

# Chapter 7. First-Year Composition: Setting Terms for College Writing

## A Preface on My College Writing

I have an almost complete file of my undergraduate college papers including a number with teacher comments. In the next few chapters I will examine them chronologically and by subject, as I experienced them, starting with first year writing, which most directly and explicitly set the terms for college writing. This is not the first time I have looked through them, as my original impulse to save them was to keep track of my thinking. But now I see them through the eyes of a writing teacher to notice the learning of style, structure, text forms and functions, and processes of writing. Of course, the writing problems I was working on were related to the content and elaboration of ideas that I was thinking about; that is, the writing development was driven by the impulse to give shape to my emerging thinking. In the chapters to follow I will try to show that dynamic interaction of growing writing and thought. I also will focus on what Vygotsky called leading activity (1967, 1978)—that is the more explicit problems of both thought and expression I was consciously trying to solve, and thus what I was most overtly working on. The novel problems posed by the papers and the solutions are evident in the texts and how later texts differ from early ones, but as I examine the papers, I also recover my remembered state of mind—what I was worrying about, what I felt puzzled by, what I was pleased to accomplish, and other emotions.

I also was aware at the time (and still am in my current work) that realizations often follow in the wake of writing; it may take weeks and months, and even years, following writing a paper to recognize consciously the fuller ideas I was gesturing at and the force of their implications. I also have recognized how the ideas and practices I was realizing in one location might be applicable elsewhere. These leading activities, the problems I was solving, and the ideas I was working on frequently led me to new places where things started to look different and where new lines of inquiring, thinking, and acting opened up. In the chapters that follow I will tell the stories of a number of such incidents. We might consider these as instances of threshold concepts, both personal and academic (Meyer & Land, 2003).

In writing these papers I was working on many skills and strategies that would be embedded in my later work and issues that would remain thematic, so they will get a lot more attention than you might think undergraduate papers deserve. Nonetheless, to me they reveal much about my trajectory as a writer and my growing understanding of writing, and I will try to indicate that in the next several chapters. If still the discussion seems tedious and self-indulgent, my apologies.

## Inviting and Accepting Experimentation

As I have reviewed my college papers it has become clearer to me how important the first-year writing course was in preparing me for later growth and setting trajectories of my development. My instructor for both fall and winter semesters, Jean Blackall (later to become a professor), provided an accepting atmosphere which recognized my prior unconventional writing and encouraged further experimentation. She also provided me with important tools to address the challenges and opportunities of my further courses. The teacher's assignments and relations to the class worked well for me, and I responded positively to her sympathetic reading of my work. Indeed, I wound up with a crush on her, though thirty-five years later when I met her again, she did not remember who I was, to my chagrin.

I always felt that she valued what I wrote, both in the quality of writing and in the message—that she took my writing seriously as a realization of my thought. This of course is now generally seen as good practice in the teaching of writing, but this communicative trust was extremely important for me. I had experienced this acceptance to a lesser degree in a number of my teachers in high school and in some of my other teachers in college—but never previously as intensely as with this teacher. The dismissal of my writing and thoughts by some other teachers hardened me and decreased my desire to write for or communicate with them. Learning to write is a growth towards the other, connecting to the reader, forging a communicative strength and richness. While at times a contentious relationship with others fostered an elaboration of arguments as long as I felt (or at least hoped) that my ideas would be heard and pondered, if I found my views being dismissed, discounted, or ignored my communicative energies shut down. Chill winds stopped growth. This need for engagement is now well recognized, but it cannot be emphasized enough. It is part of why success breeds success, to the benefit of some but not others who do not enjoy the sense of being heard.

Part of the permissiveness and experimentality of the course was the result of my not yet identifying as a potential literature major, still anticipating a career in physics. There were three tracks of first year writing course—the general one for most students, directed towards basic skills, correctness, and conventional forms. At the upper end was a course for potential literature majors who entered with high literacy scores on the standardized tests. As I learned from friends, this course was devoted to preparing students for more professionalized literary criticism and writing about texts from the literary canon. My course was for students who scored well by standard literacy measures, but were headed to other majors. The course was challenging, but not restricted to pre-professional forms, stances, and styles. We were introduced to a range of twentieth century fiction, poetry, and essays and were asked to consider issues of text organization and stylistic variation while pondering large social questions. The two-semester course organized around the theme of “Experience and Form,” had us constantly writing—starting with one-page papers due every class meeting three times a week, then later weekly papers of about five hundred words

each, with a longer paper at the end of the first term (mine was around 2500 words). The second term was organized around longer biweekly papers, again in relation to assigned books.

