TEACHING WRITING:

Methods, Materials, & Measurement

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UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE
NEWARK, DELAWARE

Department of English
University of Delaware
Volume 4, Number 1
The Philosophy of Composition

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My own words take me by surprise
and teach me what I know.

Merleau-Ponty

Meaning is neither before nor
after the act...Thus, the notion
of an Idea or 'interior design'
as simply anterior to a work
which would supposedly be expression
of it is a prejudice.

Derrida

I. The Current Philosophy of Composition

Composition is a curious discipline. It has the odd status of
being one of the few academic disciplines which the holders of the
bureaucratic pursesstrings would not like to see immediately eliminated.
Let all of the theoretical physicists become engineers, civil or other-
wise; let all of the literary critics go to law school and put to good
use their massive reading ability; let all of the linguists finally
satisfy their maiden aunts' dreams and become interpreters at the
United Nations. But good God, maintain the composition status quo
since any straying tendencies under the Right to Write are a bit more
philistine than necessary.

Added to composition's privileged place (or, at least, monetarily
secure place) is the fact that composition is one of those disciplines
which has no body of theory which it can properly call its own. Com-
position is a scavenger, stealing bits of explanation from linguistics,
psychology, classical rhetoric, logic, philosophy (and physics and
mathematics, if some "theoretist" could figure out how to use them). Whence
the complete oddity of the field: composition is deemed one of the most
important academic disciplines, an autonomous and relatively stable field;
at the same time it is one of the least respectable since it is theoryless
and therefore unattractive for "thinkers."

Given this situation, one would think that a book which addresses both
the importance of composition and its lack of theory would be well worth
reading, at least for its integrity. Such a work is E.D. Hirsch's "The
Philosophy of Composition", written by a man who, after completing his
tenure as chairman of a large and very literary English department, asked
to be named director of freshman composition, a request indicative of the
author's recognition of the importance of composition:
I began to wonder how long our university would continue its big expenditure on literary teaching and scholarship without insisting that we devote comparable energies to the teaching that was paying for so many of our literary courses—namely the teaching of composition. And it is also a book which looks laterally for its theory: "...the chief matters addressed by the book are those that connect linguistics, psycholinguistics, and historical philology with the goals of composition teaching" (Hirsch, p. 2).

In what follows I want to examine not how the book meets its claim to saying anything at all since it is unquestioned that composition theory merits a priori interest. Rather, I want to look at how the proposed theory of writing (the philosophy of composition) substantiates its claim to (empirical) roots in linguistics while addressing the standard composition aporias:

What are the distinctive features of written, as compared with oral, speech?...Can we determine by such linguistic and historical analyses the universal characteristics of good prose, and thence the most appropriate goals for teaching composition?...More particularly, what are the psycholinguistic bases of good prose, and how can our knowledge of these psycholinguistic principles lead to progress in teaching composition? (Hirsch, pp. 2-3)

Because these are by no means new questions, Hirsch’s responses are mercilessly open to terrorism, which I will restrain from engaging in since the old questions are the most intriguing, provided that they are answered by more than vagaries. Hirsch claims to have surpassed chanted answers and educational ideology: "I believe that the empirical evidence I have adduced and interpreted has raised my argument above mere ideology" (Hirsch, p. 4). I confess here (somewhat prematurely) that his argument is little above old-school ideology with a pseudo-base in linguistics. Let us see how his philosophy of composition runs.

In a nutshell, the philosophy of composition is as follows: good prose is readable prose, and composition instruction ought to be designed to show students how to produce readable prose. Of course, the crux of this position (not a new position at that) is the definition of "readable," which Hirsch goes through elaborate machinations to spell out, with commentary on the nature of prose as a convenient by-product. Unfortunately, almost everything that he says on these matters is either trivial or wrong.

