part of myself" or to "pour myself into" writing. He speaks of writing and language as tools and he is interested in the process by which one "pours oneself into" the hammer while one hammers—focusing attention on the nail rather than on the hammer.<sup>2</sup>

But while this effect of freewriting is important, I am beginning to notice the opposite effect (see Pat Belanoff): how often freewriting is not just a pouring myself into my discourse but also popping myself out of it. For some reason, freewriting has the capacity to increase our awareness of what we've written—what we are doing. Notice, for example, in one of my early journal entries how I wrote, "But when I get this down on paper I see that. . . .": the act of writing down a feeling made me more aware of it from the outside. Here is a more extended example. My freewriting during a stuck point in writing this essay led me to make a metapoint about the structure of my essay—and then even to reflect on metadiscourse itself:

I SEEM TO BE MAKING TWO POINTS: MORE EXCITING INTENSE STATE; AND RELINQUISHING CONTROL. HOW DO THEY RELATE? DO THEY WORK AGAINST EACH OTHER?

METAPPOINT: FREEWRITING HAS LED ME TO MAKE MORE OF THESE META POINTS AS ABOVE: MORE ARTICULATING MY DILEMMA—TRYING TO PUT THEM INTO WORDS. NOT ALWAYS WRITTEN NONSTOP, BUT USUALLY QUICKLY. BUT IT'S OF THE ESSENCE OF FREEWRITING (FOR ME) TO BE AN ARENA FOR TALKING ABOUT A METAPPOINT—A COMMENT ABOUT A DILEMMA—AN ATTEMPT TO FIND WORDS FOR A DILEMMA OR PERPLEXITY.

BEFORE I GOT ACCUSTOMED TO FREEWRITING I DIDN'T WRITE THESE THINGS OUT; I WOULD SIT AND PONDER—PERHAPS WORK OUT NOTES—PHRASES. BUT THESE "FREEWRITING LIKE DISCOURSES" ARE A KIND OF ACTUAL "TALKING TO MYSELF" IN SPEECH—NOT A MATTER OF BETTER BOILING THINGS DOWN INTO NOTES. THE MOVE TO NOTES IS A MOVE FROM THE TEXT FURTHER AWAY—FROM THE DISCOURSE OF THE TEXT INTO SUMMARY AND ESSENCES—THAT'S THE POINT OF NOTES: THE PERSPECTIVE THAT COMES



FROM ESSENCES. BUT THIS MOVE I'M MAKING NOW IS A MOVE FROM THE TEXT IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION—MORE TOWARD SPEECH. TALKING TO MYSELF. IT'S MUCH MESSIER—IT DOESN'T HAVE THAT LOVELY PERSPECTIVE OF NOTES AND ESSENCES—BUT SOMEHOW IT OFTEN HAS THE JUICE OR BUBBLING ACTION (ALKA SELZER) TO CUT THROUGH PERPLEXITY THAT I CAN'T WORK OUT WITH NOTES AND ESSENCES. I NEED TO “HAVE A LITTLE CHAT WITH MYSELF”—A KIND OF HUMAN TRANSACTION AS WITH AN UNDERSTANDING AUNT—RATHER THAN TRYING TO DO FREEZE DRIED SUMMARY TRANSACTION WITH ANGELS OR GOD.

When Bob Whitney said to his student, “Nothing begins with N” (he was trying to nudge her on in her freewriting when she had said she had “nothing on her mind”), he was really popping her *out of* her stream or plane of thought—which was after all mere emptiness or blankness of mind. For of course no matter how deeply I insist that our minds are never empty, I must admit that we often enough *experience* our minds as genuinely empty. Whitney, then, was coaching her to step *outside* that blankness of mind and to write a phrase such as, “Nothing’s on my mind” or “Nothing going on here.” To write such a phrase is really to *comment upon* one’s mental state.

If we reflect for a moment we can see why freewriting invites metadiscourse. When I am writing along in normal conditions I commonly pause: my thought has run out or I wonder about what I’ve just written or I can’t find the word I want. But when I freewrite the “no stopping” rule won’t let me pause. What happens? If I cannot find the next word or thought, the natural next event is to write down a piece of metadiscourse. Indeed the ticking clock has probably *put* a piece of metadiscourse into my mind (“Oh dear, I’ve run out” or “I don’t know what to say next”). Freewriting also invites metadiscourse because, as blurting, it often leads to something that surprises or dismays us: “That’s not the right word” or “Do I really feel that way?” or “What a nasty thought.”

It is intriguing that freewriting should help me move in these two directions: to “indwell” or pour myself *into* my language, thinking and feeling; yet also to step outside or at least *notice* and comment on my language, thinking and feeling. Yet I don’t experience this metadiscourse as a distancing or stepping *outside* my language or thinking. I feel just as “poured into” these pieces of metadiscourse. Indeed it feels as though the capacity that freewriting has for making writing more a part of myself comes



especially from these metacomments—this experience of finding language for these reflections on language. Perhaps the paradigm mental process in freewriting occurs in that moment when Bob Whitney's student uses a *word* ("nothing") for what had till then been a nonlinguistic feature of her consciousness (emptiness).

We might be tempted then to argue that freewriting helps us move to "higher" cognitive realms of metadiscourse (and so is particularly important for weak students). But I am reminded of Shirley Brice Heath's saying that she refuses to use the term "metacognition" because of its connotations of being something "higher" that only skilled students can do (discussion at the English Coalition Conference in 1987). Pat Belanoff shows that there is more metadiscourse in the freewriting of skilled students than of unskilled students, but she suggests that the unskilled students probably have just as much metadiscourse *in their minds* ("How do you spell that?" "Oh no, I can't write anything intelligent"). Indeed both Sondra Perl and Mike Rose give good evidence that what gets in the way of unskilled and blocked writers is *too much* metadiscourse. But these weak students don't feel they can bring these metathoughts *into* the text, make them *part* of the dialogue. So instead of saying that freewriting helps move us up to higher cognitive levels, I would argue that it helps us do *in writing* what we can already do perfectly well in our minds.

### **A Different Relationship to Writing**

In conclusion then, freewriting has gradually given me a profoundly different experience of and relationship to writing. Where writing used to be the exercise of greater than usual care and control (especially in comparison to speaking) freewriting has led me to experience writing *in addition* as an arena of less than usual care and control: writing as an arena for putting down words and thoughts in a deeply unbuttoned way. And when I make progress toward something "higher" in writing—towards clarity of thinking or effectiveness of language or toward metaawareness—I experience this progress as rooted in freewriting, the "lowest" of writing activities.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This started before I knew of Ken Macrorie and learned the name and

the self-conscious technique from him. And also before an M.I.T. colleague brought back from a summer's teaching in a rural southern college a different but comparable writing exercise: fill up a legal-sized sheet with nonstop writing; write as small or large as you wish. Here too was the essential germ: a task or even "ordeal" but with extenuating circumstances to guarantee success.

<sup>2</sup> "Our subsidiary awareness of tools and probes can be regarded now as the act of making them form a part of our own body. The way we use a hammer or a blind man uses his stick, shows in fact that in both cases we shift outwards the points at which we make contact with the things that we observe as objects outside ourselves. While we rely on a tool or a probe, these are not handled as *external* objects. We may test the tool for its effectiveness or the probe for its suitability . . . , but [when we actually use these tools], they remain necessarily on our side . . . , forming part of ourselves. We pour ourselves out into them and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them. . . . Hammers and probes can be replaced by intellectual tools" (Polanyi 59). He goes on to talk about language—noting specifically how hyper-consciousness of the language in one's mouth or in one's hand can ruin the smooth use of it.

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Patricia J. McAlexander  
Noel Gregg

# THE ROLES OF ENGLISH TEACHERS AND LD SPECIALISTS IN IDENTIFYING LEARNING DISABLED WRITERS: TWO CASE STUDIES

Individuals who are learning disabled possess average to above average intelligence but have difficulty acquiring, storing, and/or retrieving information in certain areas. The primary reason for this difficulty is thus not lack of intelligence—nor is it an emotional block, poor instruction, or a disadvantaged background. Rather, the reason is a deficit, apparently of neurological origin, in one or more specific cognitive processing abilities—for example, perception, symbolization, image-making, conceptualization. Such specific cognitive processing deficits can affect different content areas or social skills. When the deficits affect written language, the condition is called *dysgraphia*. Some of the symptoms may be illegible or unusual handwriting, frequent and bizarre mechanical errors, and incoherent or inappropriate style and content. Helmer

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*Patricia J. McAlexander, assistant professor in the English component of University of Georgia's Division of Developmental Studies, has published in Early American Literature, Studies in the Literary Imagination, College Composition and Communication, and elsewhere.*

*Noel Gregg is associate professor in the University of Georgia's Division for the Education of Exceptional Children and Director of the University's Learning Disabilities Adult Clinic. Her articles on the college LD population have appeared in such publications as Journal of Learning Disabilities, Journal of Special Education, and Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment.*

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Myklebust published his pioneering *Development and Disorders of the Written Language* in 1965, but it has been mainly in the 1980s that traits of college level dysgraphics have been investigated and described by such teachers and researchers as Amy Richards, Noel Gregg, Susan Vogel, and Mary Ross Moran.

Indeed, during this decade an increasing number of dysgraphic students are enrolling in college—particularly in developmental and remedial courses (Longo, 10–11). Many of these students, however, have never been diagnosed as writing disabled. Perhaps because they were able to handle the often less demanding writing assigned in high school, the severity of their problem is not revealed until they become involved with the extensive writing and close correcting of college composition. Other students, though previously diagnosed as LD, are reluctant to disclose their disability. As Longo puts it, “Using long-established avoidance patterns, [they] enter the ‘hide-out’ phase of their college education,” rather than making their problems known to their professors (11). Yet most dysgraphic students will find that passing required college writing courses is extremely difficult, if not impossible, without some special instruction and modifications. Thus Amy Richards writes, “The chief hope for the writing disabled student in the college classroom is that English composition instructors learn how to make tentative identification of writing dysfunction” (68).

