



From Attitude to Aptitude: Assuming the Stance of a College Writer

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As I think about the task of defining college writing, I remember two important mentors in my academic life: William E. Coles, Jr., and Kellogg Hunt. Bill Coles often uses the phrase “get your money up” to insist that if one is going to talk about writing, one had better bring along samples of student writing that illustrate concepts being explained and support claims being made. Kellogg Hunt was not one to prescribe what others should do, but the care he took with his own research has often stood me in good stead. Hunt avoided, at all costs, making claims that he could not support; as a case in point, consider his analysis of complexity in syntax, entitled *Syntactic Maturity in Schoolchildren and Adults*. Knowing that it would be virtually impossible to define *good* writing, he based his study on two important assumptions: namely, that as writers grow older, their writing gets better; and that those who have been published in two quality magazines, *Harper's* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, can be assumed to be good writers. With those assumptions in place, he undertook a study that described the changes in students' writing over time—from the early grades to high school—and he contrasted the writing style of the best student writers with writing chosen from the pages of those two literary journals.

So what, you may be asking, do these reminiscences about my two mentors have to do with the task at hand? Just this. Mindful of my mentor, Bill Coles, I will endeavor to “get my

money up.” That is, I will illustrate and support the claims I am making about college writing with samples written by college students. And, like my other mentor, Kellogg Hunt, I will begin with an important assumption, viz., that any writing we receive from students attending college is, ipso facto, college writing. With this assumption firmly in place, I will proceed to describe the qualities I see in the writing of three college writers.

Before you despair, thinking that I have completely misunderstood the task we have been set, i.e., to analyze the qualities of college writing, let me explain a bit further. There is a sense in which this task is an impossible one. What exactly could one mean in asking what differentiates college writing from that which is not college writing? Do we mean to suggest that college writers come to us as college writers? If so, what exactly are we supposed to be doing to (or for) them in the one or two college writing courses they are required to take? Surely, we have things to teach them. Are we, then, supposed to be moving them from the status of *college writers* (which status we assume they have attained in order to matriculate at our institutions) to that of *advanced college writers* and eventually *postcollege writers*?

As an alternate reading, by college-level writing we may refer not to products they are capable of producing when they come to us, but rather to the skills, knowledge, and attitudes they bring to college, assets that will allow them to develop their abilities to produce the types of writing we value in our institutions. I prefer this reading. It allows me to say that when they come to us, students only have to produce a piece of writing in response to the first writing assignment we give them in order to become college writers. However, some of them come with certain assets that make it likely that they will be able to learn how to produce the kinds of products we value. Others, lacking these assets, are not likely in the brief span of time we have them to learn how to produce these products. What are these assets I speak of?

This would seem to be the time for me to “get my money up.” Let’s look at a text written by a student who has what it takes to develop the kind of writing we’re looking for. This text, written by a first-year college student, was in response to an assignment given in a Philosophy of Biology course:

A Critique of “The Propensity Interpretation of Fitness”

In an Advance Biology class, Darwinian fitness was introduced to me as the reproductive success of an organism. At the time, I considered that concept simple and logical. I could see how it followed, what I then perceived as, the theory of evolution. I even noted that this definition insinuated that those organisms who may seem quite fit (in a physical sense or such) are not fit in the scheme of natural selection if they do not indeed reproduce. All of this seemed easy enough prior to our class “Philosophy of Biology” and such essays as Susan K. Mills and John H. Beatty’s, “The Propensity Interpretation of Fitness.” I was previously content with fitness for the same reason that R. Levins accentuates when he says, “Fitness enters population biology as a vague heuristic notion, rich in metaphor but poor in precision.” It has been often noted that there are circular problems in defining fitness for natural selection and the theory of evolution. The purpose of the paper by Mills is to propose one approach that provides a non-circular and logical definition of fitness. I understood why the authors felt the need for this new interpretation. I also pointed out what I felt were the points of confusion, points of weakness, weak extrapolations, ideas that were well thought out, and finally the overall usefulness of this new interpretation.

It is very easy to be pleased by my old Advance Biology definition of fitness [Darwinian]. But when the questions, what is the definition of fitness and what is the measure of fitness, are asked simultaneously an obvious flaw is exposed; intuitively the answers are the same. The authors of this essay were so bothered by this flaw that they opted to present the propensity interpretation. In this case, the definition of fitness does not include the phrase “those that survive,” thus interrupting the previous circularity of other arguments.