Let us consider first some of the statements purported to be major claims in this theory, but which are, in reality, rather short-sighted and unimportant. In chapters one and two of his book, Hirsch goes to great pains to argue against Bloomfieldian conceptions of written language (that writing is simply the graphic rendering of oral speech) in order to show that prose is autonomous. He argues in this counter to Bloomfield that written language has a grapholect (written dialect), that the grapholect has its own conventions, and that it is individuated as a complete
linguistic system in literate society. Who, however, would ever question any of Hirsch's claims these days? To be sure, no linguist would side with the Bloomfieldian position because linguists and literary theorists (including Hirsch himself) have made it quite obvious that written texts are corpora with rules all their own. From such a stance, it is easily deducible that written language has its own normative conventions. However, such notions do not cease with Hirsch's second chapter. He subsequently argues that written texts are problematic phenomena because they are without overt devices to mark stress, intonation, audience, and other such things that oral speech has. Apart from the fact that this comparison flies in the face of his earlier contention that oral and written speech are incomparable, Hirsch has argued for the very things that could be deduced from his previous argument for the individuation of the grapholect: obviously the grapholect has conventions of its own (e.g., no intonation) — it is a grapholect. His argument is analytically true, and therefore of little note.

Perhaps such conclusions are attributable to Hirsch's naivety in linguistic matters, an explanation which no doubt could be offered to account for the surfeit of banal proposals that dominate all philosophies of composition, not just Hirsch's. But Hirsch is slightly unique here in offering psycholinguistic support for his positions. He thus advances the arguments that prose, if it is to be readable, must hold the reader's attention and perceptions, must consider intention, and must employ frequent closure. Who would argue with any of this? Certainly, professional composition teachers would not dispute any of these notions, especially since they have passed for standard composition instruction for years. Nor would any linguist dispute these claims since they are given in any examination of a communicative situation. To argue against them is foolhardy; to argue for them is superfluous.

But if my purpose, here, were solely to indicate Hirsch's shortsightedness, I would accomplish little more than antagonism since plenty of interesting theories have begun on not-so-interesting premises. But Hirsch's theory is so flawed that it is difficult to see where the theory begins or ends.

Ostensibly, the philosophy of readable prose begins with considerations of the nature of written language, which, to Hirsch, demands that one consider the nature of script systems, their development, and their efficiency. That is, one must consider the meta-nature of prose. This initial step in the theory is suspect since it based on a category mistake: the nature of script systems (how ideographic systems have evolved into alphabetic ones) says little about the nature of writing systems since writing is surely not some derivative scriptal function. But the theory proceeds to elaborate on the unique nature of prose, given its scriptal origins. Of particular note is that prose, as an elaborated code (À la Basil Bernstein), must mark itself internally as it creates its own situational context since it has none of the devices which oral speech has to mark context: namely, intonation, gesture, pitch, etc. As Hirsch says: "...the important distinctive features of written discourse and the chief difficulty of composition is [sic] its isolation from any particular situational context" (Hirsch, p. 21), which means that prose "has to make up for its lack of intonation, gesture, and facial expression" (Hirsch, p. 22). Although such contentions seem unquestionable, they are completely wrong. For one thing, if composition were devoid
of any situational context, many of the traditional problems of composition could be solved immediately since the activity could be taught in those terms (as context-free). But every piece of written discourse has a situation: pragmatics, insofar as it has meant "situation," is also applicable to texts (see van Dijk's work). Furthermore, if there is any piece of written discourse which is most readily situational, it is the composition! What is the pragmatics of the novel? The answer is anyone's guess, but most likely it is what the interpretant brings to bear on the isolated text (to use Hirsch's own critical terminology). What is the pragmatics of the composition? It is ineluctably the situation of the composition class with a composition teacher who will read the text and probably react to it in the manner that most other composition teachers react to the compositions they read. And that is the crucial point: one of the most important problems in composition is that the composition has such a precise situational context: virtually every composition student comes to the writing task with an already well-developed system of situational expectations about writing. If any sort of instruction must be done in this respect, then students must be taught to un-learn the explicit situational context of the composition; otherwise, students will never produce anything but the classic COMPOSITION-CLASS composition, which is unpalatable to all composition teachers, but covertly demanded by most of them. When written discourse is given this less explicit context, then perhaps "good, readable prose" can be gotten, but until then, the explicit composition pragmatics rules it out.