Richards’ word “tentative” here is a vital one. There are major drawbacks to identifying dysgraphics simply on the basis of classroom writing and behavior. First, the learning disabled population has no one consistent set of characteristics; their disorders are, as Hammill et al. point out, “heterogenous” (8). Each dysgraphic student presents a unique profile, both in terms of writing weaknesses and in reactions to those weaknesses (for example, some LD students simply give up, exhibiting learned helplessness or a lack of effort; some blame others for their failures; some keep trying valiantly to improve their writing skills). Second, while some particular error patterns are found most often in the writing of the learning disabled, many characteristics of dysgraphic writing may also be caused by low intelligence, emotional or social dysfunction, developmental delay, lack of motivation, or educational or cultural deprivation (see, for example, Shaughnessy, who stresses the “central condition of ill preparedness,” (161; also 10 and 174). A final difficulty for English teachers trying to identify an LD student on the basis of classroom writing is that, even if the student’s work seems quite clearly indicative of a disability, similar errors can be caused by different deficits—and for instructional purposes teachers need to know what type of disability the student

has. Thus, although composition teachers may often be accurate when they suspect a student of being dysgraphic, the most reliable way to identify learning disabled students and to define the nature of their disabilities is through clinical testing. Moreover, college students who were diagnosed in grade school often need to have their tests updated. In most areas of the country private testing is available, but in recent years many postsecondary institutions have initiated centers to identify and support LD students (see HEATH, for a list of directories for such centers).

There are, of course, as in any rapidly developing field, many issues still to be resolved regarding LD students and these centers. In particular, there remain debates regarding various aspects of the term "learning disability," the diagnostic tests to use, and the interpretation of the results. These issues are beyond the scope of this article. In the following case studies of a teacher's and LD center's analyses of two basic writers, we do not advocate a particular model of diagnosis. Rather, we hope to illustrate the complexity of recognizing and defining learning disabilities, and the need for a cooperative sequential process of identification on the part of English teachers and LD specialists. We hope that these case studies will also clarify the often mysterious-seeming process of clinical testing and diagnosis.<sup>1</sup>

The developmental studies program in which our two students, Tracy and Bob, were enrolled was designed for freshmen who do not meet the criteria for regular admission to the university, but who show academic potential. Students accepted into the program are tested in math, reading, and writing; they are then enrolled in appropriate remedial classes, from which they "exit" into regular courses once they meet specified criteria. Students have up to four quarters to meet this criteria. Both Tracy and Bob were placed in developmental studies writing classes and had been there two quarters. Part I of this essay (The Classroom) will describe aspects of these two students' essays which led their third-quarter teacher to recommend them for LD testing. Part II (The Center) will describe the testing procedure, their test results, and the center's diagnosis.

## **Part I—The Classroom**

Although college teachers are less likely to have taken courses in written language disorders than teachers at lower levels (who are often required to for certification), postsecondary composition teachers today are becoming more familiar with at least some of the basic LD symptoms. Their knowledge is surely due in part to helpful articles currently being published on the subject—for

example, by Belinda Lazarus, who describes characteristics of LD students and suggests some accommodations for them; Amy Richards, who distinguishes between “errors of inexperience” and “errors of writing disability”; and Carolyn O’Hearn, who further defines the nature of dysgraphic mechanical errors.

According to Richards, errors of inexperience are typical errors, found often in basic writers; errors of writing disability are often unpredictable and unusual—even “bizarre.” Yet when only typical writing errors are present, a teacher should not necessarily conclude that a student is cognitively normal. As Mina Shaughnessy writes, if the kinds of spelling errors her “inexperienced” students made were to appear “in the papers of academically advantaged students (i.e., students from schools where there was opportunity to read and write), there would be good reason to explore the possibility of an underlying [perceptual] disorder” (174). A high frequency of errors of inexperience in an “experienced” writer, then, can also be symptomatic of a writing disability. The first student whose diagnosis we will describe, Tracy, seemed to her classroom teacher to be such a student. In spite of the fact that Tracy had had no apparent educational deprivation, she made an unusually high number of writing errors—some “LD errors,” but mostly “errors of inexperience.”

Tracy was White and middle-class and spoke well. In addition to an “academically advantaged” background as Shaughnessy defines it, she had had two quarters of intensive training in writing in the developmental studies program, and she praised her teachers highly. Moreover, Tracy was a hard worker who organized papers well and expressed accurately ideas discussed in class. Yet in spite of her background and her abilities, Tracy’s neatly written essays generally had, in any one paragraph, eight to ten spelling errors, as well as comma errors, unclear pronouns, major sentence errors, and occasionally, awkward sentence structure. Her spelling errors were of all types—many semantic (*led, lead; too, to; sense, scents*), but also auditory (*struckture, of for have, probley*), and visual (*avialable for available*). While such mistakes might be classified as errors of inexperience, Tracy also made some “LD errors”: her spellings were often inconsistent (correct in one line, incorrect in the next), and she tended to leave out letters in the middle and at the ends of words—omissions which did not reflect pronunciation. Tracy was aware of her weaknesses and blamed herself, resolving repeatedly to work harder.

An excerpt from one of Tracy’s essays, a response to John Holt’s “Kinds of Discipline,” is typical of her writing. On the first page of her essay she had had a clear thesis that stated that Holt’s three

disciplines—of Nature, Culture, and Superior Force—all played a major role (“roll”) in our lives. After discussing the Discipline of Nature, she began the paragraph below:

- 1) Next is the Discipline of Culture. Holt points out
- 2) his essay that “man is a social, a cultural animal.”
- 3) (p. 70) People expecially young people immatate the
- 4) people around them. Young people do it tring to act
- 5) like adults kind of like playing a game to them. Older
- 6) people immutate the people around them in order to fit
- 7) in and be excepted. For instance, at church everyone
- 8) sits quitley and still. Older people do it in order
- 9) to be excepted if the were loud and moved around old
- 10) people would begin to stair and possobly ask them to
- 11) leave. Young people on the other hand immitate the
- 12) other people as a game. They sit still and don’t say
- 13) a word because they want to be like their parents.

Here Tracy shows her strong points: she understands both the reading and the given topic, and her organization is clear. Tracy’s spelling is the most obvious problem. In about 140 words, she has thirteen misspellings representing a variety of error categories—auditory, visual, and semantic. The inconsistent spellings of *imitate* (lines 3, 6, and 11) and the omitted final letter on *they* (line 9) are particularly indicative of a disability. This excerpt illustrates other problems that plagued Tracy—major sentence errors (lines 8–11), sentence structure (lines 4–5), unclear pronouns (line 12), and punctuation errors. Faced with papers like this from Tracy the first few weeks of the third quarter, Tracy’s teacher decided, on the basis of the quantity of her errors, the quality of her educational background, her scattered “LD errors,” and the effort Tracy seemed to be making, to advise Tracy to sign up for testing at the University’s LD Center.

The second student, Bob, also seemed to his teacher possibly dysgraphic. He had obvious intelligence—a wide reading background, a good vocabulary, good reading comprehension, a zest for writing—and an advantaged background (he was White and middle-class and had attended a private high school). Yet he exhibited many traits often described as characteristic of a learning disabled student. His handwriting was unusual: he wrote all in capitals, except for the letter *g*, and still occasionally reversed letters, such as *s*. His spelling errors were frequent, generally auditory, and often bizarre; he also had a great deal of trouble with sentence structure and punctuation. But Bob had other writing problems in addition—and these, the teacher thought, might be



partially caused by his resistance to classroom authority. Bob's essays lacked cohesion and were often globally disorganized, with no paragraphs or brief one-and-two sentence paragraphs. He claimed that the tightly organized "reason 1-2-3" type of essay bored him. Also, he repeatedly did not write on the assigned topic—and he once stated that when teachers "blatantly failed to generate a suitable topic," he would "come up with [his] own." He balked at the study of grammar, and his essays were often inappropriate in tone or overly dogmatic. For example, in a supposedly serious essay Bob's thesis statement read: "Both [writer-editor Norman] Cousins and [educationist John] Holt are wrong in their ideas; simply because neither of them agree with me unequivocally." Even if Bob were being ironic here, the tone is inappropriate.

Below are the opening two paragraphs of one of Bob's essays:

- 1) THE PROBLEMS I HAVE ENCOUNTERED WHILE
- 2) NEGATEING SUPERIOR FORCE PLACED ON ME IN A
- 3) GROUP, A SEPERATE GROUP OR MYSELF PERSONALY
- 4) WERE ALL HANDELED IN A SYMLAR FASHION.
- 5) THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS TO RE-MEMBER
- 6) ARE THAT MIGHT MAK "THE POSESSION OF THE MEANS
- 7) CONFERRS THE RIGHT TO USE THOSE MEANS AS THE
- 8) OWNER SEES FIT" OR SIMPLY PUT 'MIGHT MAKES
- 9) RIGHT." THIS IS THE MOTTO OF THE ENEMY, THEY
- 10) HAVE A LOADED DECK. THE ENEMY MAY BE THE BOARD
- 11) OF EDUCATION, OR THE PRINCIPLE. OR A SCHOOL THUG.
- 12) THEY ALL gET HANDELED THE SAME WAY.

For this essay, Bob had chosen a topic asking him to describe a Discipline of Superior Force (authority) in his life, including some rewards and punishments he had received at its hands. However, Bob somewhat altered the topic: he showed how he—or the group he was part of—*defeated* a Superior Force (in this case, the principal and the Board of Education).

This excerpt also exemplifies Bob's problems setting up an organization plan. He attempts in the first paragraph of this excerpt to list the points he is going to make, but in the second paragraph he begins a second list of points (which he does not complete) and then he has still a third "list" (two items). Although he tries to be accurate by eliminating the third item of the third list, he still does not make clear which of his lists presents the "map" of the essay. Bob's coherence is also hurt by the structure of his first two

sentences (lines 1–8). Finally, Bob has serious punctuation and spelling errors (nine misspellings in about 100 words, some quite unusual).