There were many minor points of confusion in the essay, but that very well could be the fault of the reader more so than that of the authors. However, I did feel that there was one rather important part that was confusing. After presenting the bulk of their argument, the authors attempted to expand their idea in to a mathematical sense (refer to pages 15, 16 in Sober). I can see the appeal of conveying the idea in another manner such as this, however I felt the practicality of it was low. When I approached this portion of the paper I felt the tone of the issue switch to that of a very intricate calculus word problem. And I was not prepared for nor did I benefit from that transfer. Obviously, I am noting this as a point of confusion and therefore I am not saying that it is fallible in any sense, or that I wouldn’t validate it completely with more explanation.

I did not outright disagree with much of what Mills and Beatty presented in their paper; and the paper was relatively sound except one analogy the authors made. This analogy was placed on page 9 in Sober, and it deals with “the propensity of salt to dissolve in [pure] water.” It seems to me that fitness is far too different from chemistry for a proper analogy to be drawn. For example, I believe it is much less controversial to say, “the guarantee of salt to dissolve in [pure],” because from my understanding that is just what it is. There are two other smaller weak points that are more specifically weak extrapolations. The first deals with the authors’ statement that they have improved the definition of natural selection by introducing this propensity interpretation. They take a good effort to qualify this statement, however the claim is of gargantuan proportion and is based largely on “common sense.” The claim seems to merit (and quite possibly require) a whole other paper. The sentiment is that the authors received a “two for one” deal here, however the reward of this claim is of too much importance to be awarded so easily. The second extrapolation is criticized pretty much for its brevity. The statement is contained in the very last sentence of the paper, where the authors express that they see no reason why “a similar reconstruction could not be given for the case of macroevolutionary change.” There is absolutely nothing in this paper to validate that claim and therefore I couldn’t stand to let that extrapolation pass uncommented.

So far I have been very critical of this paper, however I believe it was warranted. Regardless there were some very clear points that really stood out in the paper. I felt the separation of propensity fitness into “fitness1” and “fitness2” was really helpful. For one reason, there was a need to differentiate between the fitness of an organism and of a genome (with alternate alleles). Kudos is given to Mills and Beatty there. Also I enjoyed and grasped a hold of the concept of propensity as a graduated spectrum (refer to page 11 in Sober). I felt it did the job in explaining the specific idea of propensity that the authors had in their mind. I do believe the authors succeeded in presenting a notion that can explain when the fittest do not survive to reproduce, however I am still troubled by the reality of the statement. Tom Bethell taps into my reservation with his statement, “If only there were some way of identifying the fittest before-hand, without always having to wait and see which ones survive.” And since my intuition says we can never know this vital information of “who is fittest” before the fact, I’m almost moved to say, “Why bother?”; conversely I also understand that new discoveries in science can only come about through (philosophical) questioning even in a skeptical situation.

The conclusion of Mills and Beatty maintains that their interpretation of fitness “allows us to reconstruct explanations of microevolutionary phenomena in such a way that these explanations appear to be entirely respectable and noncircular.” However, much like the rest of the paper this conclusion is open to skepticism. The phrase “appear to be respectable” alone causes me to be reticent about supporting the conclusion. How can you rely on appearance? One of the most commonplace sayings I can think of is, every thing isn’t as it appears. And what does it mean for the explanation to be respectable? A good informed guess can certainly be respectable, but yet it can also be wrong.

Now that I’ve put my money on the table, let me be clear what assertions my “money” is supporting. I am not saying this is the type of writing we want college students to be doing; in many ways, it’s not what we want from them when they come to college—and it certainly isn’t the kind of writing we want from them when they complete a college-level writing course. It isn’t necessary to detail all the ways it fails to meet those standards. Suffice it to say, they include editing problems, such as subject-verb agreement errors, failure to understand the meaning of individual words, awkward phrasings, and equivocation. There is enough here to keep a teacher’s red pen busy for some time.

Even so, my claim is that this essay, written during the student’s—let’s call him Adam—first month of college, demonstrates those assets that he will need to succeed as a college writer. How so? Let’s start with the basics. We have said that this writing contains problems in basic editing. True enough. But, those cases seem to be the exception rather than the rule. Most of Adam’s verbs agree with his subjects; most pronouns are properly connected with antecedents; most words are spelled correctly. At the level of the sentence, we also find basic competence. The writer seems to have an intuitive sense of what makes a sentence different from a nonsentence.