But if the above problem seems wholly the opposite of what Hirsch supposes it to be, consider the fact that his entire argument on the pragmatics of prose is viciously contradictory to begin with. The gist of his position is that written language must achieve, in alternative ways, what oral language achieves automatically through its design-features. But if written language is fundamentally different from oral language, as Hirsch's previous elaboration of the trivial has shown, why must it be taught to be comparable to oral language? Why do they have to achieve the same purposes? How can they achieve the same purposes if they are so basically different? In short, the presumption of the fundamental separation of writing and speaking and a program predicated on their ultimate equivalence make for a very shaky philosophy of readable prose.

However, the philosophy of composition never recovers from these initial flaws, and subsequent, gross, linguistic misconceptions render it (linguistically, at least) groundless. Perforce, consider how the grapholect is a natural language of instruction because its autonomy and pervasiveness allow it to dominate all other sorts of language in a literate society. One must first assume, in Hirsch's argument, that "children have always been the principle agents of language change" (Hirsch, p. 48). Now, with the grapholect as the standard language in literate societies and with "the widespread use of standard language on television" (Hirsch, p. 48), the language of the young (and hence the language of the future) is going to approximate the grapholect more and more. Thus, composition instruction profits from this situation since the language of compositions, the grapholect, now has a natural tendency toward becoming the spoken language of society, facilitating greatly the propagation of literacy. Moreover, given that "the range of variations tolerated within a dialect is always narrower than the range tolerated within a national language" (Hirsch, p. 47), the grapholect becomes the perfect language of literacy since, in addition to being pervasive and
spoken, it (as the national language) is open to great stylistic variation and thus allows room for every person to express himself freely (or more freely than in pre-grapholect times).

Every one of these assumptions can be questioned and dismissed. First, there is no evidence (and Hirsch gives none) that children cause the major changes in language, beyond the trivial truth that children usually live longer than their parents and hence pass on the changes that their parents have given them. Children learn the variations in the language that surrounds them and are less likely to institute change simply because of the power structure into which they are born. To say, then, that children are the principal agents of language change is both trivial and false. Second, Hirsch has unnecessarily conflated "grapholect," "standard language," and "national language." A grapholect is a written dialect of a language. A standard language is a methodological abstraction invented by linguists and educators: it is a phantom—no convincing evidence exists in support of the reality of a standard language (whether it be called a "grapholect" or anything else). If, by "standard language," Hirsch means "dominant dialect," then he is surely wrong in equating dominant dialect and grapholect since the only speech community where speaking and writing are very similar is academia, and it requires extensive submission to this academic language—not a simple engagement with the "natural" surrounding grapholect—before this unification of writing and speaking occurs. And a national language is the oral language of political power in some demarcated geo-political area: it is never a grapholect; a grapholect is never a national language; a national language can be a standard language, but certainly not, by transitivity, does that make the national language a grapholect. These ideas should all be kept distinct. Third (to continue the list of false assumptions), television has had no noticeable leveling influence on language variation: that is, even if some standard language were used on television and it isn’t, it would not become the spoken language of the television viewers, precisely because there is no continual, punitive effect from television, directing its viewers, correcting them, and coercing them to speak standard televisionese. Fourth and finally, there is no evidence supporting the claim that dialects have a smaller range of variations than does a national language, apart from the trivial truth that a national language consists of dialects and therefore consists of the totality of dialectal variations (and hence has more variation than any single dialect). Assuming that such a question as range of dialectal variation were even an empirical question and not mere conjecture, how could such a thing be measured? What is a range of variation?