Since so many of Bob's traits, particularly the handwriting and spelling, fit descriptions of traits of learning disabled writers, and since Bob, like Tracy, had had an "advantaged" background, the teacher recommended him for testing also. She did wonder, however, to what degree Bob's writing problems were due to a cognitive disorder and how much to his negative attitudes.<sup>2</sup>

## Part II—The Center

Testing in an LD center allows more standardized measurement of the specific cognitive and social-emotional abilities impacting on a student's achievement than can be informally achieved in any one classroom. However, postsecondary learning disabilities centers may vary in their testing procedures. At this particular center, students undergo two days of individual testing. First, each student is given an "intake" interview for a background history and personality assessment. At this time the interviewer notes problems in social cognition (inappropriate social behavior, insensitivity to others) and weaknesses in oral language expression and comprehension. In addition, the clinicians look for specific defensive behaviors—learned helplessness, for example, or a tendency to assign external blame for failures (see Alloy 210)—by which the learning disabled (along with many individuals who are not achieving as they wish) sometimes attempt to cope with their problems. The specialists then go on to take writing samples and to administer a battery of informal and standardized tests that assess both specific cognitive abilities and achievement in oral language, reading, writing, and mathematics.

When the testing is completed, a team of clinicians carefully analyzes the results to determine error patterns within and among tests. A learning disability is indicated if the student is *overall* of average or above average intelligence but is *significantly* below average in one or more specific cognitive areas. The team also considers the other data that has been gathered. For instance, the student's personality profile is examined to be sure that there is no depression, anxiety, or psychosis which could be causing these patterns.

The results of Tracy's and Bob's testing are described below. Selected lists of instruments used and Tracy's and Bob's numerical scores are given in Tables 1 and 3; the clinical evaluations are given in Tables 2 and 4. Individual skills are described in the text and

categorized as ABOVE AVERAGE, AVERAGE, or BELOW AVERAGE. We want to make clear, however, that these descriptions of Bob's and Tracy's skills and the final diagnoses are not based on any one of the listed tests; a multidisciplinary team of clinicians identifies the patterns of deficits and strengths by making multiple task comparisons. One test score alone would have little value.

### **Tracy:**

*Background.* Tracy had never been tested for learning disabilities, although she had had difficulty learning to read and was held back in second grade for that reason. She indicated that she felt incompetent in reading, and in college often needed to read passages several times to understand them.

*Intellectual Assessment.* In all measures of cognitive functioning, Tracy performed in the AVERAGE range. Within this range, however, she showed a relative strength in problem solving tasks, which may account for the logical organization of her essays, and a relative weakness in rapid visual discrimination and attention to visual detail, one probable reason for her spelling and punctuation problems.

*Achievement Assessment.* 1) Reading. Tracy was in the lower end of the AVERAGE range in reading recognition tasks, word attack, and phonetic analysis, all traits that again relate to her problems with spelling. Contrary to her own self-evaluations, she was AVERAGE in reading comprehension—an explanation for her ability to understand the basic points of the essays assigned in composition. And as might be expected from the consistently clear organization of her own essays, she had no difficulty on a task requiring her to recognize principles of organization in different modes of writing. 2) Mathematics. Tracy's performance on all measures of math were within the AVERAGE to ABOVE AVERAGE range. 3) Writing. Tracy produced a very coherent text with few cohesion errors, thus revealing a sensitivity to the needs of the audience. The area of written expression was, however, the most difficult content area for Tracy; overall her performance was BELOW AVERAGE. She had frequent punctuation and grammatical mistakes, although these appeared more often to be instructional errors (i.e., misplaced modifiers, comma splices, fused sentences) than errors typical of LD writers (syntactical order, omission and/or substitution). As in her classroom writing, her greatest problem was spelling; she had errors in recognition, recall, and spelling of words in context. Her attempts to spell phonetically showed little utilization of cues from structure or roots of words, so that phonetically spelled words were sometimes bizarre looking.

*Oral Language Assessment.* Measures of language function

indicate that Tracy could understand and express oral language with no difficulty at the word, sentence, and text levels.

*Personality Assessment.* No indications of depression, anxiety, and/or psychotic behaviors were observed in Tracy's behavior during her assessment. Tracy revealed maturity in accepting personal responsibility for most of her social and academic behaviors

*Diagnosis.* While Tracy's testing revealed a weakness (below average achievement scores) in spelling and in the mechanics of writing, the discrepancy among her scores was not great enough to suggest cognitive processing deficits. Therefore the LD center team concluded that she was not learning disabled. They speculated that her weaknesses may have arisen from a developmental delay at a formative period (perhaps before or during her initial second grade year) or from lack of appropriate instruction at that time, and whereas she seemed to have caught up in reading, the writing processes still lagged behind.

### **Bob:**

*Background.* Bob had been diagnosed as learning disabled in the early elementary grades. His deficits were then diagnosed as mainly visual: visual-perceptual, visual-motor, and spatial relations.

*Intellectual Assessment.* As might be expected from his classroom participation and his vocabulary, Bob scored ABOVE AVERAGE in knowledge of abstract language and oral expression; and as might be expected from his spelling and mechanical errors, his scores were BELOW AVERAGE in visual tracking, visual-motor, and revisualization skills and in manipulation of novel symbol systems.

*Achievement Assessment.* 1) Reading. Bob was AVERAGE in word attack skills and reading recognition; his errors in this area were due to overrelying on the phonetic system and underrelying on his visual processing abilities (example: in a multiple choice question he chose *enuf* for *enough*). On reading comprehension he was ABOVE AVERAGE, but he scored BELOW AVERAGE on a task requiring him to recognize principles of organization in various types of discourse. Bob's high reading comprehension score, therefore, was probably based on his ability to go back and find pieces of information, rather than on his understanding of the whole pattern of the piece. (The format and demands of a psychometric task are very important to consider in evaluating a student's performance.) 2) Mathematics. Bob's performance on all measures of math was within the AVERAGE to ABOVE AVERAGE range. 3) Writing. In writing Bob ranked BELOW AVERAGE. Bob's difficulty in understanding principles of organization in reading paralleled

TABLE 1  
Selected Diagnostic Assessment Measures  
and Scores--Tracy<sup>3</sup>

Weschler Adult Intelligence Test-Revised

(Standard Scores)			
Full Scale Score 99			
Verbal 96		Performance 104	
Information	8	Digit Symbol	10
Comprehension	12	Picture Completion	10
Arithmetic	9	Block Design	9
Similarities	10	Picture Arrangement	15
Digit Span	8	Object Assembly	10
Vocabulary	9		

Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational

Test of Cognitive Ability

(Standard Scores)			
Picture Vocabulary	101	Visual Matching	98
Spatial Relations	111	Antonym/Synonym	101
Memory-Sentence	109	Analysis/Synthesis	105
Visual-Audial	115	Number Reversal	106
Blending	97	Concept Formation	125
Quantitative Concepts	104	Analogies	105

Tests of Achievement

(Standard Scores)			
Letter-Word Identity	89	Humanities	104
Word Attack	96	Social Studies	109
Passage Comprehension	107	Science	101
Calculation	108	Proofing	93
Applied Problems	96	Dictation	91
Punctuation	96	Spelling	86
Usage	101		

Peabody Picture Vocabulary

Test-Revised

Standard Score 95

Logical Relationships(ETS)

Categorizing Ideas	10/12 Correct
Connectives	12/13 Correct
Analogies	10/12 Correct

Wide Range Achievement

Test-Revised

Standard Scores

Reading 83

Spelling 79

Arithmetic 75

Recognizing Principles of Organization	11/13 Correct
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Berry Visual-Motor Integration Test - No Errors

Bender Visual Motor Gestalt Test - No Errors

Holistic Quality Writing Score = 2 (1=lowest out of 4)

Holistic Coherence Writing Score = 2

TABLE 2

## THE CENTER'S EVALUATION OF TRACY

DIAGNOSIS:	Not learning disabled
COGNITIVE PROCESSING DEFICITS:	None
ACADEMIC WEAKNESSES:	
	Spelling
	Phonetic skills/structural analysis of words
	Proofing (poor attention to visual detail)

his inability to produce coherent and cohesive written discourse. His organizational errors seemed also to indicate a lack of sensitivity to audience; however, it is difficult to determine whether a writer simply has weak organizational skills or whether he has little sensitivity to audience needs. The two traits are indeed probably interrelated (a point we have pursued in "Relation Between Sense of Audience and Specific Learning Disabilities: An Exploration," forthcoming). Bob was also weak on tasks that tapped his understanding of grammatical structures both in English and in novel symbol systems. In English he made errors in case, choice of preposition, and word order, and he had difficulty with logical grammatical structures in narrative, expository, and persuasive genres. Bob's lowest achievement scores were in spelling, particularly during a spontaneous writing assignment. Again, he appeared to overrely on his phonetic skills, ignoring visual word configuration cues.

*Oral Language Assessment.* Bob demonstrated AVERAGE to ABOVE AVERAGE semantic, syntactic, and word finding abilities. However, the clinician noted a slight weakness in the organization of Bob's oral discourse—indicating again his problems with text structure. Later several learning disabilities specialists working with Bob were to note his seeming insensitivity to listener's needs.

*Personality Assessment.* Bob showed no indications of depression, anxiety, and/or psychosis during the assessment. However, Bob demonstrated a tendency to blame others for his failures. He indicated that the teacher's control of school assignments and standards resulted in an undervaluation of his abilities.