At a somewhat higher level, we find some sophistication in sentence structure. To see that sophistication, we need look no further than the first four sentences of the first paragraph:

In an Advance Biology class, Darwinian fitness was introduced to me as the reproductive success of an organism. At the time, I considered that concept simple and logical. I could see how it

followed, what I then perceived as, the theory of evolution. I even noted that this definition insinuated that those organisms who may seem quite fit (in a physical sense or such) are not fit in the scheme of natural selection if they do not indeed reproduce.

The paper begins with a passive sentence. While Adam certainly overuses the passive, here he uses it quite effectively, to highlight the subject of his investigation. The second short sentence is made emphatic by the rather complicated sentences that follow it. The third sentence offers an embedded clause (*how it followed*) as the object of the verb *see*; and within that embedded object, the writer uses an embedded clause (*what I then perceived as*) to modify the object of *followed*. The fourth sentence is equally complicated with two right-branching *that* clauses modifying each other. If this grammatical terminology isn't to your liking, simply read the sentences and note the skillful use of complex clause structures.

Now that we have established that the writer can handle the basics of usage and sentence structure, let's move up a level to coherence. Adam provides a basic plan for the paper in the last sentence of the first paragraph: he will critique the article entitled "The Propensity Interpretation of Fitness," by Susan K. Mills and John H. Beatty. The rest of the paper attempts to offer support for the claims that the article is confusing at points, that it has weaknesses, but that, overall, it presents a useful interpretation. As support, Adam offers:

1. the confusion caused by the attempt to translate their idea into a mathematical formula;
2. their reliance on an analogy that does not work;
3. their attempt to pair two different claims, offering support for the first, and assuming the reader will not notice that support has not been offered for the second;
4. their introduction of a final claim that has no support whatsoever.

Of course to know how good this writing is, we would have to examine the text Adam is writing about to see whether these criticisms are warranted. However, we don't have to consult that

other text to determine that this writer knows a great deal about writing and thinking. It is clear that he knows that analogies provide a good place to attack any argument. Even more importantly, Adam knows that a writer is responsible for offering support for all the claims that are made. He seems almost indignant in the last sentence of paragraph five, where he says: “There is absolutely nothing in this paper to validate that claim and therefore I couldn’t stand to let that extrapolation pass uncommented.” A writer able to work up this kind of steam over an unsupported claim comes to a college writing class with one essential building skill for the work ahead.

But the writer has additional important skills. In paragraph six, he turns to strengths he finds in this article. In doing so, he shows his ability to analyze (sorting the various issues found in the article) and to evaluate—“I do believe the authors succeeded in presenting a notion that can explain when the fittest do not survive to reproduce. . . .” In this same paragraph, Adam illustrates his ability to bring other voices into the conversation he is having with the reader: “Tom Bethell taps into my reservation with his statement, ‘If only there were some way of identifying the fittest before-hand, without always having to wait and see which ones survive.’”

In addition to these basic writing skills, this writer also demonstrates a good deal of knowledge about language and logic. First, let’s look at language. In paragraph one, Adam tells us that he has noted “that this definition insinuated that those organisms who may seem quite fit (in a physical sense or such) are not fit in the scheme of natural selection if they do not indeed reproduce.” From this sentence, we can deduce that this writer knows something about the role of implication in language. Even though *insinuated* may not be the best word for what he means, the writer seems to be moving toward an understanding that a word’s meanings are not limited to neatly packaged assertions. And in this same sentence, he shows his understanding of polysemy: an organism may be *fit* physically and yet not be deemed *fit* in the context of an evolutionary process.

Next, let’s look at what Adam knows about logic. Paragraph two begins as follows:

It is very easy to be pleased by my old Advance Biology definition of fitness [Darwinian]. But when the questions, what is the definition of fitness and what is the measure of fitness, are asked simultaneously an obvious flaw is exposed; intuitively the answers are the same. The authors of this essay were so bothered by this flaw that they opted to present the propensity interpretation. In this case, the definition of fitness does those include the phrase “those that survive,” thus interrupting the previous circularity of other arguments.