There are no answers to such questions forthcoming from Hirsch, and thus these assumptions lend no credence to the argument for the grapholect. The claim that the grapholect dominates, or will dominate in the future, is bogus; a grapholect (not a national/standard language) dominates as both speech and writing only in academia, which gives a curious twist to matters at hand, since it is only in academia where people are asked to write compositions, not in the natural, grapholectized world, a fact which Hirsch fails to note. All of these claims about the grapholect are, in fact, irrelevant to the matter at hand, namely the philosophy of academic writing, a subject which Hirsch has little time for, especially since, given the "establishment" of natural tendencies in the grapholect, he dwells considerably on the natural, progressive tendencies in prose itself, presumably to show how prose works inherently, so that one can design composition instruction according to these inherent features.
What is the natural evolutionary tendency of prose? It is, curiously enough, the same tendency as occurs in spoken language (lest we forget that writing and speech are supposed to be different): language changes inherently for the better, for the sake of simplicity, or as Hirsch says: "...the evidence seems to me irresistible that the languages of which we possess a continuous record have indeed moved on the whole towards increased communicative efficiency" (Hirsch, p. 53).

The irresistible evidence for this position comes from Otto Jespersen, who believes that over time, the forms of language become shorter, the forms of language become fewer, their formation becomes more regular, their inflections are lost so that all languages tend to become analytic (non-inflactive and relying on word order for syntactic marking). Further evidence comes from George K. Zipf's Law of Least Effort, which is "an impressive amount of statistical data from several languages" (Hirsch, p. 55) which shows that there is an inverse relation between the complexity of linguistic forms and their use: i.e., complex forms are infrequent, supposedly suggesting that simplicity/efficiency are the order of the day in language.

What validity does this argument for efficiency have? It has none. The forms of language do not become shorter over time: note, e.g., that the bloating of English technical vocabulary is due almost totally to the influx of multi-morphemic lexical items—superancticrognerization—which are surely not shorter forms. The forms of language do not become fewer: if anything, the forms of language are in a steady-state—witness, in this regard, how the loss of voiceless stops in proto-Germanic was reconciled by the creation of them subsequently from the voiced stops. Languages do not tend to become analytic: modern Pidgin has twelve grammatical cases, with inflections to mark all of them.

This whole idea of progressive change in language toward communicative efficiency is a throwback to a defunct Romanticism, as hopeless now as it was when Schleicher first proposed the idea, based on his belief in Darwinian explanations of everything, including non-organic entities such as language. If languages, like organisms, change progressively toward a more "adaptable" simplicity and efficiency, why in current Russian is there a proliferation of instrumentally-marked predicates replacing the "standard Indo-European" nominative form in nouns following the copula? Why do the dialects of Southern American English lose their nominal plural markers and create ambiguities (i.e., [tɔːsk] = [tɔːskə] (pl.) and [tɔːsk] (sing.))? How and why did the incredibly complex Chinese ideographic system ever develop? Why do Czech and other Slavic languages retain much of the supposed Indo-European surplus of case markings while the other Indo-European languages lost them long ago "for the sake of simplicity and efficiency"?