*Diagnosis.* The wide discrepancy among Bob's scores—from ABOVE AVERAGE to significantly BELOW AVERAGE in both intellectual and achievement assessments—indicated that Bob was learning disabled. The center's team saw two specific areas of deficit indicated: in visual processing (noted in grade school) and in organizational skills (perhaps more obvious now that Bob was an adult). While Bob's visual deficits affected his writing mainly

through mechanics, spelling, and penmanship, his organizational deficit—his inability to sort, coordinate, and subordinate data of all kinds—affected in various ways both his writing and the ideas expressed in his writing. First, this inability to organize data explains his difficulty understanding relationships at the sentence, paragraph, and the text level—hence the weaknesses in cohesion and coherence. Second, although Bob's reading comprehension was good, this deficit contributed to his problems writing on the topic: he misunderstood the mode desired or stressed only one aspect of the topic. Bob's inability to coordinate and subordinate information also probably related to his intellectual rigidity (his dogmatic stands on issues) and, as mentioned earlier, to his apparent lack of audience awareness (his inappropriate tone and his confusing leaps from idea to idea, with little sense of planning or care). Bob's resistance to classroom authority was no doubt partly a function of his organizational/audience awareness problem and partly a reaction to his deficits; such behavior relieved Bob of responsibility for his failures and masked his own doubt in his ability.

Postsecondary LD centers vary not only in testing and diagnostic procedures but also in the amount of support available to students diagnosed as LD and to their teachers. Once this LD center's team reaches a diagnosis, they give a report to the student, and a selected summary (if the student wishes) to the student's instructors and advisors, with recommendations for future instruction. In addition, tutoring and special services are available for the student. We will conclude with a brief description of the center's recommendations for Tracy and Bob.

*Recommendations for Tracy.* Since Tracy was diagnosed as non-learning disabled, the clinicians predicted that continued instruction should result in improvement. Indeed, even before the center's diagnosis was known, Tracy's mechanics had improved at least sufficiently for her to "exit" her third-quarter developmental studies course. Passing the remedial course and learning that she was neither cognitively disabled nor below average in reading gave Tracy more confidence. (Clearly it is helpful for a student, whether LD or non-LD, to know his or her academic and social profile.) The following year Tracy successfully completed both of her freshman English writing courses.

*Recommendations for Bob.* Bob's composition teachers were told of his disabilities so that they could understand his unusual mechanical and coherence problems. Bob himself was advised to take computer-assisted composition courses when he exited his remedial course, so that he could use a spell-check and more easily revise, edit, and proofread his papers. Tutoring and counseling at

TABLE 3  
Selected Diagnostic Assessment Measures  
and Scores--Bob

Weschler Adult Intelligence Test-Revised  
(Standard Scores)

	Full Scale Score 107		
	Verbal 105	Performance 108	
Information	10	Digit Symbol	8
Comprehension	9	Picture Completion	11
Arithmetic	7	Block Design	14
Similarities	12	Picture Arrangement	9
Digit Span	6	Object Assembly	12
Vocabulary	14		

Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational  
Test of Cognitive Ability  
(Standard Scores)

Picture Vocabulary	128	Visual Matching	83
Spatial Relations	107	Antonym/Synonym	138
Memory-Sentence	119	Analysis/Synthesis	111
Visual-Audial	95	Number Reversal	87
Blending	123	Concept Formation	117
Quantitative Concepts	112	Analogies	118

Tests of Achievement  
(Standard Scores)

Letter-Word Identity	108	Humanities	113
Word Attack	111	Social Studies	117
Passage Comprehension	116	Science	126
Calculation	96	Proofing	103
Applied Problems	124	Dictation	102
Punctuation	102	Spelling	103
Usage	103		

Peabody Picture Vocabulary  
Test-Revised  
Standard Score 120

Logical Relationships(ETS)

Categorizing Ideas	12/12	Correct
Connectives	13/13	Correct
Analogies	10/12	Correct

Wide Range Achievement  
Test-Revised

Standard Scores	
Reading	112
Spelling	92
Arithmetic	102

Recognizing	
Principles of	
Organization	6/12
	Correct

Berry Visual-Motor Integration Test - Age Equivalent=12  
Bender Visual Motor Gestalt Test - 3 Errors

Holistic Quality Writing Score = 1 (1=lowest out of 4)  
Holistic Coherence Writing Score = 1



TABLE 4  
THE CENTER'S EVALUATION OF BOB

DIAGNOSIS:	Specific Learning Disabilities
COGNITIVE PROCESSING DEFICITS:	
	Visual discrimination
	Visual motor
	Visual memory
	Visual sequencing
	Spatial relations
	Integration/organization of verbal information at the sentence and text level
ACADEMIC SKILL IMPACTED ON BY LEARNING DISABILITIES:	
	Spelling
	Proofing
	Handwriting (speed and formation)
	Comprehension and production of the principles of organization in text structure across genre
	Sense of audience
	Motivation and self-concept

the LD center were also recommended; the tutoring would focus on Bob's academic weaknesses, while the counseling would include sessions on modifying his defensive behaviors. Bob exited the University's developmental studies program after his fourth quarter, his teachers hoping that with accommodations and clinical support, Bob might, like many other LD students, successfully complete his freshman English requirements. Bob, however, has so far been unable to do so.

These case studies should not lead to wide-ranging generalizations about LD students, but they do suggest some needs in postsecondary institutions: the need for further examination of policies regarding the learning disabled; the need for composition teachers to receive more training in written language disorders; the need for researchers to explore further the nature of specific cognitive deficits and their impact on college level writing. But most particularly, Tracy and Bob illustrate the complexity of diagnosing writing disabled students—and the necessity for both English teachers and learning disabilities specialists to play a role in doing so.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some of the material in these case studies was presented by the authors

in a panel, "The Challenge of Problem Spellors," at the Conference for College Composition and Communication," Seattle, WA, March, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> In the case of both Bob and Tracy, the teacher was able with their permission to confer informally with a clinician from the University LD Center who had been observing the class and to show her writing samples of both students. This clinician concurred that testing both students would be advisable.

<sup>3</sup> In Tables 1 and 3, the standardized scores have a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15.

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Marilyn S. Sternglass

## THE NEED FOR CONCEPTUALIZING AT ALL LEVELS OF WRITING INSTRUCTION

Two types of programs exist on many campuses, basic writing classes for those generally characterized as native speakers, and ESL classes for those characterized as nonnative speakers. After completing one or the other of these two remedial sequences, both groups of students then meet in regular freshman writing courses, and they are joined there by students from similar backgrounds who were placed into the freshman level without having been identified as requiring either kind of remediation. This surely does *not* mean that once students enroll in the freshman course that their instructors can assume that all linguistic interference features have been eliminated. But it does mean that the students have achieved a level of performance upon which they can now build with greater independence than they might have been able to at an earlier time.

Necessarily, in the levels preceding the freshman course, attention has been paid to linguistic forms that differ in systematic ways from the conventions of Edited American English. But, increasingly, teachers of both ESL and basic writing classes have been coming to understand that teaching the *conventions* of writing is not a sufficient prep-

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*Marilyn S. Sternglass is professor of English and Director of the M.A. in Language and Literacy at The City College of The City University of New York. She has recently published, The Presence of Thought: Introspective Accounts of Reading and Writing (Ablex, 1988), and is currently working on the second edition of Reading, Writing, and Reasoning (Macmillan, 1983). This paper was first presented as the keynote address at the 1989 CUNY ESL Conference. It appears here in revised form.*

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aration either for the traditional freshman writing course or for the courses in the students' majors that will follow. These conventions need to be taught within a larger conceptual framework.

Since students will be required to undertake more and more rigorous conceptual tasks as they proceed through college, one way to examine how well ESL students have been prepared to meet the demands of regular college courses would be to compare their performance in freshman composition with those who have come out of basic writing courses and students who have been placed directly into the freshman course. It would be nice and neat if we could say that each group had a different linguistic history and we could thus compare the effects of their linguistic histories on their performance. But such neat classifications do not exist, and it is perhaps even more interesting to see whether students whose native language was not English performed differently in the regular freshman composition course depending on whether they had needed and had received some type of remedial instruction, basic writing or ESL, or whether they were placed directly into the traditional freshman course. Even such a comparison becomes problematic, because we would need to know how long each individual lived in the U.S., when their study of English began, under what conditions, what the language of the family household is, and surely many more factors that one can think of. Regardless of these language and family histories, all these students are now being asked to perform in the same classroom setting, and their performances will be compared with each other as they are instructed and evaluated. It seems reasonable to ask, then, how the ESL students will fare in comparison with the others, and, further, how instruction in ESL classes can or should be modified in any ways to help these students achieve the goals of regular college courses.

### **Language Background as a Basis for Placement**

To provide a basis for considering these issues, I would like to present some findings from a section of freshman composition I taught in the spring of 1988 at City College. A breakdown of the language history backgrounds that I have for 21 of 25 students who were in this composition course is provided in Table 1.

One question that interests me is whether it is possible to ascertain why these students received these different placements, three in the ESL sequence, four in the basic writing sequence, and five directly into the freshman course. One clear distinction is that the four placed in the basic writing sequence all started to study English between the ages of 5 and 7, while all three placed in the ESL sequence started to study English after the age of 13.

**Table 1**

<b>Placement history for freshman course</b>	<b>Age of first study of English</b>	
	<b>5-9</b>	<b>12-28</b>
From ESL sequence		Three (13, 14, 28)
Basic Writing	Four (5, 6, 7, 7)	
Direct Placement	Three (5, 8, 9)	Two (12, 15)

So those placed in the basic writing sequence were closer to the natural language acquisition stage when they started to study English than those placed in the ESL sequence.

The picture, though, isn't so clear when we look at the distribution of the five placed directly into the freshman course. Three of the students were between the ages of 5 and 9 when they started to study English, similar to those placed in the basic writing sequence, and two others were 12 and 15, roughly the same ages as two who were placed in the ESL sequence, 13 and 14. So, it seems reasonable to ask whether there were factors other than linguistic competence that affected the placement of these students. Could there have been some manifestation in their writing in the placement tests of the ability to handle questions on a conceptual basis that overrode the importance of the linguistic features? I don't know the answer to this question, but I can speculate about this based on an analysis of the performance of all these students in the regular composition course.