## Attentiveness to Meaning, Structure, and Style

In looking over the first term papers some themes stand out. As would be typical in my literary courses throughout my undergraduate years, there was an emphasis on close reading, careful attention to symbols and meaning, and explication of texts—all in the new critical mode, popular in the middle sixties when I was a student. Both my sentences and teacher comments noticed paradoxical contrasts and oppositions in the texts. As the year went on, I used more and more paradoxical formulations of my own, especially to contrast the novel thing found in the text with the expected or conventional. Over the years since, I have had to break myself of the habit of using such contrasts when they weren't necessary, to go directly to the thing I wanted to say without noting how it was distinctive from something else. On the other hand, typicality and unexpected contrastive hybridity have been thematic in my theoretical interests throughout the years. In sentence style, the teacher especially recognized balanced sentence constructions along with pithy, witty summation sentences. I accordingly paid attention to sentence rhythms and learned to punctuate my long, complex sentences with short, pointed resting points.

The instructor emphasized making meanings explicit and clear, as in comments as “I don't see what you are getting at in your idea of...” or “Explain why...” She also asked for grounding my observations in textual evidence. As the term went on, my claims became more elaborated and evidenced. Our assignments and class discussions asked us to look for coherence in the texts we read. The instructor repeatedly asked “What holds this text together? What makes it a single piece of writing?” Our own writing was also expected to be coherent, but we were encouraged to seek creative solutions to coherence. The instructor's comments throughout the year recognized a variety of idiosyncratic forms of organization I used. She even noted that in a second reading of one of my papers she saw why I had taken what initially seemed to her a sudden leap—but now saw I was preparing to show a change in attitude and direction.

I took her flexible idea of unity as an invitation to follow an organic structure of intellectual discovery in my papers. This matched well with my practice at that time of writing a single draft, often from sketch notes. I did much improvisatory work inside my head, putting the mentally-prepared parts together as I wrote out the text. I experienced argument as a kind of discovery as I worked through ideas and details. I would repeatedly reread my partial draft and move forward. In the papers in this course, I often belabored points as I tried to discover what it was I wanted to say. Only in later years when I began to revise consistently was I able cut out the exploratory phrasing that led me to a final clean formulation. This is still something that I consciously monitor in my revision.

## Some Assignments

A number of the assignments asked for imitation of authors' styles or procedures. After we discussed the heterogeneity in Eliot's "Wasteland," we were asked to collect ideas in a poet's notebook and then in a following assignment to use those separate entries as the basis for our own poem. My notebook was, following Eliot, a collection of obscure cultural references and jingly-jangly verses of self-doubt and romantic confusion. As we started to look at some stories by Hemingway and D. H. Lawrence, we were asked to write a personal narrative that would open up a larger theme. I turned my experience registering for the draft into an ironic contemplation on how institutions gave us unformed, shy, identityless young people official identities and places in society. I stole my theme and stance from Brecht's play *A Man's a Man*. Then we were asked to write a Hemingway story in the style of Lawrence, and the next week a Lawrence narrative in the style of Hemingway. This pair of exercises gave me the chance to explore the interaction of sentence complexity, stance distance, and empathetic evaluation. After reading some essays of James Baldwin we were asked to write about something we felt deeply, which gave me the opportunity to assert my views on morality, thereby building a more assertive voice. After reading Joyce's *Dubliners* (and writing an analysis of one of the stories) we were asked to write an epiphany of our own, embedded in a narrative. I wound up telling of a (highly fictionalized) moment when the bravado of my high school crowd evaporated as we headed off to college, leaving me with a sense that I was alone.