Although he has not stated his case clearly, Adam seems to be attempting to point out the circularity in the reasoning of those who have been attempting to define fitness. He praises the writers of this article for attempting a definition of fitness that does not “include the phrase ‘those that survive,’” revealing his understanding that a definition can be circular even when a concept presented in the subject of a sentence is paraphrased in the complement, i.e., to be satisfactory, a definition must add new information in the complement.

Another logical insight can be seen in the following passage taken from paragraph four:

There are two other smaller weak points that are more specifically weak extrapolations. The first deals with the authors’ statement that they have improved the definition of natural selection by introducing this propensity interpretation. They take a good effort to qualify this statement, however the claim is of gargantuan proportion and is based largely on “common sense.” The claim seems to merit (and quite possibly require) a whole other paper.

Like most students who are stretching their vocabularies, Adam sometimes seems to push his prose to the breaking point, e.g., using *accentuates* for *emphasizes* (paragraph one) or using *transfer* for *change* (paragraph three). However, his use of *extrapolations* in the passage above seems to drive home an important point he is making about this article. To extrapolate one proposition from another is to make an inference or a conjecture. Unlike a corollary principle, which is proved incidentally by proving a related principle, an extrapolation must be proved separately from the principle from which it was extrapolated.

Clearly this writer comes to college with important skills and knowledge. But even more importantly, he comes with the right attitude. To see what I mean in saying this, let's think of the various related meanings of the word *attitude*. It can be used to express emotion, as would be the case if we talked about a child with a belligerent attitude. Certainly such a child is evincing an emotion, but at the same time he is evincing an orientation; there is a clear relationship between this use of attitude and its use in describing an airplane. Just as an airplane takes a certain orientation toward the earth and the sky, a writer takes certain attitudes toward his or her writing, subject, and readers.

What are these attitudes? Another way of asking this question is, how does the writer orient himself or herself in this writing situation? I would argue that at the core of a writer's attitude are that writer's beliefs. If a writer believes a reader is lazy and/or uninformed, then, ipso facto, the writer takes a certain attitude toward that reader. If the writer believes a particular subject is serious and important, the writer then brings a certain attitude toward that project. If the writer believes certain fringe groups to be kooks whose point of view or arguments should not warrant serious thought, then his or her writing about these people and their arguments will reflect that attitude. So, what kinds of attitudes does this writer bring to his writing in this essay?

We don't have to look very far to see important evidences of these attitude-forming beliefs:

In an Advance Biology class, Darwinian fitness was introduced to me as the reproductive success of an organism. At the time, I considered that concept simple and logical. I could see how it followed, what I then perceived as, the theory of evolution.

We mentioned above the complicated syntactic structure of the last sentence in this passage. That complication reflects the complicated beliefs that this writer assumes, viz., that his perceptions about the world do not reflect the reality of that world and that what he believes at one point may well be changed at another point in his life. It is hard to overestimate the importance of this attitude. With it, the writer opens himself up to learning of all kinds—most immediately, he opens himself to learning about a

subject during the process of his own writing. We see this openness again in paragraph three when the writer tells us: “There were many minor points of confusion in the essay, but that very well could be the fault of the reader more so than that of the authors.” The writer believes that he is in part responsible for making the meaning he takes from a text, and he brings a careful attitude toward that process—realizing that misunderstandings often reflect a failure of writer and reader to connect.

I mentioned above that the kind of open attitude this writing reflects permits him to learn from his own writing. We see that kind of learning most powerfully in a conversation that the writer has, in a sense, with himself (paragraph five):

Tom Bethell taps into my reservation with his statement, “If only there were some way of identifying the fittest before-hand, without always having to wait and see which ones survive.” And since my intuition says we can never know this vital information of “who is fittest” before the fact, I’m almost moved to say, “Why bother?”; conversely I also understand that new discoveries in science can only come about through (philosophical) questioning even in a skeptical situation.

Here the writer is pushing the limits of his thinking—in fact, of thinking itself. Just as the quantum physicists had to push their thinking past the boundaries of what seemed intuitively possible in order to move past Einstein, our everyday thinking requires us to bring a skeptical attitude to the most intuitively established truths when those truths seem to represent a roadblock to continued thinking.

Of course when a writer brings this attitude to his or her own thinking and writing, it is a relatively logical step to bring that attitude to the writing and thinking of others. From the beginning, we see that this writer brings a questioning attitude to the authorities whose article he is to critique. When they offer claims without support, he becomes animated in discussing this weakness. But at the same time, he analyzes and evaluates positively those points in their article that seem valid to him.