### **Interpreting Tasks**

In order to compare the performance of students coming from ESL classes with students coming from basic writing classes and students who were placed directly into freshman composition classes, I looked at their performance on three types of writing tasks undertaken in the freshman composition course: summary writing, comparison-contrast, and analysis. On some taxonomies of cognitive complexity, these types of tasks would represent consistently higher levels of abstraction. However, the hierarchical arrangement of such tasks is strongly dependent upon how the individual interprets the task, so that, for example, summary writing for some students could include analysis and evaluation if these students see the summary as something they could refer to at a later time. Such students would not then treat summary as a rote recounting for another as audience but would include their own evaluative comments so that they could reconstruct their interpretations of the material. Similarly, comparison-contrast could also be structured

either from a factual or an interpretive perspective. Thus, individual interpretation of the demands of a task will strongly influence how the task is defined and carried out (Sternglass 1988).

### Assessing Cognitive Complexity

Before looking at the work the students produced, it is important to consider an extremely important issue that Mike Rose raised in a recent article: just what is the relationship between writing and models of cognition which have been applied to writing? In particular, he questions the suitability of applying Piaget's stage model, especially the concrete and formal operations stages, to an analysis of students' reasoning abilities as demonstrated in writing. Rose argues that Piaget was studying formal logic, while a study of writing entails other dimensions as well:

Much problem solving and, I suspect, the reasoning involved in the production of most kinds of writing rely not only on abstract logical operations, but, as well, on the rich interplay of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic associations, feeling, metaphor, *social perception, the matching of mental representations of past experiences with new experiences*, and so on. And writing, as the whole span of rhetorical theory makes clear, is deeply embedded in the particulars of the human situation. It is a context-dependent activity that calls on many abilities [emphasis added]. (285)

Howard Gardner supports these contentions in his consideration of "multiple intelligences" when he points out that

[s]omewhere between the Chomskian stress on individuals, with their separate unfolding mental faculties, the Piagetian view of the developing organism passing through a uniform sequence of stages, and the anthropological attention to the formative effects of the cultural environment, it ought to be possible to forge a productive middle ground: a position that takes seriously the nature of innate intellectual proclivities, the heterogeneous processes of development in the child, and the ways in which these are shaped and transformed by the particular practices and values of culture. (326)

What these studies point out to us is that our approach to teaching our students to handle increasingly complex cognitive tasks and to demonstrate their ability to do that through writing is not a simple matter. Although the ability to analyze is a significant conceptual tool, it need not be presented solely as an abstract logical operation.

The ability to analyze can be fostered by drawing on students' past experiences and helping them see the relationship between these experiences and new experiences so that they can draw larger, even societal implications from them, in other words, to go, as Jerome Bruner has suggested, "beyond the information given." (416)

### **Examining Student Writing**

In an attempt to investigate student responses to tasks that had the potential for including larger, societal implications, I analyzed three sets of student papers. In the particular class I taught, the theme of the course was autobiography, and the students read autobiographical accounts, wrote about them, and constructed their own autobiographies, so the potential to "match representations of past experiences with new experiences" and to reflect their "social perceptions," two characteristics Rose encouraged be included within a study of writing, existed in the tasks the students undertook. Because of both the nature of the assigned readings and the students' own range of cultural experiences, another dimension posited by Gardner, "the ways in which [intellectual processes and heterogeneous processes of development] are shaped and transformed by the particular practices and values of culture," was also incorporated into the tasks.

I decided to look at the students' writing from two perspectives, after having selected out for analysis the writing of all those students in the class who were nonnative speakers of English. First I grouped the students into two categories: those who had initially been placed in some remedial track, either basic writing or ESL, and those who were placed directly into English 110, the freshman writing course. As I have noted, of the nonnative speakers in my class, four had come through some or all of the basic writing track, three had come through some or all of the ESL track, and five had been placed directly into English 110. So in this case, the remedial population consisted of seven students and my traditional population consisted of five students. (Notice that the nonnative speakers constituted 12 students out of a class of 25.)

The second basis for analysis was the degree to which students drew implications from the readings and their own experiences which were tied directly to the experiences themselves and the degree to which they could construct larger generalizations that went beyond the scope of the particular experience. Let me say at the outset, as David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky have cogently argued, when college students are asked to explain the significance of an experience, they are able to do so. There was not

a single student in my class who could not function at an analytic level and draw implications from the experiences described in *writing*. This finding is consistent with Dixon's argument questioning whether narratives can in fact be easily separated from abstract thinking (10) and is also supported by the 1984 report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress which found that 84% of 17-year-old high school students in the United States could "search for specific information, interrelate ideas, and make generalizations." However, there were rather dramatic differences in the ways in which the students from basic writing or ESL tracks performed in relation to the students placed directly in freshman composition in discovering and presenting larger conceptual implications.

I must note that I was missing a few pieces in my data set. For the summary writing, I lacked two papers, one from a basic writing student and one from a student placed directly in English 110. In the comparison-contrast task, papers for two basic writing students were missing. Since my population sample is very small, I am presenting my findings both in terms of percentages and numerical figures for each group. The figures I will be citing here represent those who completed the tasks at the most complex conceptual level.

The students started out at roughly the same level of analysis. In an early task calling for summary writing, 33% (that is, two) of the students coming from the remedial tracks, including one from the ESL track, developed implications that went beyond the particular experience they had read about, as did 25% (that is, one) of the traditional students. About a month later, comparing their own experiences with those of an anthropologist visiting Africa, 20% (that is, one) of the remedial students (including none from the ESL track) drew larger implications, as did 60% (that is, three) of the traditional students. The greatest variation between the two groups came in an analytic task describing a significant change in the experiences of a Black woman whose autobiography they had read. Here 29% (that is, two) of the seven students in the remedial track (including one ESL student) drew wider-ranging implications, while 100% (or all five) of the traditional students were able to do so.

### **Implications of the Study**

Although I am talking about a small sample of students and I am looking at their writing from a particular perspective, I do believe that some important, preliminary implications can be drawn. The first is that by the time the students entered the freshman course,



from whatever route, they were roughly equivalent in both linguistic and analytic abilities. All produced writing that contained some features of nonstandard usage at the sentence level when treated as examples of formal Edited American English. All the students also produced writing that showed them capable of producing analysis based on the experiences they read about or their own experiences. But, they did not all demonstrate the same rate of growth during the semester, if one can characterize growth as the ability to transcend the particular experience and see its implications within a larger conceptual framework.

If, even in a course where students were encouraged to integrate their own experiences and values into a broader interpretation of the events they were writing about, students are still tied to a consideration of the particular event itself and are unable to discover and/or present a relationship between that particular event and its larger societal or intellectual consequences, they will not be prepared to synthesize and evaluate the more abstract or remote materials they will encounter in their later educational experiences.

### **Applications for Instruction**

How do these implications then translate themselves into considerations for educational practice? They suggest to me that there may have been some fundamental differences in the prior experiences between the students placed in the basic writing and ESL tracks from those placed directly into the traditional freshman course. Certainly, by the time they came to the freshman course, both groups of students had had experiences that enabled them to master enough of the conventions of Edited American English to warrant placement there. Both groups had had sufficient experience with reading and writing tasks to be able to handle the process of analysis when requested to do so and given opportunities to practice. But, it seems likely that the students coming through the two remedial tracks had not had enough opportunities to consider and practice writing about larger issues and questions posed by instructional materials they had interacted with.

I do not believe that many students would automatically consider larger issues when confronted with a typical reading-writing task in either a developmental class or a traditional class. But, if suggestions could be made to students throughout these sequences of courses, through classroom discussion and/or in writing tasks, that they should consider the further consequences of the issues or experiences they are reading about, they will be beginning the "training period" that Mike Rose notes that scholars

of Piagetian theory such as Bruner (416) have found “can have dramatic results on performance” (284).

If we can think of our students’ experiences as recursive, if we can take advantage of having the opportunity to work with a group of individuals over several semesters, we can provide opportunities to our students to practice complex cognitive activities throughout these courses, without demanding that they handle them all expertly at every stage. Vygotsky’s idea of “the zone of proximal development” applies directly here. In this view, individuals, under the guidance of those more expert than they, can be shown to be capable of performing at a level just beyond their present level of independent competence (84–87). These students may not yet be able to handle these complex cognitive processes independently, but their ability to do so lies in their immediate future. Such a belief leads Vygotsky to conclude that “the only ‘good learning’ is that which is in advance of development” (89). What is needed is the opportunity to practice that Mike Rose has called for. It is crucial that students feel safe to take risks, realizing that skills previously mastered may decline temporarily while they are attempting to master new processes. Settings must be provided where such risk-taking is not only permitted but valued.

### **Instituting a Spiral Curriculum**

Moreover, we can foster the introduction of new ways of initially looking at issues and experiences that are especially relevant to our students’ own lives and cultural backgrounds. Students can begin to consider implications beyond their particular experiences during their semesters in the remedial tracks. The freshman writing course is not a “bridge” course—the bridge between acquiring linguistic and analytic competence in the sequences preceding the freshman course and the conceptual demands of synthesis, evaluation, and construction of original interpretations and ideas that will be fostered in upper level courses (Sternglass 1989).

Rather, all of these courses, remedial and traditional, should be conceived of as part of a “spiral curriculum,” to use Bruner’s term, in which all kinds of conceptual and linguistic activities are introduced and practiced at each level. As long ago as 1960, Bruner proposed the hypothesis that “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development” (413). The performance of students would, naturally, be expected to improve in each level of instruction, but the demands should be the same at all levels. The central point is that conceptual as well as linguistic activities need to be practiced, and

two- or three- or four-semester sequence of instruction gives our students the incredible opportunity to repeat these experiences more and more productively.

In actuality, this should not be very difficult to accomplish. Nudelman and Schlosser, for example, pointed out in 1981 that

students can be taught to use their personal experiences as the first step in the process of composing an expository essay. The most crucial link in this process—one that is often overlooked by composition teachers—is the students' ability to conceptualize, to form generalizations *that extend the personal reminiscence into the more objective world at large.* (497, emphasis added)

Notice this last point, "to extend the personal reminiscence into the more objective world at large." It is the building of this connection that should be begun during the remedial sequences.