All these assignments playing with imitation on multiple levels—in style, stance, voice, purpose, and form—gave me license to pursue idiosyncratic modes of answering more conventional assignments. In a second term assignment to analyze Faulkner's sentences, for example, I wrote the entire 1000-word essay in a single sentence (embedding an equally long quote of a Faulkner sentence). I learned a lot about text organization, sentence style, sentence rhythm, cohesion, and wit as the term went on. Though in retrospect my attempts look labored, the work of a self-possessed freshman, at the time I remember often being quite pleased with my playful efforts. At least I was learning.

Only a few of the papers I remember as dull and conventional, but in looking at those papers I remember as uninspired I now I see I was working out ideas important to me. One of the more painful papers was the fall final paper on essays by Joseph Wood Krutch, a writer I found terminally boring. Nonetheless, as a then science student, I used that paper to question whether science was the necessarily better path. My arguments against Krutch now look to be vague and sloppy invocations of intuition to suggest limits of rational inquiry; nonetheless, I was coming to recognize the role of imagination, abduction, and human intelligence in science—seeing science as created through human inquiry and agency. I used, of course, many sentences of contrast, opposition, paradox, and negation along the way—building my sense of rhythm and syntactic surprise. I also kept

working on logics of organization, moving from one idea to the next determined by a reasoning path rather than a preset outline.

This search for meaning in science was clearly on my mind, as it appeared in a number of other papers throughout the first term. Although the literary analyses of the second term didn't create as direct a place for my ponderings on the meaning of life as the first term assignments, such thoughts crept in as I considered the values and moral dilemmas of characters. I began my paper on *Lord Jim*, for example, with the quote from the character Stein "...How to be. Ach! How to be." This problem of finding life meaning continued through my undergraduate life. It also became the ostensible reason I gave for my switch from the sciences to the humanities in the middle of my sophomore year, though a number of personal and academic situations contributed to the decision.

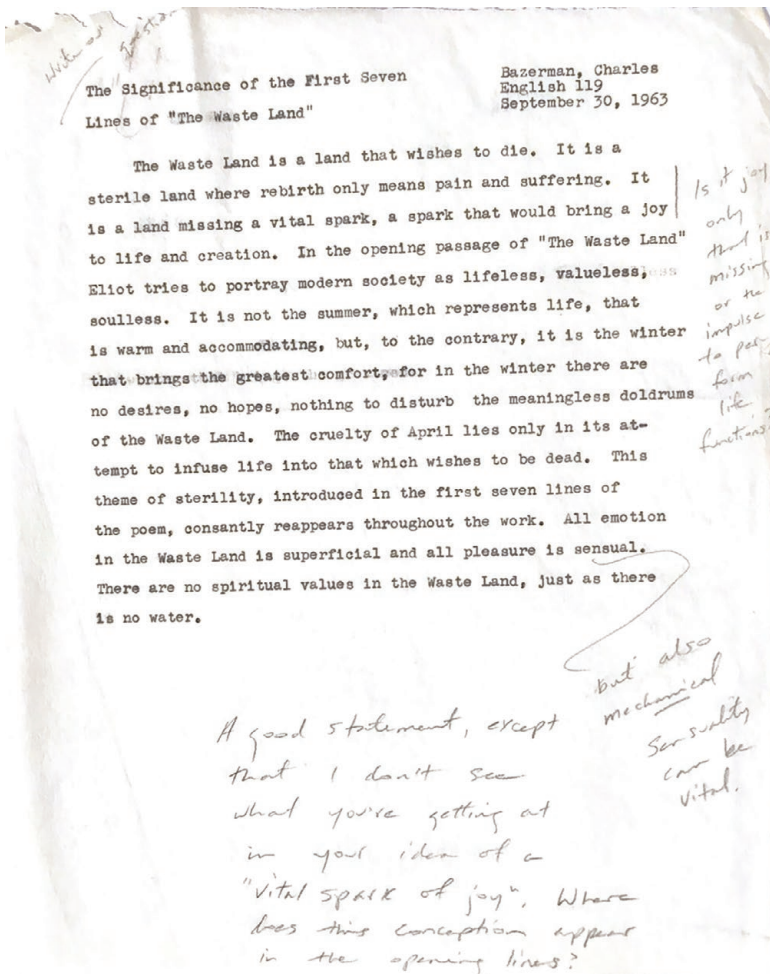


Figure 7.1. My first assignment in first-year composition. Courtesy of Charles Bazerman.