To this point, it may seem that I am protesting too much about the assets this writer brings to the college writing situation. In part, I am doing so because the paper is so lacking in

some of the niceties of college writing that we would want to see in those texts that we hold up to our paying public. I want to look beyond the surface form to the underlying abilities this student brings to a college writing class. We may see these abilities more clearly by contrasting this student's writing with writing that lacks these qualities.

“The Right to Pray”

It is nine o'clock a.m. seven years ago in a small classroom. A bell rings to signify the beginning of school. “Would everyone please stand for the flag salute and a moment of silence,” blares over the intercom. Twenty-seven sixth graders noisily shift chairs and stand to their feet. After they salute the flag, the teacher asks, “Who would like to lead us in prayer today?” Every child raises a hand and shouts, “Me, me, me!”

These days have been long lost. Prayer in schools has been abolished because it has been argued that it interferes with some of the children's religious preferences. But what about the other kids? They are being deprived of a religious freedom. To give both the religious preference and freedom the constitution grants, prayer should be present, but optional, in schools.

We believe the reason this country is in such a bad shape is because it has turned away from God. One example is taking prayer out of schools. With all of the trouble and evil in the world, we want our children to learn to ask for God's protection. Now more than ever protection in school is essential. Schools are now corrupt with drugs, fights and murders, and they are getting worse as times passes. God is the only one able to protect kids while they attend school.

The people who oppose prayer in school say school is not the place for prayer. Schools are for learning. Anywhere can be the place for prayer. The prayer does not have to be long and extensive. It can be a short simple prayer, like thanking God for waking me up this morning and giving me strength to attend school, that will not interfere with time used for getting an education. The prayer does not even have to be aloud. God sees the heart. Silent prayers are just as effective. One prayer that I used to use in class went like this: Dear God, I want to thank you for my life, health, and strength. I ask that you protect me through the day. Amen.”

Atheist are among the people who wanted prayer out of school. These people do not believe there is a God. Naturally, they pass it on to their children. They do not want their children

exposed to religion in school. Some say the prayer was forced on the students. If prayer was optional in schools, the students would be given a choice.

Opposite of the atheist's beliefs, some parents believe in God and want Him in every aspect of their child's life. These are the people that suffer from the decision to take prayer out of school. They can not practice their religious beliefs and therefore they have no religious freedom. One of my friends told me, "I was really shocked when they [Congress] passed the law taking prayer out of schools. How could they do that? Religious freedom is given to us by the constitution. I felt so deprived!" How would the opposition feel if one of their inalienable rights, such as liberty, taken away from them? They would be very upset. Well, this is how we feel. This is a grave injustice to some of the Americans.

In the 1700's and 1800's, thousands of people set out for this country. Many had suffered beatings and imprisonment in their home country because of their religious preferences. News had gotten to them that they would be able to practice their choice of religion in the New World. It was known to some as a religious haven. During this journey, which sometimes lasted for three months, many contracted diseases and some lost their lives. Now, some of their descendents are being deprived of that self-same freedom. No compromises were made when the decision was finalized to remove prayer from schools. These people have a right to practice their religious beliefs. Just as students are given the choice of saluting the flag, they should be given the choice to pray.

As I indicated above, I don't believe this student will likely succeed in a college writing course. I will pass over the obvious problems with writing skills to deal with what I see as the more important limitations of this writer—the attitudes she brings to this writing assignment. Here is the assignment as her teacher presented it to her:

Reflect on your experience and choose a controversial issue that is particularly interesting to you. Write a paper in which you attempt to convince your readers to accept your views on the topic. Be sure to target your essay for readers who are in need of some convincing on this matter.

This is not an assignment that I would give; it may well contribute to the student's failure to write successfully by asking her to

attempt to convince people who see the world differently than she does to accept her world view. I would much prefer an assignment that asks her to explain her reasoning (her position) rather than to persuade others to change theirs. Even so, there are things this student, let's call her Donna, could have done to show she is ready to matriculate in a college writing course.

As I noted above, this assignment asks Donna to talk to people who see the world differently from the way she sees it. It assumes that there are issues on which reasonable people disagree. And we as writing teachers assume that a good bit of that disagreement comes about because of the different ways in which people use language to describe, define, and evaluate the worlds in which they live. This assignment invites the writer to enter into and, indeed, struggle with the complexities of this world.