Charles Cooper sees this process as one that evolves naturally. In a 1985 study, he demonstrated that it is virtually impossible to produce autobiographical writing without writers examining, analyzing, and evaluating their experiences. And he was talking about a study that looked at the writing of 9-, 13-, 18-year-olds and older adults. Cooper says:

It's not that writers must wait until their 50's or 60's to evaluate remembered incidents. And it's not that only Pulitzer prize-winning journalists and other experienced writers can integrate evaluations of experience into autobiographical writing. Some 9-year-olds can do it. Nearly all 13-year-olds can do it. And, in my experience, all 18-year-olds can do it. Across that age range, though, what begins solely as external evaluation interrupting the story develops into evaluation embedded in the ongoing story and, finally, integrated, subtly, into basic narrative clauses. This progressive refinement is the major part of the story of the development of autobiographical writing. (5)

Thus, Cooper sees the integration of the evaluative aspect into the writing as part of a natural, developmental process, and the ability to embed these evaluations is already in place for 18-year-olds. We have the opportunity to foster the further natural development of these abilities by encouraging our students to apply an evaluative and analytic stance to their own experiences and the experiences of others so that they see how these experiences reflect larger societal issues.

## Examining Student Writing

Two examples of the beginnings of such applications from the writing of my students illustrate the potential of this approach. These two students had almost diametrically opposed perspectives, one fatalistic and the other critical. Both these students were examining the experience of a telephone operator interviewed by Studs Terkel and they commented on her experiences as part of their summary-writing task. The first student, Victor, a Hispanic student, had come to the United States from El Salvador at the age of 21. Now 29, he has completed the entire ESL sequence. He writes: "After all, I would say that operators learn how to live and work with their limitations even though they don't like certain restrictions in their job they know that their duty is to follow the orders of the company in order to perform well their tasks." Although we might object to Victor's too easy compliance with conditions as they are, we note that he has placed the telephone operator's job within a larger social construct, the company, and provided an analysis of the relationship between the two.

A completely opposite perspective is presented by Martin, a West Indian student from Jamaica whose first language was the Jamaican dialect and who came to the United States in 1982. Martin, who was placed directly into the English 110 course, wrote: "Heather seems to be troubled by the company policies that restricts communication between individuals, fosters anonymity, use the worker as tools, and work them at difficult and stressful tasks. She does not, however, gives the impression of having reached the point of actively opposing or disobeying these policies." Although Martin does not carry this aspect of the discussion further, simply raising the possibility of "opposing or disobeying these policies" implies the possibility of questioning the relationship between the employee and the employer. So, although Victor and Martin see these relationships quite differently, the point is that they see larger contexts within which the particular experience fits. To use Nudelman and Schlosser's phrase, they are carrying the specific experience "into the more objective world at large."

## Conclusion

If we can see the fostering of these connections as part of a natural, developmental cognitive growth sequence, we can build into our own sequences of tasks for our students, opportunities to take their own experiences and the experiences of others and apply them to large societal questions. Such opportunities will prepare

them to examine issues further removed from their direct experience, and will foster an examination that will be rooted in personal and humane perspectives, not simply from abstract, logical points of view.

We should not postpone asking our students to stretch their thinking on every occasion. As Vygotsky has pointed out, individuals' competence in handling demands will only improve if they practice appropriate activities under expert supervision. Students should be provided with appropriate reading/writing activities of real complexity at every level so that their examination of conceptual matters can be fostered at the same time that their control of linguistic features is being fostered, and they can experience the same kind of natural growth that they experienced in developing their native languages.

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Joseph G. R. Martinez  
Nancy C. Martinez

# WHO IS ALIEN IN THE DEVELOPMENTAL CLASSROOM? A COMPARISON OF SOME STUDENT/TEACHER VALUES

However sympathetic teachers may be to developmental students' aspirations, they still often think that these students differ in striking ways from the typical college population. Developmental students, so the story goes, are the round pegs who must be remolded, cognitively and affectively, to fit into the square holes of academe. "Their salient characteristic," writes Patricia Bizzell, former director of Rutgers' developmental writing program, "is their 'outlandishness'—their appearance to many teachers and to themselves as the students who are most alien in the college community" (294). Mina Shaughnessy describes the basic writers she studied at The City College, CUNY as "strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life," and she cites their atypical backgrounds, growing up in "New York's ethnic or racial enclaves . . . [speaking] other languages or dialects at home and never successfully reconcil[ing] the worlds of home and school . . ." (3).

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*Joseph G. R. Martinez is associate professor of Educational Foundations at the University of New Mexico, and Nancy C. Martinez is a field editor with G. K. Hall. Their publications include articles in the American Journal of Education, the Journal of College Reading and Learning, and the Journal of Basic Writing. They also coauthored The Holt Workbook, a composition textbook published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston (2nd ed., 1989).*

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Some theorists recommend the acquisition of an academic world view as the primary goal for developmental students (see Bizzell, Hays, and Perry for descriptions of an academic world view). But whatever the long-term goals for making students fit into academe, each teacher of developmental students must first pose and reach an important short-term goal: finding a common ground of values, perceptions, and knowledge with each group of students in each class so that the immediate tasks of communication and instruction can begin.

Frequently the dramatic differences between students' and teachers' goals and viewpoints make reaching this goal a complex and frustrating process. Not only do the students and teachers *not* share a world view; they also may not see the day-to-day operations of the class from the same perspective, differing on such basic matters as the importance of class attendance or of turning assignments in on time. Moreover, while developmental students may be the aliens in the greater world of academe, once the class is formed, the students are at their desks, and the classroom door is closed, it is not the students but the teacher who is alien. In effect, the teacher undergoes an abrupt shift from academic insider to classroom outsider, the minority representative who is isolated by values as well as language from a majority to whom he or she appears "outlandish." To create a climate for successful interaction, the teacher must discover first what values motivate his or her students and how the students define the learning situation.

What motivates developmental students? How do they see and interpret interactions with their teacher? And how do student-teacher differences affect those interactions? We looked for some answers to these questions in a two-part study. First, we surveyed educational psychologists' research on student/teacher values and expectations and adapted a theoretical model to describe interactions in a developmental classroom. Second, we studied two basic writing classes to test the model and to discover where a teacher might intervene most effectively to attain positive results (such as having papers turned in on time or persuading a student to attend class).

## **A Model of Student/Teacher Interaction**

During the past twenty years educational psychologists have explored the influence of teacher expectations and values on learning outcomes. Beginning with Rosenthal and Jacobson's classic *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, researchers have repeatedly reaffirmed findings linking student achievement to teachers' perceptions and



behaviors (Cooper, "Pygmalion" 389–410). Evidence suggests that many teachers "slot" students into categories; the categories of their expectations tend to be self-fulfilling prophecies; and their behavior, reflecting their expectations, affects students' "self-concept, achievement motivation, and level of aspiration" (Maehr 887–896; Wang and Weisstein 418). Moreover, "the relation between teacher expectation and student achievement is bidirectional. . . . A student's actual performance serves as the primary influence on the expectation held by the teacher . . .," promoting "a cyclical process of mutual influence . . ." (Cooper, "Communication" 194). This "cyclical process" is described by the model in Figure 1 (adapted and expanded from Ames' value-belief attribution-model, 109).

If student and teacher values and expectations are well matched, the teacher will have no problem selecting appropriate behaviors to disrupt a negative learning cycle or perpetuate a positive learning cycle. However, if values and expectations are mismatched, the teacher will be more likely to select inappropriate behaviors, disrupting positive cycles and perpetuating negative cycles.

Developmental classrooms offer a special challenge for matching student and teacher expectations. Often teacher and students come from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds and represent opposite extremes, high and low, in academic achievement and motivation. Although both students and teacher can be assumed to share a common goal—successful completion of the course—they may differ dramatically in their definition and value of success, both as an end and as a process, and how they assess its cost. Figure 2 demonstrates the potentially negative interaction of a teacher and student with conflicting values.

In Figure 2 the teacher values school work first and assumes that fulfilling an assignment depends on internal control mechanisms—the desire or motivation to turn the assignment in on time. Therefore, the teacher interprets the unacceptable performance as a failure due to lack of effort and a possible precedent for future infractions. The punitive outcome reflects research findings that teachers are harsher in evaluating failure they attribute to causes controllable by the student than failure attributed to uncontrollable causes, such as lack of ability (Weiner 57–73). On the other hand, the student values family first and assumes external control of performance; consequently, the student interprets the failure as uncontrollable. Since the motivation to achieve depends upon students' belief that they can control their academic outcome (Cooper, "Communication" 193–211), the interaction described by Figure 2 results in lowered motivation and probably more rather