Is the Germanic sound shift an instance of simplification since it is essentially a re-cycling of the Indo-European consonantal inventory? Isn’t an analytic language (presumably a simpler language) actually more complex than an inflective language if the former language has fewer case markings than the latter, thus demanding that grammatical distinctions be conceptualized not memorized from markings, by the speakers? Isn’t an analytical language, the telos of efficient evolution, actually less efficient than one with case markings since it has a more restricted word order and hence has little potential for stylistic form to vary with the expressive needs of the situation?
Isn't the virtual disappearance of the dual in Indo-European languages an inefficient change since its absence concomitantly eliminates a speaker's ability to speak uniquely about a certain distinction in the world, namely only two objects? I could go on here with innumerable examples of "inefficient" language change, but the point is sufficiently clear. Who could ever say that languages change toward simplicity and efficiency? Who could ever say that this is a natural aspect of language? Roman Jakobson, in fact, has noted that a so-called simplification in one part of a language causes a complication in another part, an observation certainly not in accord with Hirsch's tour de force in invoking Zipf's Law in support of his efficiency argument since it means that languages become as complicated in usage as they become simple. But apart from this interesting little symmetry in language change, Zipf's Law has no credibility to begin with. It has not only been questioned as to its statistical validity, but if it is even correct in any instance, it is trivial since it is so broad that it applies to all natural phenomena, not just lexical forms. But while it is obvious to a person who considers actual linguistic data that language change does not work progressively toward efficiency and simplicity, it is not so obvious to Hirsch, who proceeds to discuss the efficient evolutionary state of prose, now that he has "established" that all language moves toward this "goal." Unfortunately, his observations on prose are as misguided as those on language change, precisely because he assumes, once again, that observations about oral language hold likewise for written language. Consider a major statement in his argument that, over time, prose has evolved toward greater communicative efficiency: "In every sixteenth century grapholect of Europe, we will probably find great variations in the effectiveness of prose" (Hirsch, p. 60). How could a statement such as this ever be verified? It is even dubious that anyone could ever judge the effectiveness of current prose, much less that of a language known to us only through its texts, since for the latter task we would need at least one living, native speaker of a sixteenth-century European language, a hard request indeed. An argument such as this is nonsense, in the classic positivistic sense. This pretense to empiricism tells us nothing about the nature of prose or its "progressive evolution": the former merits a different approach, and the latter is non-existent.

I think that Hirsch's problems with his "philosophy of composition" can be summarized rather neatly. He has conflated simplicity and efficiency and has failed to substantiate either as universal aspects of language, and by dictum, has also failed to substantiate either as aspects that ought to be part of a theory of composition. He has further embraced fully the naive nineteenth-century view of language as an organism which undergoes evolution, changes for communicative survival, and derives from earlier corrupted (or inefficient) forms. Such a position not only has been refuted for at least one hundred years, but also has the insidious consequence of requiring arguments based on the "natural" aspects of language (whatever they are). Hence, Hirsch's acceptance of the vacuous position that language "naturally" tends toward efficiency and simplicity, as supported by the "naturalness" of the grapholect, bears on his composition theory in that he insists that good prose is natural prose, that natural prose is prose adhering to natural prose processes, and that natural prose processes are simplicity and efficiency. Thus, good prose (what students should be taught to write) is simple and efficient. Such reasoning has the tenor of political theories which stress
"natural law" pressed to the service of democracy or socialism, when most natural law is actually either anarchy or Fascism. One ought to see that such "natural" theories are far from weighty.

Simplicity and efficiency are old ideas to composition theorists, and apart from the question of their naturalness in prose, Hirsch wants to reify them in the notion of "readability," a psycholinguistic concept characterizing efficient text-processing by a reader. This notion is really the core of Hirsch's theory: what he is trying to do is to clothe old ideas in modern psycholinguistic garb, with debatable success.

A text is readable if it employs frequent closure, fulfills expectations sufficiently, and provides adequate context: all of these factors aid a reader's cognition of the composition. But how does one judge if a text meets these readability criteria? One must rely on the criterion of absolute synonymy: "Assuming that two texts convey the same meaning, the more readable text will take less time and effort to understand" (Hirsch, p. 85). This is all well and good, provided that two texts actually can convey the same meaning, but there is no evidence at all that such absolute synonymy exists. In fact, to use Hirsch's own system on itself here, if two linguistic elements were absolutely synonymous, wouldn't it be egregiously in-efficient to have them both in the language since they are duplicates? How could the language have evolved in such a redundant way? All cynicism aside, I think that the lack of absolute synonymy can, indeed, be illustrated from Hirsch's own writing. He gives an example, in chapter four, of how to make a more readable text out of a less readable one, while retaining the exact meaning of the original. Not only is this the only instantiation of the philosophy of composition, but it is a crucial one, in that it supposedly illustrates the hub of the theory: efficient rendering of prior meaning through the production of a readable text. The first passage below is a quote from Bormuth; the second is Hirsch's revision of it, a revision which presumably retains the full meaning of the first while rendering the passage more efficiently expressed/understood:

A second question was whether or not the relationship between language variables and the difficulty of that language was linear. For example, is the difference in difficulty between two and three syllable words as great as the difficulty between seven and eight syllable words? If not, the simple correlation techniques used by early researchers yielded misleading results. Bormuth (1966) found that many of the relationships showed varying degrees of curvature.

My revision:

Another unanswered question about readability formulas was whether relationships such as those between reading-difficulty and word-length were constant relationships. For example, is the difference in difficulty between two and three syllable words the same as the
difference between seven and eight syllable words? If not, the simple averaging techniques of early researchers yielded misleading results. Bormuth (1966) found that the relationship between reading difficulty and traits used in readability formulas were in fact inconstant relationships (Hirsch, p. 84).

All of Hirsch’s revisions in the name of readability amount to two things: insertion of information surrounding the passage before it was extracted from the complete text; changing the technical vocabulary to more common terminology. The first sort of revision is superfluous since the reader has the information anyway from the rest of the text; it is a rather cheap way of obtaining readability. The second revision contradicts the synonymy argument since the revised passage is wrong in relation to the first. Consider, as far as the latter point goes, what Hirsch changes. He replaces "linear" with "constant relationships." Is this an adequate paraphrase of "linear"? No, it is a truism to say that a linear correlation is a constant correlation. Of course a linear correlation is constant, but it is such in that the ratio of the change of each of the correlated elements equals one; Hirsch gives an understatement, not a synonym. He also changes "correlation techniques" to "averaging techniques." Is correlation an averaging? No, averaging actually has nothing to do with correlation—in the statistical sense—which is the problem here. Hirsch has tried to translate the semantics of one academic discipline into the semantics of everyday language, or something like everyday language. In doing so, he has forsaken most of the interesting distinctions inherent in the definitions of statistics. To wit: he translates "curvature" as "inconstant relationship." Even if a curvilinear correlation could be construed as an inconstant relation, it is so only in a very trivial sense. Curvilinear correlation actually means that one value decreases or increases at a greater rate than the increase or decrease of another value, and to call that relation "inconstant" is to miss the interesting facts which curvature of correlation indicates. To many statistician or educational psychologist. Thus, the only readable synonyms which Hirsch can give for statistical concepts are either incorrect or trivial ones, characteristics which have become more than appropriate for his theory of composition. It is impossible to make consistent judgments of readability because synonymy, the constant, does not exist. Every revision of a text produces a new text, with new contingencies of readability. Hirsch, in fact, has an inkling of this, and suggests that his empirical readability be re-named "relative readability." But this re-naming introduces serious problems. How is readability even empirical (which is the whole purpose for having it) if it is entirely contingent? How does anyone—let us say, e.g., a composition student—make sense out of the vague criteria for this empirical notion?

(1) Closure must occur frequently enough to accommodate short-term memory and not interrupt the forward movement of the mind. (2) Expectation must be sufficiently fulfilled to achieve semantic integration without interrupting this forward movement. (3) Contextualization
must be sufficiently explicit to indicate the contours of implication without interrupting the forward movement (Hirsch, p. 137).

How is "frequent enough closure" judged empirically? How is "sufficient fulfillment of expectation" judged empirically? How is "sufficiently explicit contextualization" judged empirically? What are "contours of implication"? And so on, and so on...