She declines. She is writing a rote speech that will stand for the set of beliefs she brings to this assignment. There is no awareness of an audience that will question assertions made. We see this attitude in the very first paragraph when we are told that when the teacher asks for a volunteer to lead in prayer, "Every child raises a hand and shouts, 'Me, me, me!'" What would happen if we were to question this student: "Somewhere out there don't you suppose there was a shy child, or a sick child, or a mean little child—someone who would not have shouted his or her desire to lead in prayer?" I suspect that if she answered honestly, she would say something like, "You know what I mean. Quit asking silly questions."

Of course we cannot quit asking these "silly" questions. We have to ask what she means by saying (in paragraph two) that "prayer should be present, but optional in schools." And we must understand what she means in saying (in paragraph four) that "prayer does not even have to be aloud." Who would (or could) deny students the right to pray silently while they sit in their seats, walk to and from classes, or take a test?

It is tempting to say that this student just can't think well. Or to say she doesn't understand the rhetorical situation, i.e., she can't put herself in the place of her readers and speak to them in a way that they can understand her. But I'm not satisfied with that answer; I don't think it gets to crux of the matter. This student approaches this writing situation with an attitude that pre-

vents the kind of thought and rhetorical awareness we would encourage.

In order to explain what I mean, I need to review her essay attempting to read the text in the way she meant for it to be read. Speaking for people who believe the way she believes, she argues that to take prayer out of school is just as much of an infringement of the rights of her group as leaving prayer in is for those who oppose prayer—or more so, since her group is in the majority. She recognizes that those who oppose prayer say it takes time away from learning. So she is willing to stipulate that the prayer they use should be very short and simple—and not take very much time away from education. But she knows that this will not satisfy. She knows that some extremists on the other side are going to say that the words of a prayer will offend nonbelievers. So, in a situation in which there is a nonbeliever present, she might be willing to go so far as to say there could be a few moments of silent prayer—and of course the nonbeliever would not (could not) be forced to pray. What could be more fair?

Those of us who have come to write (and think) in the way we do are appalled at this simplistic thinking. And it is tempting to label her as one unable to think in the ways we do. I don't believe that is true—at least not of many students who write this way. Rather, they are like the Hopi Indians who had only two words for hot and cold colors. The extreme Whorfian hypothesis would have us believe that, limited by their language, the Hopi could see no shades of color, that blue looked no different from green. Most linguists today would argue against that view. When (and if) they see a need for these differences, and are given the language to do so, the Hopi are perfectly capable of seeing these shades of meaning.

So what exactly does this have to do with Donna? Well, Donna has not yet come to understand the importance of using language in the subtle ways we would want her to use it. Donna is like a person who buys a toothbrush, takes it home and opens it up, but then decides that she doesn't like it. She takes it back and asks for her money, only to be told by the clerk that once opened, a toothbrush is not returnable. But Donna insists she hasn't used the toothbrush, hasn't even touched the head of the brush. The clerk does not disagree, but asserts that, in principle,

once a toothbrush has been opened, it is contaminated by definition. Donna goes away shaking her head at this ridiculous rule that ignores what she knows to be the truth.

Donna would feel the same way about those who would try to complicate the prayer in schools argument with such hypotheticals. They would argue that atheists would not be the only ones to object to the Christian prayers she would like said in her schools. Muslims, Jews, and even some sects of Christians would be left out of the prayers she (and other members of her “we”) would espouse. Donna would look around her at the twenty-five children all shouting “Me, me, me” and say, “Where are these dissenters? They don’t come to this school. When they do, we’ll deal with them; for now, why complicate and impoverish our religious lives with these distant, hypothetical worries?”

So What Is College-Level Writing?

Since I’m taking this question from the title of an article published by one of the editors of this collection, Patrick Sullivan, let’s begin with his list of standards for defining college-level work. After saying that a student should write “in response to an article, essay, or reading selection that contains at least some abstract content” (385), Sullivan offers the following criteria for college-level writing:

- ◆ A willingness to evaluate ideas and issues carefully
- ◆ Some skill at analysis and higher-level thinking
- ◆ Some ability to shape and organize material effectively
- ◆ The ability to integrate some of the material from the reading skillfully
- ◆ The ability to follow the standard rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

I am not sure whether Sullivan means for us to use these criteria to determine whether a student should be admitted to a college-level writing course or whether the student should receive a pass-

ing grade for a college course. Depending upon how these criteria are defined and interpreted in specific situations, they could be used to exclude a large percentage of the students currently in college writing courses.