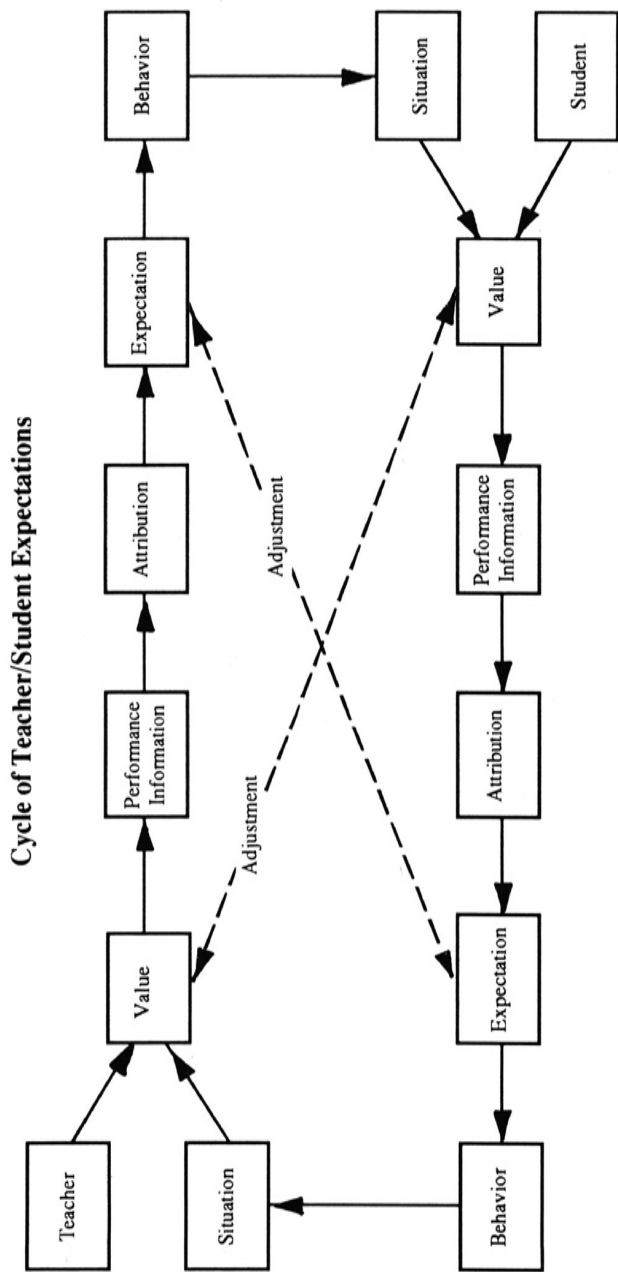
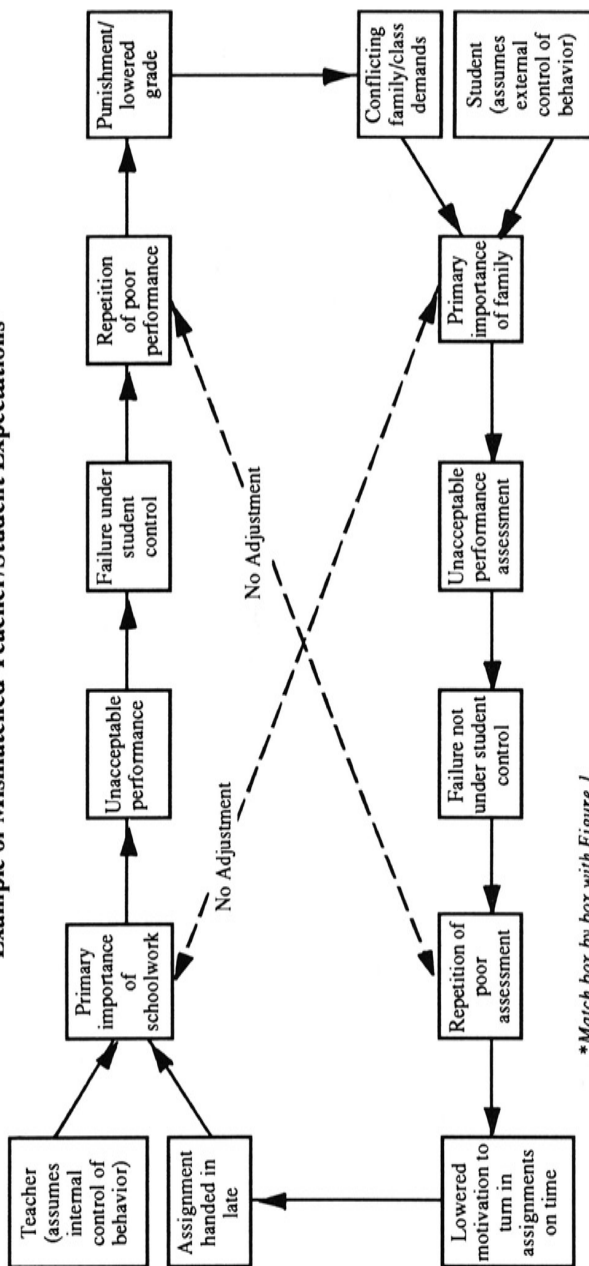


Figure 1

Figure 2\*

### Example of Mismatched Teacher/Student Expectations



than fewer late assignments. The behaviors of both student and teacher are rational within the framework of their own value structures; however, in Figure 2 since student and teacher values and expectations are mismatched, each may perceive the behavior of the other as irrational and unpredictable.

### **Study of Two Basic Writing Classes**

To test the predictions of the model, we studied two basic writing classes, both taught by the same teacher. The teacher described interaction in the classes as frustrating, with response to motivational strategies haphazard and student involvement uneven. The correlation between the teacher's evaluation of her students' success in the course, as measured by final grades, and the students' self-evaluated success, as measured by an end-of-the-semester poll of grades expected, was weak ( $r = .44$ , where  $r$  shows the degree of relationship between two variables and where the strongest possible correlation is  $+1$  or  $-1$ ). The correlations between the students' high school grades in English and both their final grades and their expected grades in the developmental course were also extremely low ( $r = .10$  and  $r = .09$ ). All three sets of correlations suggest that students found neither their past experiences in English courses nor teacher feedback in the developmental course to be particularly helpful in predicting their final grades.

### **Subjects**

The study focused on 31 students, representing five ethnic backgrounds: non-Hispanic White (9), Native American (4), Hispanic (13), Black (2), and Oriental (3). All but one of the students were freshmen and had been placed in the course by low ACT (American College Test) and diagnostic test scores. The remaining student was nontraditional, returning to the university after an absence of several years and taking the course to review basic writing skills. Twelve of the students were the first in their families to attend college, while 19 had college-educated parents—a surprisingly high percentage (61%) for a developmental class and a possible indicator that these students would be closer in values and behavior to the general college population than were their classmates.

The teacher for both sections was non-Hispanic White, held a Ph.D. in English, and had been a first-generation college student.

## Methods

The study combined qualitative and quantitative methods. To begin, we conducted classroom observations and interviews, collecting student and teacher comments and soliciting clarifying responses about the importance of the class, their commitment to their work, and the relative importance of other demands on their time and energies (see Rath *et al.* for research guidelines). We then used the comments and responses to prepare a values questionnaire that asked students to rate the importance of the various elements they had indicated comprised their lives (school, work, family, athletics, friends, church, clubs, creative interests, home); make decisions concerning class-related dilemmas; and explain the importance of a college education as well as the sacrifices they were willing or not willing to make to succeed in college. We asked the teacher to respond to the questionnaire on the basis of her value belief or "what ought to be" (see Ames 109) and her expectations concerning student values and behavior. And we also compiled student profiles, detailing demographic information, records of class attendance, and the excuses given for any missed classes or late assignments.

## Results

To compare the teacher's expectations and students' expressed values, as reported on the questionnaire, we used a chi-square analysis as a "test of goodness of fit" (Spatz and Johnston 236). Analysis of each item in the questionnaire tested the hypothesis that students' expressed values would fit or match teacher expectations. The comparison of teacher and student ratings of the importance to students of school, family, friends, and so forth showed that they would only agree one in a thousand times (that is, a statistically significant difference at the .001 level). This result not only rejected the initial hypothesis but also supported the opposite hypothesis that student values did not fit and could not be predicted from teacher expectations.

Comparison of teacher and student resolutions of classroom dilemmas differed according to the type of question. We did not find a statistically significant difference on traditional study-skills questions. On these questions chi square equaled 1.5, resulting in acceptance of the hypothesis that student answers matched teacher expectations. But we did find a significant difference when choices involved the competing demands of family or friends. On the people-related questions, there was no fit between teacher expecta-

tions and students' answers. The tabulated chi-square value was 17.3, which was statistically significant to the .01 level; therefore, the initial hypothesis was rejected: students' resolutions of the classroom dilemmas did not match teacher expectations when the question involved family or friends.

*Table 1*

Chi-Square ( $X^2$ ) Analyses:  
Comparing A & B with levels of C, D, & E,  
where p refers to probability or chance

A & B	$X^2$	P
C	20.2	< .01
D	1.5	> .05
E	17.3	< .01

A = Teacher Expected Value  
B = Student Expected Value  
C = Importance of School, Family  
D = Study-Skills Questions  
E = People-Related Questions

In further analysis we compared students' answers on people-related questions in terms of the students' ethnic backgrounds. We found no significant differences, suggesting that although the students disagreed with the teacher, they nonetheless agreed with each other. Moreover, we found no significant differences between the responses of students whose parents had attended college and students whose parents had not.

The final item on the questionnaire asked students to explain in essay form the importance of a college education and the sacrifices they would make to succeed. All of the students said that a college education is important, and 80% said they would be willing to make sacrifices to succeed; however, less than a third rated college at the highest level as "most important." Several defined importance in terms of pleasing friends and family, but most explained that college is necessary to get a good job. Three students indicated they would be willing to sacrifice "whatever it takes" to succeed, while twenty-one students qualified their willingness to sacrifice,

saying they were "willing to sacrifice some," "to sacrifice within reason," "to sacrifice almost everything." Family and social activities, sports, fun, and jobs were all mentioned as special reservations, with more of the students reserving family and friends than other activities.

The teacher's response to the same question described education as the "*raison d'être* for students during the college years" and, therefore, "the lodestone around which all other activities and commitments should be planned."

## Discussion

Generally the data support the model of student/teacher interaction that we proposed earlier. The mismatch between teacher and student viewpoints seriously affected interaction in the classes, with the very real possibility that the teacher's attempts to motivate her students had the opposite effect. While the teacher placed an extremely high value on school in general and upon the basic writing class in particular, the students saw learning as only one of several important activities in their lives, some of which had prior and competing claims on their time and energies. To the teacher, class attendance and completion of assignments on time were base line behaviors—the beginning point of effort and evidence of students' commitment to succeed. To the students, commitment to the class could begin when commitments to family, friends, or jobs had been satisfied; they saw the base line on which to build success as a balance of school, social, and work activities.

Although we did not attempt to replicate the Bakan or Parsons and Goff research, the results of this study also point toward a difference in value orientation, similar to those they explore, between teacher and students. The teacher demonstrated some of the characteristics of an *agency* value structure. She emphasized individual achievement, self-assertion, self-protection, and isolation, and she appeared to segregate goals to achieve in school from goals to be affiliated or to form relationships with other people. The students, on the other hand, valued close personal relationships and helping behaviors; they seemed to integrate achievement and affiliation motives and to demonstrate characteristics of a *communion* value structure (see Bakan; Parsons and Goff 265–267; and Frieze, Francis and Hanusa 22–23).

