

## A RHETORICAL CONCEPTION OF WRITING

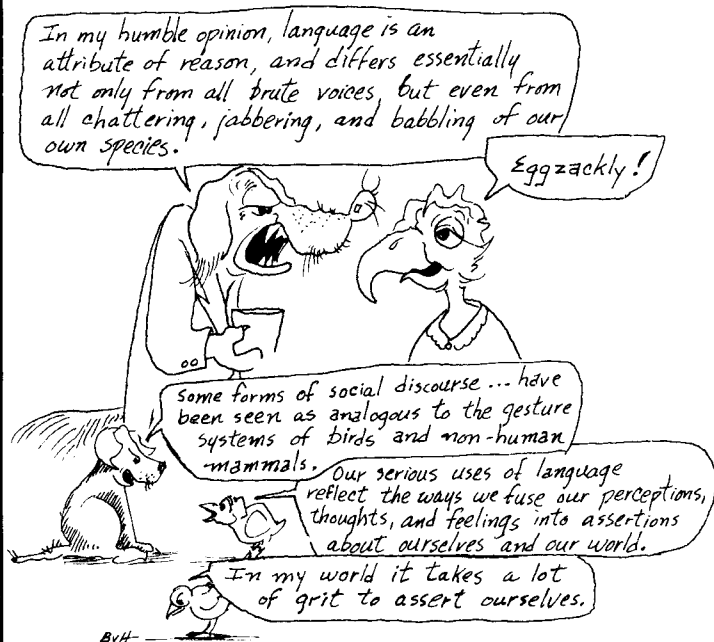
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Thought and language are so closely interrelated that many theorists have considered language as nothing other and no less than the external realization of thought. Although some forms of social discourse--greetings, cocktail party chit chat--have been seen as more closely analogous to the gesture systems of birds and non-human mammals than to processes of human conceptualization, our more serious uses of language are taken to reflect the ways our minds organize the world into conceptual categories and the ways we fuse our perceptions, thoughts, and feelings into assertions about ourselves and our world.

Traditional grammar, and the schoolroom tradition based on it, assumed almost an identity between thought and language. Gould Brown, an influential grammarian of the 19th century and a New England Quaker schoolmaster, defined language this way: "...language is an attribute of reason, and differs essentially not only from all brute voices, but even from all the chattering, jabbering, and babbling of our own species, in which there is not an intelligible meaning, with division of thought, and distinction of words."

When Gould Brown and other traditional grammarians speak of language in this way, they have in mind writing, not speech: speech, except in its carefully planned uses for argumentation and oratory, is too ephemeral to be taken seriously--too like, in its everyday uses, chattering, jabbering, babbling. Modern theorists are less quick to dismiss speech, or to see it as something utterly different from writing; and they are more cautious in asserting an identity between thought and language--certainly between language and reason. Yet modern theorists still see closer relations between thinking and writing than between thinking and speaking. Lev Vygotsky, the Russian cognitive psychologist, views writing as the expression of what he calls "inner speech": a language-like and language derived system

of generalized concepts and relationships that permits a human being to make expressible sense of his world. Writing, for Vygotsky, is the act of making inner speech intelligible and communicable to others by converting it from private to public forms.



**What do these abstractions have to do with the practical work of the composition teacher?**

### The Traditional Conception

Two differing pedagogies have emerged in response to traditional and more modern conceptions of the relation between thinking and writing. Traditionalists customarily focus their attention on the written language students have produced, or on the linguistic forms they want students to produce. They mark errors in student papers and have students correct them; they use a variety of linguistic drills (sentence combining, for example) to encourage fluency, accuracy, and maturity of expression; the more tradition-bound of them even teach grammar, or those portions of grammar that treat "division of thought"--subjects, predicates, and sentence types--and "distinction of words"--parts of speech. The assumption motivating such work,

though not always recognized, is that careful, conscious attention to expression of thought will lead inevitably to clearer thinking: to sharpen language is to sharpen thought.

### The Modern Conception

The alternative pedagogy focuses on the processes of thinking themselves, and is founded on the assumption that students will write more effectively as they can be helped to think more clearly. Teachers who make this assumption emphasize pre-writing activities, things done before a student puts pen to paper. These activities include reading or viewing and class or small-group discussion of stimulating materials; study of logical strategies and fallacies; free writing, brainstorming, and other stimuli to invention; exercises in perceptual acuity. Inventionists would agree with this assertion: to sharpen thought is to sharpen language.

### The Rhetorical Conception

There is yet a third general approach to the teaching of composition now attracting more followers--an approach that might be termed "rhetorical." As the name suggests, this pedagogy has ties with a rich tradition which originated in classical Greece and held currency in the West until the 19th century. But the new approach has been much influenced by current findings in psychology, in linguistics and sociolinguistics, and in philosophy.

The rhetorical approach acknowledges that a relationship exists between thought and language, thinking and writing, but focuses on neither. Instead, its center of concern is the communicative act itself. Its intent is to identify the participants in the act and the factors that influence it, then to explain the relation of these participants and factors as they give shape to a final written product. Teachers who employ this approach assume that students have language, that they can think, and that they can use language to express their

thoughts if they can be helped to see clearly their purpose in writing, their stance or relation to the topic they are addressing, the special demands imposed by the medium they are using, and the particular needs of their audience. The argument for a rhetorical approach might be put in this oversimplified way: Students use language in purposeful ways every day of their lives to make meaning of their world, to communicate and cooperate with others; they are familiar with the rhetorical demands of everyday life. A canny teacher can make use of what students already know about their language and its uses. But writing, and the uses of writing for academic or professional purposes, imposes new demands that differ from those of everyday interaction through language. Written texts have their own conventions of organization and style; a writer stands in a more removed relation to his topic than does a speaker; the writer's audience must be imagined and its needs projected (nobody questions or talks back to a writer). New rhetoricians claim that students will write better as they come to understand the nature of the communicative acts they engage in; that students will write better if they are given purposeful tasks and real audiences to write to.

**What do these brief synopses have to do with my work in Workshop '80?**

Let me offer two contentious contentions, and then a qualification (a familiar rhetorical strategy for an academic). **Contention one:** Most of us who teach composition have failed to acknowledge that writing is an exceedingly complex act; or failure to recognize its complexity has hampered our efforts to help students. **Contention two:** We have not

often questioned the validity of our methods for teaching composition by measuring them against a set of coherent and self-consistent assumptions about what the act of writing is and how the ability to perform that act develops.

**The qualification is this:** There is no single, universally accepted theory that explains the act of writing nor is there such a theory that explains how the ability to write develops. As a result, our methods must be eclectic, and one test of their validity must be whether or not they work. But our methods must not be ungrounded: they must be tested against the best statements we can make about what writing is and how it is learned.

**The Writing Process**

I will begin my work in Workshop '80 by attempting to develop, with help from the participants, a detailed description of what might be called "the writing process." We will try to identify the necessary steps or stages in the process by specifying the variety of conceptual, rhetorical, and linguistic problems that writers must solve in order to produce an effective piece of writing. With such a framework in mind, we will then consider and evaluate several widely used methods and techniques for teaching writing which exemplify the three general approaches described above. Because we will be working together in a small group for several hours, we will be able to choose what we look at on the basis of the interests and needs of the participants. We will have time to make what is abstract in this statement, concrete with reference to application.

I look forward to working with you in Workshop '80.