Let's examine how the two pieces of writing we have looked at so far might fare when judged by these criteria.

Our first writer certainly shows a willingness to evaluate ideas and issues carefully. Even though it is difficult to define analytical and higher-level thinking, I think most college instructors would give this student high marks in this area. I would anticipate some debate as to whether and how this student shapes and organizes his material. Although he does not use a great deal of source material, he does seem to know how to integrate sources into his own writing. And in general he can follow the rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. So if this standard is in place to determine whether he should be admitted, there is rather substantial evidence that he should be admitted; if this is an exit standard, he might be judged deficient by some.

The other writer would clearly fail two of the criteria—willingness to evaluate ideas and higher-level thinking. Even though these are difficult criteria to define, I am confident that most of us can look at her writing and say it is lacking in these areas. However, many would find her writing acceptable in terms of two other criteria: organization and standards of usage.

So where are we then? If Sullivan's criteria are to be used as exit criteria, then he is right to suggest, as he does, that there is considerable work to be done in defining and operationalizing these criteria. How could we weigh certain criteria to make sure that the second writer is not given credit for a college writing class? But even more difficult is the question of whether the first writer should be given credit, since his work embodies so many of the most important (in my opinion) criteria, while falling short in other areas. I believe we can do this work, and I am heartened by the realization that the essay we have from the first writer is his first submission in a college course. This writer can easily learn to master the criteria in Sullivan's list.

With that pronouncement made, I move to the question I find more interesting at this junction, viz., what criteria should

we use in determining which students should enter a college writing course? Somewhat facetiously above, I made the point that students are college writers when they write in college. But a more serious response to this question would be to say that not all students who graduate from high school are ready for a college writing course. If that is the case, and if we have the opportunity to screen students entering a first-year college writing course, how do we decide which ones are ready for that course and which are not? I believe that when such screening is done, it often fails to look at the most important quality a student brings to his or her writing: attitude.

To explain what I mean, let me offer one final piece of student writing:

“What If Drugs Were Legal?”

What if drugs were legal? Could you imagine what it would do to our society? Well according to John E. LeMoult, a lawyer with twenty years of experience on the subject, feels we should at least consider it. I would like to comment on his article “Legalize Drugs” in the June 15, 1984, issue of the *New York Times*. I disagree with LeMoult’s idea of legalizing drugs to cut the cost of crime.

LeMoult’s article was short and sweet. He gives the background of the legalization of drugs. For example, the first anti-drug laws of the United States were passed in 1914. The laws were put in effect because of the threat of the Chinese immigrants. In addition, he explains how women were the first to use laudanum, an over the counter drug, as a substitute for drinking; it was unacceptable for women to drink. By explaining this he made the reader feel that society was the cause of women using the substitute, laudanum, for drinking. LeMoult proceeded from there to explain how the money to buy drugs comes from us as society. Since drug addicts turn to crime to get money we become a corrupt society. Due to this we spend unnecessary money protecting innocent citizens by means of law enforcement, jails, and etc. LeMoult says that if we legalize drugs that “Overnight the cost of law enforcement, courts, judges, jails, and convict rehabilitation would be cut in half. The savings in tax would be more than \$50 billion a year.”

LeMoult might be correct by saying that our cost of living in society would be cut in half if drugs were legalized, however, he is justifying a wrong to save money. In my opinion legalizing

drugs is the easy man's way out. Just because crime is high due to the fact that the cost of drugs is unbelievable it doesn't make legalizing them right. We all know drugs are dangerous to the body and society without any explanation, therefore, you shouldn't legalize something that is dangerous.

My only and most important argument to LeMoult is the physical harm it would bring by legalizing drugs. People abuse their right to use alcoholic beverages because they are legal. For example, LeMoult himself says the amount of drug addicts is small compared to alcoholics. Why?—of course it is because of the legalization of alcohol. When you make something legal it can and will be done with little hassle. Why allow something to be done with ease when it is wrong? LeMoult's points are good and true but I believe he is approaching the subject in the wrong manner. Drugs are wrong, therefore, should not be legal!

