

# Back to Basics: Thoughtful Composition and Meaningful Grammar

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Much of the work to revise composition curricula which is now being conducted by "back-to-basics" advocates--in reaction to the poor writing and declining test scores of students--proceeds from a fundamental misconception of the process of composition. This misconception assumes that the elements characteristic of good writing can be isolated and taught through a series of workbook exercises, that a quick-fix approach can eradicate the symptoms of poor writing. Unfortunately this approach focuses students' attention upon editorial skills at the expense of involving them in activities which require them to make meaning. Back-to-basics advocates too often ignore the necessary interdependence of the many elements which together produce thoughtful writing. In so doing they leave students with an inadequate sense of the richness of language as a heuristic. As English teachers we need to address the problems which concern the back-to-basics reformers, but when we do so we need to remember that composition is not simply the neat sum of a series of objectively measurable skills, but the thoughtful development of meaning by writers. Instead of teaching writing by the building-block methods of the basic skills' advocates, we as English teachers need to stress the belief that the act of writing is an act of concept formation, and once we have done so, we need to develop methods of teaching based upon this belief.

In the process of writing as in the process of thinking, people create meanings; they form concepts by relating the events of their immediate perceptions to their past experiences. Not only is this continual process of assimilating the elements of their current perceptions into their world view a natural and regular part of peoples' lives, but an awareness of this process is essential for

effective writing and thinking. Therefore, our most basic work as teachers of composition is this: To ask our students to observe carefully and to reflect upon their observations in the light of what they already know--to ask our students to think.

In Visual Thinking, Rudolf Arnheim provides composition teachers with a useful explanation of how processes of thought begin with our perceptions of our surroundings. Arnheim argues: Perceptions are not isolated physiological phenomena; they constitute the initial stage of the cognitive process and provide forms and shapes for developing abstractions. As shapers of abstractions, perceptions order the thinking process itself. Because they are purposive and selective, they provide the initial form of developing concepts. Arnheim emphasizes the importance of careful perception: "Since reasoning about an object begins with the way the object is perceived, an inadequate percept may upset the whole ensuing train of thought" (Arnheim, p. 27). To develop a fuller understanding of an object, he suggests individuals make several observations of objects in a variety of situations so that they will develop richer, more honest concepts-- concepts better suited to productive thinking.

Arnheim's explanation of concept formation is especially useful to composition teachers because it suggests that meanings are created when concepts are formed and that concepts are created from perception. Because composition is a shaping process dependent upon concept formation, it too must begin with careful observation.

Too often, composition textbooks and composition teachers focus students' attention on the technical correctness of the final draft of their writing instead of

on the processes of developing meaning. Often, teachers and textbooks also make assignments that provide only titles or topics for compositions, without suggesting ways for students to make observations. These assignments naturally generate detached, meaningless writing because students are instructed to proceed from the preconceptions of the author of the assignment instead of from their own perceptions. Unless a student has developed an exceptional ability to form abstractions from abstractions, he is likely to find composition quite frustrating if continually asked to conceptualize from given data.

An exercise from one English textbook which imposes its own preconceptions upon students--ignoring the necessary priority of students' perceptions to students' compositions--asks students to develop a paragraph from one of these topic sentences: "Count on me as a passenger for a spaceship"; "Living in the atomic age challenges us"; "How to save money is a problem I have solved" (Christ and Carlin, p. 21). Would it not make more sense (and better paragraphs) for the authors of this text first to ask students to observe particular aspects of their surroundings and to base their writing upon their perceptions? For instance, a more useful assignment might ask which of the students' daily activities would probably be possible on a spaceship. Then, having provided the student a way of approaching the assignment, the instructions could tell the student to form a concept of being on a spaceship. A paragraph based upon such an assignment would be more meaningful to students simply because it asks them to begin with the perceptions of their own daily experiences. Because the version of the assignment I suggest is based upon the students' real-life activities, it might initially appear to be the less imaginative exercise. On the contrary, it is more likely to engage students' imaginations because it asks them to explore familiar images as they imagine life on a spaceship.

When we assign compositions to our stu-

dents, we need to be conscious of this early stage of the meaning-making process if we expect students to develop and articulate concepts. To assign compositions without providing time or directions for students to make use of their own perceptions is to dissociate writing from the development of meaning.