The counter-intuitiveness of "relative readability" and the absence of ground for judging readability through revision demolish the bases of a psycholinguistic theory of writing built on the natural state of evolving prose. The philosophy of composition is actually very much old-school ideology masked by footnotes to linguists. Per force: the practical applications of this philosophy of composition demand that composition teachers judge compositions for the quality of their intentions, their correctness, and the quality of their presentation (see Hirsch, p. 186), and demand that composition texts approximate Strunk and White's Elements of Style (old-school Bible). These are old applications of old solutions to old problems. But at least these applications make no pretense to linguistic and psycholinguistic validity, since such excursions by one theorist have indeed shown that "composition research has become as chaotic as the California gold rush. Good work [is] as hard to find as nuggets in a well-panned stream" (Hirsch, p. 169).

II. Toward a Believable Philosophy of Composition

The absence of a tenable philosophy of composition demands that the essential definitions of the field be reworked. Let us ask the hard question: what is composition? Is it the writing of precise essays? Is it the writing of succinct essays? Is it the writing of essays modeled after the great writers of our time? Is its business "the instant humanizing of the incoming barbarian through a selective look at science, popular and esoteric arts, psychology and sociology"? Is it the choosing of the more readable of two synonymous texts? It is none of these. Composition must be viewed as an activity enmeshed in the system of academia. Given that academia is a plurality of semantic systems, that academic disciplines are actually systematic ways of talking about the world, composition is the production of texts and discourses which are acceptable (to varying degrees) within this plurality of semantic systems. Such a definition of composition changes the tenor of the activity considerably.

Composition as the production of acceptable academic texts means that composition is a performance (to use the Chomskyan verbiage), and therefore is a probabilistic endeavor. Composition has been viewed too long in the past as some sort of categorical capability, some timeless method that will suffice not only for the generation of every kind of text that a student will have to write in academia, but also for every text that he will write in his life. Such a conception of composition
is no far from realistic that it is foolish to consider at any great length.
A piece of writing—a composition in particular—is the product of a body of
knowledge which the author draws on, supposed to be relevant for the writing
task at hand, and allows to be affected by the very act of writing; or to
paraphrase Chafer, one must access a body of knowledge to produce a discourse,
but what one knows changes as the discourse proceeds. In composition, this
body of knowledge is the semantics of disciplines which the student has
internalized to some extent, knowledge which changes as he writes about it.
Furthermore, if composition is the production of academic texts, and
if production has its obverse in comprehension (as is argued in numerous
psycholinguistic texts), then reading and writing are intimately linked.
Although it has been known for some time that reading is as crucial as writing
in composition, it has not been known that reading is as probabilistic as
writing. If comprehension is as much a performance as writing is, then
the comprehension of a student's text by, say, a composition teacher is as
contingent as the writing of it. This means that the understanding, judging,
and grading of a composition rest on a fundamental probabilism since the
reader's access to the knowledge in the text is a function of the likelihood
of a match between the reader's semantic system and the system which appears
to him to be in the text. This point cannot be emphasized enough. If there
is any idea that is thoroughly entrenched in current philosophies of composition
it is that composition teachers—readers of compositions—are the possessors
of some absolute body of knowledge which they can categorically bring to bear
on the writings of their charges and which provides them with the credentials
to praise or demean those writings. But such an attitude is nonsensical.
Reading comprehension depends on what Gestalts constrain the knowledge of
the reader. Thus, to suppose that the teacher/reader of composition is privy
to the grammatological sumnum bonum is not only foolish, but also insidious
and rather arbitrary.
With composition as an academic performance and relativism as the order
of the day, the activity of composition becomes an act of negotiation within
the confines of the academic semantics surrounding the act, and it is thus
a negotiation which takes place within the history of all academic knowledge
that has been produced or ever will be (mea culpa: these are Derridian/
Foucaultian assessments). Given the historicity and the transactional nature
of composition, the philosophy of composition is rather like the phenomenology
of composition. The student produces a negotiable piece of academic knowledge:
the composition is a commodity, something bargained for. It is something which
may or may not be understood, which may or may not cohere to the system of
knowledge it occurs in. But these are things which must be decided as the
composition is read and written, not after the fact and certainly not beforehand.
Otherwise, one falls into the common stance of assuming interior/anterior
designs in the reading and writing, a stance which can lead only to tautologies
or contradictions: one verifies what one expects, or one decides that one's
expectations were not fulfilled. Either way, one runs into analytic thinking,
a mode of thought which obviously leads nowhere.
Given the above phenomenological bent to composition, the discipline
ought to be devoted to the exposition and facilitation with what Husserl
and Martin have called the nomological status of academia. That is, com-
position should teach the non-denotative, the non-referential, the axiomatic.
That is not to say that composition should instruct students to produce
fantasy; rather it is to say that composition should not get bogged down in
insisting on the production of ontologically relevant texts, object-oriented
texts, texts which cohere extrinsically. Given the nature of academic in-
formation, students should not be asked to produce information which is
decidedly contrary to it: namely descriptions of the world, concrete terms
(the insidious Orwellian notion of writing), or descriptions of events and
people in precise language. No other texts that they will write subsequently
in academia will require them to perform in a similar manner: why should they
engage in ontologically relevant writing, then, as training for nomological,
axiomatic writing?