While this essay has many flaws, it has qualities that make it more appealing than Donna's school prayer essay. The writer, let's call her Mary, seems to try to listen to the argument of the LeMoult text and rather than offering pronouncements of the beliefs of a certain group, she qualifies certain statements with such phrases as "in my opinion."

However, when we look closely at this text, there is little to recommend it over Donna's. It is written in response to another text, so it gives us a chance to examine the writer's ability to interact with the thinking of another writer—you'll remember that Sullivan recommends that judgments about college-level writing be made on texts that are written in response to other texts. If you were able to compare Mary's essay with the LeMoult text, you would see some very real problems with her ability to interpret this text. Chief among them is her failure to identify the thesis of LeMoult's article, as stated in the last sentence of his essay: "I do not suggest that we legalize drugs immediately. I ask only that we give it some thought." It is clear from his article that LeMoult is leaning toward a position of legalizing drugs, but he asks only that his readers consider how our current drug laws are working and give some thought to other ways of dealing with drugs.

This is something that Mary will not do. She knows that drugs are wrong, and she knows that we should not legalize things that are wrong just because it might cause a reduction in crime to

do so. In her defense, it seems that she would have made alcohol illegal given the chance, since the use of alcohol is clearly wrong.

I Don't Like Your Attitude

I don't think either Mary or Donna is ready for a first-year college writing course. Having been both a director of composition and a department chair, I am aware I will have to come up with something more than "I don't like your attitude." But in a real sense, that's the truth. And I don't want to stand behind some smoke screen, e.g., pointing to problems in grammar and mechanics or even sentence structures. Those problems can be found in Adam's paper also.

No, I mean it when I say I don't like certain students' attitudes, because it is their attitudes that are going to keep them from the growth in writing, reading, and thinking that we want to see in a college-level writing course. Our attitudes position us for learning in the same way that an airplane's attitude positions it for landing. In fact, our attitude determines our aptitude, and interestingly enough, both words come from the same Latin word, *aptitudo*.

What then can we tell our students like Mary and Donna, and what do we do to help them prepare themselves for college-level writing? I think Patrick Sullivan offers us some crucial tools here. I think he is absolutely right that what the writing students do to illustrate college-level competence should be in response to texts that contain abstract content. I might push a little further here to say those texts should deal with complex issues that challenge students to read against their biases. The writing they do in response to these prompts should require them to show their ability to think about difficult topics abstractly and with some openness. We need not analyze that writing in the detail that I have analyzed Adam's text, but that analysis should show some of the ways in which we can find college-level abilities in writing that is far from perfect.

Then what? What can we do for those students whose writing does not demonstrate such abilities? What we don't do is relegate them to classes in which we torture them with drills on

correctness and elegant sentence structures. Those things come in time as writers become more and more engaged with their writing.

Another thing that we don't do is respond to their texts with the litany of questions that a cross-examining attorney barrages a hostile witness with. When a writer says, "We all know drugs are dangerous to the body and society without any explanation, therefore, you shouldn't legalize something that is wrong," it will avail us (and the student) little to write in the margin such responses as:

- ◆ Do we all know anything?
- ◆ Are all drugs dangerous to the body? What about aspirin?
- ◆ What do you mean "without any explanation"? Don't we have to explain ourselves?
- ◆ Do we make all wrong actions illegal?
- ◆ Do you think it's wrong to insult someone? Should it be illegal?

I base this claim on the assumption that the writer who writes this way is like the person taking a toothbrush back that has been opened. This person knows he or she did not use the toothbrush and so sees no point in engaging in theoretical discussions about the fact that an opened toothbrush indicates that one could have used it. This person might understand the need for that discussion more if the clerk simply accepts the toothbrush and then gives back a replacement—one that has been opened and repackaged in a makeshift cellophane container.

As for our student writers, it may be much more helpful to give them complex texts to read, write, and talk about. Rather than asking them to imagine hypotheticals, we should encourage them to interact in situations where people think and define the world differently. It is one thing to talk abstractly about the problems with prayer in school. It is quite another to have a conversation with people whose beliefs (or nonbeliefs) differ from yours. Such conversations may provide students ways into texts that they might not otherwise have. Most importantly, they may encourage students to want to deal with the complexities that they would otherwise avoid.

Works Cited

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