Despite the fact that asking students to form concepts is the basis of a composition curriculum, many secondary schools' curricula require that writing be taught within a program based upon the assumptions of traditional grammar books which approach composition differently. In the preface to English Grammar and Composition, John Warriner articulates the underlying premise of such programs: "Grammar is placed first in the book because most teachers wish to be sure that the terminology of language study is firmly grasped early in the year" (Warriner and Treanor, p. iii). Warriner's assumption that a student's ability to name the parts of speech and the elements of a sentence must precede the ability to compose reflects the tendency of post-Sputnik American educators to teach to quantifiable, isolated objectives, usually at the expense of the development of the thinking process. The traditional grammar's reliance upon objective exercises with "right" answers leads students to develop a simplistic notion of language. Exercises comprising sentences that are without context have been designed so that the student will be able to identify a "right" answer. They encourage the student to view language as a sort of mathematics in which ambiguities and shades of meaning are problems to be overcome rather than rich possibilities. When students do write within a curriculum guided by such principles, they often try to be "right"--to compose with the black-and-white, right-or-wrong language of the exercises. They become more concerned with avoiding errors than they are with expressing meaningful ideas. It is little wonder that so many compositions written with traditional grammar and composition texts as their models are incomprehensible.

Fortunately, there is a theory of grammar

that can serve a thoughtful composition curriculum. In the Bay Area Writing Project pamphlet Working Out Ideas: Predication and Other Uses of Language, Josephine Miles presents the basis of a grammar that requires students to generate their own sentences and to see the subject-predicate relationships in the sentences as the basis of their meanings. Because her grammar asks students to identify their own subjects, it asks students to begin the composing process with their own perceptions. Once students have their own subjects, they make sentences by choosing predicates: "Sentence-making is predication, and to predicate is to assert an idea, selecting and treating facts from a point of view" (Miles, p. 6). Miles's grammar treats the sentence as an expression of an idea, making the act of composition analogous to Arnheim's act of thinking. The subject-predicate relationship she describes echoes the association between percept and concept that Arnheim describes.

Miles's grammar offers students a meaningful way to understand the effectiveness of their own language. Her approach teaches students to make use of such a grammar as they revise their own compositions: to isolate the bases of their concepts by foregrounding their subject-predicate relationships; to become conscious of their own developing concepts by focusing their attention on the appropriateness of particular subject-predicate relationships; to determine if they are consciously classifying and renaming subjects, providing readers a fuller understanding of their ideas or if they are unconsciously repeating the same subjects; and to develop an awareness of the richness of their ideas by expressing them with carefully chosen predicates. Grammar used in this way can increase writers' awareness of modification, subordination, and coordination, and can give writers reasons to consider linguistic conventions, not for their own sake as "right answers" to isolated problems, but as useful means for developing meaning. Using this approach to grammar shifts the focus of classroom attention from the examination of errors to the

exploration of possibilities. A student who has invested the energy necessary to compose a thoughtful piece of writing is much more likely to be interested in learning the styles and technical skills that will help to develop his meaning.

We English teachers do need to examine our writing curricula, but not for the reasons cited by the back-to-basics reformers; we need to move away from exactly the sort of isolation of concepts that such reformers advocate. We must help our students to develop a sense of the usefulness of writing; for only with that sense will they develop a concern for acquiring the technical skills that will make their meaning comprehensible to their readers. Our examination of our various composition curricula should proceed from the premise that the discipline of written composition is a thinking process in which the writer forms concepts from his perceptions of the world. We must be sure to provide for sensible methods of teaching such as the ones suggested by Josephine Miles, which echo enlightened theories such as those developed by Rudolf Arnheim. We must do so because we wish students to compose from their own perceptions rather than from the preconceptions of traditional exercises that ignore this crucial early--and individual--stage of composition. A curriculum based upon a clear understanding of the writing process offers us hope that students will become more conscious of the development of meaning in their writing and, by extension, such a curriculum will address the most basic need in any writing classroom--the need for thoughtful composition.

#### REFERENCES

Arnheim, Rudolf. Visual Thinking. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.

Arnheim explores the relationship between sensory perception and reasoning. The book is particularly useful for its clear explanation of the process of concept formation and for its rational advocacy of arts in education.

Christ, Henry I. and Jerome Carlin. Modern English in Action (Grade 8). Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1975.

Modern English in Action is the name of a series of widely-used grammar and composition texts for Grades 7-12. It offers a traditional, isolated-skills approach to language study.

Miles, Josephine. Working Out Ideas: Predication and Other Uses of Language. Berkeley: Bay Area Writing Project, 1979.

This pamphlet is a collection of Josephine Miles's essays which introduce teachers to

her theory of composition. Her theory focuses on the subject-predicate relationship as being at the heart of a writer's meaning.

Warriner, John E. and John H. Treanor. English Grammar and Composition 8. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963.

There have been many subsequent editions of the widely used "Warriner's" text since the 1963 edition, each with a revised preface that explains how the book adheres to the latest trends. The book's business-like philosophy and format remain essentially unchanged since the earliest editions.