These different value orientations also seemed to be related to contrasting perceptions of locus of control (see Wang 213–247). While the teacher saw individuals as responsible (controlling) for such classroom behaviors as attendance and turning assignments in

on time, the students saw external factors as controlling their behavior.

Table 2 outlines the different excuses students offered for missing class or turning in assignments late as well as some supporting information about diagnostic scores and background. Of the 31 students, 25 indicated they had been late turning in assignments because of external demands on time; only one student considered an excuse (studying for another class) "not legitimate" and, consequently, something for which he should be held responsible. Although there was no significant difference in the number of late assignments turned in by students in the upper and lower thirds of the class, there was a statistically significant difference in the types of excuses they offered. Students in the upper third were more likely to excuse themselves because of work, while those in the bottom third were more likely to excuse themselves because of personal activities.

Thirty students cited external demands as reasons for missing class. During the semester students reported 26 family crises, 7 emergencies at work, 10 doctor's appointments, 6 instances of car trouble, 7 hangovers, 5 emergencies having to do with other classes, 7 cases of oversleeping and tiredness, 12 cases described as "personal activities," and 1 case of not wanting to come, as well as 25 illnesses. Students in the upper and lower thirds of the class were equally likely to miss class because of family crises, work, and doctor's appointments; however, those in the upper third were more likely to cite illness and the demands of other classes as reasons for their absences. In addition, analysis of types of excuse in terms of ethnic groups showed a significant trend for absences specifically. Hispanics, Native Americans, and Blacks frequently cited family crises as a reason for not attending while no Orientals or non-Hispanic Whites used this excuse.

Of the 195 excuses that students offered for late work or absences, 160 or 82% were caused, they said, by external pressures or demands. These figures suggest that students saw external factors as controlling their behaviors and to some extent expected the teacher to share their view (otherwise, why offer the excuses?). "If it can't be helped, it can't be helped," one student told the teacher after he missed an in-class writing assignment in order to join his father on a hunting trip.

Given the different values orientations of teachers and students and their conflicting attributions of control, the interaction pattern diagrammed in Figure 2 describes many of the student/teacher interactions in the classes we studied. Classroom observations support this assumption. Students conscientiously reported to the





teacher their reasons for missing class or turning in assignments late; some also provided excuses for not typing papers (although typing was not required) or for giving a task less than their best efforts. Nonverbal clues during these interchanges suggested the students were most confident but the teacher least accepting when the excuses involved *communion-type* values (family obligation, helping friends, and so forth). The students were less confident but the teacher more accepting when the excuses concerned *agency-type* values—the need, for example, to study for a midterm in another class or to achieve personal goals. Moreover, the teacher appeared to respond more negatively—refusing to accept late work, deducting points, or lowering a grade—when the excuses involved relationships than when they involved personal achievement goals or personal illness. When this behavior was pointed out to the teacher, she said she equated the family-crisis-type excuse with placing blame on others (an immature behavior to be discouraged); on the other hand, she felt self-oriented excuses, including not wanting to come to class, showed a mature willingness to accept responsibility for one's own behaviors and should be encouraged. Implicit in this analysis was a suggested belief that the family-type excuse actually masked some underlying personal motive for which the student did not wish to take responsibility.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The students in these classes rated the teacher highly on their end-of-the-semester evaluations, with one class giving her an “excellent” and the other an “above-average” rating. However, in both classes students indicated dissatisfaction with their own performance and said they would have liked more and clearer evaluative feedback. Several students questioned the fairness of grading procedures; moreover, the classes as a whole estimated higher deserved or expected final grades on their evaluations than the teacher actually assigned. Nearly two-thirds of the students did not, in the teacher's estimation, reach their potential. She expressed disappointment that during the final weeks of class, motivation appeared to decline rather than increase. Fewer students attended class regularly or took the opportunity to rewrite papers for higher grades.

Although neither teacher nor students felt they had failed in the course, neither felt entirely successful. Part of the dissatisfaction might be attributed to mismatched values and motivational structures; part, to unrealistic or even uninformed expectations. Clearly, both the students and the teacher needed to make some

accommodation in their perspectives. On the one hand, students have to develop the internal locus of control that researchers tie to success in learning situations (Wang 213–247). On the other hand, the teacher needs to develop a better understanding of and respect for students' *communion-style* values and motivations and to moderate her own expectations and responses in terms of those values.

"In creating motivation sometimes it is better and more convenient to change the situation rather than the person" (Maehr 894). Changing the situation through accommodation and better understanding would mean that no one, neither teacher nor students, need be alien in the developmental classroom. Once we recognize that performance situations created by teachers must in some sense adapt to students just as students must adapt to the demands of these performance situations (Maehr 887–896), we can alleviate some of the "outlandishness" that handicaps both students and teachers and begin to create a more supportive and productive classroom environment.

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## NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

**SEAMEO Regional Language Centre in Singapore will hold its 25th Regional Seminar on Language Testing and Language Programme Evaluation April 9–12, 1990** in the RELC Building, 30 Orange Grove Rd., Singapore 1025, Republic of Singapore. The theme: "Language Testing and Language Programme Evaluation." **Deadline** for a 200-word abstract plus a 50-word bio-data: **November 30, 1989**. Contact: Director (Att. Seminar Secretariat), SEAMEO Regional Language Centre (address above).

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**The East Central Writing Centers Association** (formerly Writing Centers Association: East Central) will hold its Twelfth Annual Conference **April 20–21, 1990** at Indiana State U in Terre Haute. Proposals: standard concerns of writing centers, their special mission to help students, also the position of centers within schools. Of prime interest are proposals formulated as interactive workshops. **Deadline** for one-page submissions: **December 15, 1989**. Contact: Corky Dahl or Brenda Ameter, The Writing Center, Indiana State U, Terre Haute, IN 70809.

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**The New York College Learning Skills Association** will hold its **Thirteenth Annual Symposium on Developmental Education April 22–24, 1990** at the Nevele Hotel, Ellenville, NY. Proposal topics: all aspects of college level developmental education and learning support services. **Deadline: October 27, 1989**. Contact: Dr. Kathleen Schatzberg-Smith, Ass't. Dean of Instruction, Rockland Community College, 145 College Rd., Suffern, NY 10901; (914) 356–4650 Ext. 261 or 210.

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**NCTE Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference**, the first sponsored by NCTE Affiliates in the region, will be held **April 26–28, 1990** at Greentree Marriot, Pittsburgh, PA. The theme: "Styles of Learning: Ways of Teaching." Proposals for **Pre-Conference Workshops** (full-day presentations on a topic) should address concerns of teachers, K-16: computers, whole language instruction, strategies for working with mainstreamed students, collaborative learning. Proposals for **Conference Sessions**: panel discussions, workshops, demonstrations, or single presentations to appeal to English and Language Arts teachers, K-16. **Deadline: November 1, 1989**. Contact:

Regional Conference Proposal, WPCTE, 611 Field Club Rd., Pittsburgh, PA 15238.

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**The 1990 Kellogg Institute for the Training and Certification of Developmental Educators** will be held **June 10-July 27, 1990** at Appalachian State U, Boone, NC. Focus is on the use of learning styles and their implications for instruction, the process of developmental evaluation activities, use of academic intervention and counseling techniques, management of programs and classes, as well as the use of computers for management, data collection, and instructional purposes. The summer session will be followed by a fall term practicum project. Graduate credits are available. **Applications deadline: April 1, 1990.** Contact: Elaini Bingham, Director, Kellogg Institute, or Margaret Mock, Administrative Ass't., National Center for Developmental Education, both at Appalachian State U, Boone, NC 28608; (704) 262-3057.

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**Western Ohio Journal** for 1990 will feature original poetry, articles, and reviews. Teachers at all levels may submit classroom narratives (with student samples) for an idea exchange section. Multiple submissions, previously published material, black-and-white drawings and cartoons are eligible. **Deadline: January 20, 1990.** Contact: *WOJ*, c/o James Brooks, Sinclair Community College, 444 W. Third Street, Dayton, OH 45402.

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**The Council of Writing Program Administrators**, a national professional organization, evaluates institutions' writing programs by providing two trained consultant/evaluators to work with faculty and staff. This service is funded in part by an Exxon grant, and by modest fees plus travel expenses (grant support available). Contact: Dr. Edward M. White, Dept. of English, California State U, San Bernardino, CA 92407.

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**Indiana Writing Project** runs a **public electronic bulletin board for writing teachers**. A set of assignments for downloading is available. Access the board by calling (317) 285-8414 with modems set to 8 data bits, even parity, and one stop bit. (Almost any default modem setting will do.) Calls can be accepted at 300 bps, 1200 bps, or 2400 bps. First-time callers are automatically registered. Callers' time online is limited to 30 minutes. The IWP service aims at free

exchange of information among writing teachers, e.g., the exchange of assignments and public domain software, and ongoing professional dialogues. The bulletin board operates 20 hrs. per weekday, 24 hrs. per weekend day. Scheduled down times: Weekdays 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Suggestions? Leave message for the sysop.

### **WPA Research Grants**

**The Council of Writing Program Administrators** is currently accepting proposals for its 1990 research grants. The council will award several small grants (up to \$500) for research relating specifically to the concerns of writing program administrators. Proposals should not exceed four single-spaced typed pages and should describe (1) the research problem and objectives, (2) the procedures for conducting the research (including sample, design, instrumentation, and personnel), (3) a time-line, and (4) a budget. Researchers planning to conduct surveys may include in their proposal the free use of the WPA mailing list. All WPA grant recipients will be asked to submit their research report to the Council's journal, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, for possible publication before submitting it to other journals. Please include your name, affiliation, address, and telephone number on your proposal. The **deadline** for submission is **December 20, 1989**. Please send the proposal **and two copies** to: **Prof. Karen Greenberg, Chair, WPA Grant Committee, Department of English, Hunter College, 695 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10021.**

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