Needless to say, the same arguments hold for reading. It is senseless
to demand that students read extracts from Time or The New Yorker as model
prose pieces when these publications are committed to ontology rather than
nomology: that is, they are committed to expositions in referential discourse
rather than axiomatic discourse. What students will read subsequently in
academia will be almost entirely nomological, axiomatic, and immune
to absolute verification procedures. Why have them read preparatory
texts which are completely the opposite of this program?

The recognition of the important place of nomology in composition
is a nice complement to a philosophy of composition based on probabilism
and performance since the nomological status of the information to be
put in a composition has an arbitrary base, just like any axiomatic
system. Given this arbitrariness, the only sensible way to judge such
a text is through negotiation and dialogue, not through imposition and
categorical judgments. And this question of negotiated knowledge and
dialogue points truly to the fundamental problem of composition, which
is not that students cannot write, not that television has hampered
thinking, not that students are imprecise thinkers, etc., etc. The basic
problem of composition is that students will turn in a text which seems
eminently reasonable to them, but which is unreasonable to the teachers/
readers. This paradox cannot be resolved by a reversion to outdated
ideologies dressed in technical euphemisms; it can be resolved only
through a reasoned consideration of the acts of reading and writing
in the contexts of academia.

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Notes

1 E.D. Hirsch, The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 1977), p. xii; all subsequent references to this work
will be cited by author's name and page number in text.

2 See, for example, E.D. Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation (New

3 See Teun van Dijk, Pragmatics of Language and Literature (Amsterdam:
North-Holland, 1976) and Text and Context: Explorations in the Semantics

4 Perhaps it is more appropriate to call Schleicher a Lamarckian
than a Darwinian.
I share the belief of most writing teachers that holistically graded writing samples are better indicators of potential student need and performance than are short answer editing tests. However, administering and grading a large number of samples in a short time presents its own problems, especially if the team of readers is small, unpaid, and beset by other pressing professional duties. Despite its shortcomings, ETS's Test of Standard Written English has proven to be a useful instrument for selecting which essays we must read for placement purposes.

At Plattsburgh we test students to determine whether they should (1) receive proficiency credit for composition; (2) complete a three-credit composition course; or (3) complete a six-credit sequence beginning with a developmental course. Identifying the students to be granted proficiency is fairly easy, since they rarely exceed 5 or 6% of the freshman class. Discriminating between the other groups is the difficult task, especially since we now have the authority to require students to abide by our placement decisions. Since the developmental classes are designed to be smaller than the regular composition classes, and since the students do a substantial amount of writing in the course, it is crucial that we place in the course only those who need it most, usually 12-15% of those tested.