

A Case for Cases

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It is unfortunate that our new-found awareness of writing as process hasn't yet extended to a parallel awareness that any act of communication is a response to a situation — a situation which may, in fact, have other possible responses. For example, faced with a large and angry man who wants to rearrange my face, I may fight, run, or talk him out of it. It is this principle — language use is a response to a situation — which should govern our lives as teachers of writing. A failure to recognize and use this principle as we teach writing has a number of unfortunate consequences: First, it forces us to unusual lengths to provide methods of invention and audience analysis for our students; second, it leads to a tendency to speak of *An Essay* or *A Theme*, as if they were artifacts unearthed by a team of archeologists, and to giving writing assignments which are themselves artifacts (*A Narration*, *A Cause and Effect Essay*); third, it gives much of our writing a sterile, cut-off-from-it-all feeling.

Consider a typical writing assignment from a current rhetoric:

Think of a place that is important to you and describe it to a friend who might be interested.

The steps the students go through before they can even begin to communicate about this topic are tortuous. First, the students must find a subject to write about. This is *invention* in the current sense of the word, often involving complicated heuristics and discovery procedures — free-writing, brainstorming, conceptual blockbusting, or whatever. Second, once students have discovered what they are to write about, students must marshal arguments, data, facts, suppositions, lies, generalities, and specifics, all to develop an idea which has, as often as not, been made up out of whole cloth-invented. Third, the poor students must visualize, make up, create, imagine an audience for this information. Finally, students are ready to begin communicating. When students have completed this long process, they are graded on (1) how well the invention went, (2) how *real* the details were, (3) how well developed the structure was, (4) how well the sentences flowed, (5) how well the words were spelled, and (6) how neat the punctuation was, as if these six processes existed discretely, like motes of dust in a sunbeam.

On the other hand, consider how we normally communicate in writing. It usually is a two-step process. First, a situation arises which needs a written reply to resolve it: The bank sends us a note telling us we're overdrawn; our kid's teacher wants to test her for a speech impediment we know she doesn't have; a pastoral scene sets words dancing in our

minds; a group of us decide to declare our independence from Great Britain. Second, we create texts *which will answer the demands of the situations*. An over-simplification, of course, but organizing communication in terms of situation and response will help us to understand it, and perhaps indicate where we have gone wrong in the assignments we create for students.

Consider the elements of the situation. First, there is no need for elaborate heuristics and discovery mechanisms in order to uncover a subject; the subject, indeed the substance of the communication, is inherent in the situation. Students, like us, don't have to figure out what to write about or even what to say; most of the time that's already apparent: They tell the bank, "I am not overdrawn"; they tell the teacher, "My child speaks very well." Second, because the audience is part of the situation, it does not need to be created or defined but addressed. With subject matter, content, and audience inherent in the situation, writers need only turn their minds to the meat of the problem: Finding and arranging arguments. Success in such a situation is determined by how the bank or teacher (or King George III) reacts — how well the writer has accomplished the rhetorical purpose generated by the situation.

One way out of the dilemma caused by disembodied assignments is to make them real. Ideally, teachers would put students in situations in which their success at writing is measured by success or failure in important tasks: Staving off financial ruin, keeping out of jail, getting or keeping a job, fomenting an insurrection. However, since these are not practical classroom activities, the second best approach is to use *cases* as the basis for assignments.

A *case* is a scenario which creates a situation requiring writing as a response to that situation. The situation is typically as real as possible with sometimes several pages of supporting information. In it the audience, the problem, the data, are all carefully laid out as they would be if the students were actually involved. The students study the material, and then produces the document called for by the events outlined in the case. The student's grade on the assignment is based on the effectiveness of the response to it. That is, the controlling question in grading is, "How well have the students met the rhetorical demands of the situation?" Since purpose, subject matter, and audience are inherent in the assignment, the discussion in class becomes not how to invent an audience, but how to address the one that is there; not what to say but how to say what is there to be said. The discussion also centers around what information is crucial, what can be summarized, and what can be

left out — around strategies of presentation rather than modes of discourse. In other words, writers can quit spending time on material unique to composition classes and can get to the heart of composition — arranging information in the best possible order for a particular purpose as they would in a normal, real world, rhetorical situation.

A natural consequence of a *case* approach is that assignments can neither be casually created nor casually given to a class. Since a *case* may have fifteen pages of supporting data and comprehensive directions for responding, some time must be spent on presenting the assignment to the class. The students must receive the information in enough time to assimilate and understand it — to become familiar with the situation and the problem. After students have a good grasp of the *case*, they need to walk through it with the teacher,

making sure that they understand the sorts of things that need to be said and possible approaches to saying them. It is not at all unusual for consideration of a *case*, its background, and approaches to it, to take two or three class periods. Making up such assignments can be difficult; however there are texts available on the market that present *cases* ranging from two to seventeen pages long.

My experience has been that the *case* approach, routinely used in graduate and professional schools, works very well for introductory writing courses as well. The most frequent response to *cases* is that they are “easy to get into,” meaning, I assume, that the students find a certain validity, or reality, in *cases* that they don’t find in more traditional assignments.